

Kant und die Philosophie
in weltbürgerlicher Absicht

Akten des
XI. Internationalen
Kant-Kongresses

Band 2

Im Auftrag der Kant-Gesellschaft

herausgegeben von

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De Gruyter

Gedruckt mit freundlicher Unterstützung der Società Italiana di Studi Kantiani.

ISBN 978-3-11-024648-3

e-ISBN 978-3-11-024649-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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Druck: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen

⊗ Gedruckt auf säurefreiem Papier

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

Kant's Two Conceptions of (Pure) Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

Marcus Willaschek

1. Among interpreters of the first *Critique*, it has long become standard to distinguish between a wider sense and a more narrow sense of “reason” in Kant.¹ Although Kant himself does not draw this distinction explicitly, it is clearly implied by his own usage of the term “reason” and in particular by the different definitions he gives of it in the first *Critique*. On the one hand, Kant defines reason as the “entire higher faculty of cognition” (“das ganze obere Erkenntnißvermögen”, KrV, A 835/B 863). Here reason, or “the rational”, is contrasted with the “empirical” (ibid.). Thus, reason in this sense, which *includes* the (pure) understanding, can also be defined as the faculty of a priori cognition (cf. KrV, A 11/B 24). This is what interpreters have called “reason in the wider sense.” In the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic, by contrast, Kant defines reason more narrowly, and in contrast to the understanding, as the faculty of drawing indirect inferences and (equivalently), as the faculty of principles (cf. KrV, A 298/B 355 ff.). This is “reason in the narrow sense.”

In this brief paper, my aim is to show that this distinction is not as straightforward as it seems, since Kant's different conceptions of reason do not just differ in scope (wide/narrow), but also, and more importantly, in the way they locate reason with respect to other cognitive faculties, in particular with respect to sensibility. We can see this most clearly by comparing the two ways in which Kant distinguishes between reason in general and pure reason, first, in the Introduction to the *Critique* (KrV, A 11/B 24), and, second, in the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic

1 Cf. e.g. Rudolf Eisler's *Kant-Lexikon* (Berlin 1930; Reprint Hildesheim 2008), which has seven entries on “Vernunft,” one of which is on “Vernunft im weiten Sinne” and one on “Vernunft (im engeren Sinn).” A more recent example is Michael Rohlf (Rohlf, Michael: “The Ideas of Pure Reason.” In: *Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. Paul Guyer. Cambridge 2010, 190–219), who cites Kemp Smith's *Commentary* as a source for this distinction (Kemp Smith, Norman: *A Commentary on Kant's 'Critique of Reason'*. Second edition. London 1923, 2).

(KrV, A 298/B 355 ff.). The result will be that Kant works with two substantially different conceptions of what reason is, which are based on two quite different epistemological distinctions (a priori/empirical and sensible/discursive, respectively). As we will see, these two conceptions of reason also call for different ways of distinguishing between reason in general and *pure* reason.

That the received distinction between a wider and a more narrow use of the term “reason”, although not incorrect, is not sufficient to capture the complexities of that notion in Kant can be seen from one of the passages on which this distinction is commonly based, Kant’s definition of reason in the Architectonic (KrV, A 835/B 863). Kant introduces his definition of “reason” by referring back to the distinction between the “two stems” of our faculty of cognition (cf. KrV, A 15/B 29). But while in the Introduction to the *Critique*, Kant had called these two “stems” “sensibility” and “understanding”, respectively, he now calls the latter stem “reason”. Thus, we should expect Kant to contrast reason (in this wide sense) with *sensibility*. But Kant continues: “By reason I here understand, however, the entire higher faculty of cognition, and I thus contrast the rational to the *empirical*” (KrV, A 835/B 863; my emphasis).

What is confusing about this passage from the Architectonic is that Kant seems to collapse two distinctions into one which he himself, in the Transcendental Aesthetic, took great pains to keep apart: the distinction between sensibility and discursive thought, on the one hand, and the distinction between the a priori and the empirical, on the other. By insisting that there are a priori forms of sensibility (space and time) that can give rise to a priori cognitions (e.g. in geometry and arithmetic), Kant had made it clear, against both the rationalist and the empiricist traditions, that the empirical and the sensible do not coincide. It is thus astonishing that in the quoted passage he appears to identify them (by treating both “sensibility” and “the empirical” as antonym to “reason”). As we will see, the reason for this is that Kant does not clearly distinguish in this passage between the two different conceptions of reason he employs in the first *Critique*.²

2 It must be admitted that Kant does not mention “sensibility” explicitly in this passage, but only implicitly as the other one of the two stems of our faculty of cognition. Could it be that Kant had a different distinction between “two stems of our faculty of cognition” in mind here, a distinction not between discursive thought (called understanding or reason) and sensibility, but between “reason”/“the rational” on the one hand and “the empirical” on the other? I

2. Let us start with Kant's account of reason in the Introduction to the first *Critique*:

Every cognition is called pure [...] that is not mixed with anything foreign to it. But a cognition is called absolutely pure, in particular, in which no experience or sensation at all is mixed in, and that is thus fully a priori. Now reason is the faculty that provides the principles of cognition a priori. Hence pure reason is that which contains the principles for cognizing something absolutely a priori. (KrV, A 11/B 25)

So reason in general is the faculty "that provides the principles of cognition a priori." Kant uses the term "reason" here in the wide sense of "higher faculty of cognition" which also encompasses pure intuition and the pure understanding, since both pure intuition and pure understanding provide us with principles of cognition a priori.³ But if that is what reason is, what does Kant mean by "*pure* reason"? The way Kant draws this distinction in the quoted passage is not very illuminating: Whereas reason provides us with principles for cognizing a priori, pure reason provides us with principles for cognizing *absolutely* a priori.

What Kant has in mind here may become clearer if we look back at the distinction between a priori judgements and *pure* a priori judgements Kant had drawn some pages earlier. A judgement is a priori if it can be a "cognition" – an "Erkenntniß", i. e. if it can be known to be true – independently of experience: a "cognition independent of all experience and even of all impressions of the senses" (KrV, B 2). But this is not sufficient for being *purely* a priori: "Among a priori cognitions, however, those are called pure with which nothing empirical is intermixed. Thus, e. g., the proposition 'Every alteration has its cause' is an a priori proposition, only not pure, since alteration is a concept that can be drawn only from experience" (KrV, B 3).⁴ This suggests that a judgement, proposi-

don't think that this would make any sense, since "the empirical" is not a part of our *faculty* of cognition (and hence not one of its "stems"), but a class of cognitions (namely those that depend on experience).

- 3 Cf. KrV, A 22/B 36 ("In this investigation it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensible intuition as *principles of a priori cognition*, namely space and time"; my emphasis) and KrV, B 128 (where Kant calls the categories of the understanding "selfthought *a priori first principles of our cognition*", my emphasis). As Stefano Bacin has pointed out to me, it seems that "principle" here has neither of the two meanings Kant distinguishes in the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic (cf. below sec. 5)
- 4 Things are being complicated by the fact that two pages later (B 5) Kant seems to offer the proposition that every alteration must have a cause as an example of a pure a priori judgement. I will ignore this problem here.

tion, or cognition is *a priori* just in case it can be known to be true independently from experience, whereas it is *pure* if all its constituent representations (e. g. the concepts it contains) are *a priori*, too.⁵ In order to understand what the proposition ‘Every alteration has a cause’ means, we must have mastered the concept of alteration, which, according to what Kant says on B3, is empirical and hence not pure. But once we have acquired that concept, we can come to know *a priori* – and indeed only *a priori* – that every alteration has a cause.

Since in the last sentence of the passage about reason from the B-introduction, Kant explicitly links pure reason to pure cognitions *a priori*, it seems plausible that he intends his distinction between reason in general and pure reason to parallel that between cognitions *a priori* and pure cognitions *a priori*. This would mean that, while reason in general is the faculty of a *a priori* cognition and its principles, pure reason is the faculty of purely a *a priori* cognition, that is, of cognition that is independent from experience both in the way we acquire its constituent sub-judgemental representations and in the way we can come to know its truth. So pure reason, on this reading, would be distinguished from reason in general by its more limited scope. It is not concerned with all *a priori* propositions and how we come to know them, but only with purely a *a priori* propositions and the principles of their cognition.

3. Now this way of distinguishing between reason in general and pure reason in particular may be contrasted with a different way of drawing that distinction, according to which “pure” does not primarily single out a particular kind of a *a priori* cognitions, but rather indicates a kind of use or *employment* (“Gebrauch”) of the faculty of reason. This is the

5 This means that we must distinguish between the *a priori* status of judgements and of sub-judgemental representations. Whereas a judgement is *a priori* if it can be known to be true independently from experience, a sub-judgemental representation such as a concept or an intuition is *a priori* if it can be acquired independently from experience, that is, if its acquisition does not consist in a process of reflection and abstraction from empirical representations. Kant himself draws our attention to the distinction between the *a priori* status of judgements and that of concepts at KrV, B 5 by saying: “Not merely in judgements, however, but also in concepts there manifests itself in some of them an origin *a priori*” – namely in those concepts that cannot be “left out” even if we try to abstract from everything in a given cognition that is empirical. – For a different reading of the distinction between pure and non-pure *a priori* judgements cf. Cramer, Konrad: *Nicht-reine synthetische Urteile a priori. Ein Problem der Transzendentalphilosophie Immanuel Kants*. Heidelberg 1985.

way Kant proceeds in his definition of reason in the "Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic" (KrV, A 298/B 355–A 309/B 366). There Kant starts with the Aristotelian-sounding claim that all our knowledge begins with the senses, goes from there to the understanding and ends in reason. But Kant continues: "Since I am now to give a definition of this supreme faculty of cognition [i.e. of reason], I find myself in some embarrassment" (KrV, A 299/B 355). Reason, Kant explains, has both a merely formal or logical use, which abstracts from all content, and a real or transcendental use, "since reason itself contains the origin of certain concepts and principles, which it derives neither from the senses nor from the understanding" (ibid.). The first use, Kant continues, has "long since been defined by the logicians as the faculty of drawing inferences mediately [...]; but from this we get no insight into the second faculty, which itself generates concepts" (KrV, A 299/B 355).

What Kant has in mind here is some version of the traditional distinction between *dianoia* and *noesis*: reason on the one hand as the capacity for logical reasoning or, more specifically, syllogistic reasoning ("mediate inference"), and on the other hand reason as the capacity for insight into non-empirical principles.⁶ Kant, to be sure, does not attribute to reason the ability to intuit the truth of non-empirical principles that has traditionally been associated with *noesis*, *nous* or *intellectus*; rather, he speaks of reason as containing "the origin of certain concepts and principles". But this is merely because Kant does not want to commit himself to the view that reason is actually successful in its attempt to gain purely rational insight into first principles. By saying that reason is, or contains, "the origin of certain concepts and principles," what he wants to say is that reason, in its real or transcendental use, is at least a *purported* source of (substantial, not just formal) non-empirical knowledge.

Whereas the distinction between logical reasoning and insight into principles echoes the Platonic distinction between *dianoia* and *noesis*, in regarding both kinds of thought as expression of one single faculty of reason, Kant places himself more specifically in a *Cartesian* tradition, since for Descartes and most his rationalist followers, too, the one faculty of reason comprised two distinct applications that structurally parallel Kant's logical and real use of reason.

6 On this distinction, and the history of the concept of reason, cf. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Eds. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Gottfried Gabriel. Bd. 11. Basel 2011, Art. "Vernunft/Verstand".

4. To bring Kant's conception of reason into sharper focus, let me briefly highlight its Cartesian background. In its barest outline, the Cartesian method consists of three steps:⁷ First, the analysis of complex questions into ones the answers to which can be intuitively grasped as being true; let's call answers of this kind 'principles'. Second, the intuitive grasp of the truth of the relevant principles. And third, the derivation of answers to the complex questions from principles by means of deductive reasoning. It seems plausible to assume that the first and last steps engage the same cognitive capacity: The analysis of the complex into the simpler is just the inverse application of the capacity that allows us to derive the complex from combinations of simple principles. This is the capacity for logical reasoning, deductive or otherwise. Essentially, it is a capacity for the truth-preserving progression from a given set of propositions to other propositions not included in that set. Thus, the capacity for logical reasoning is concerned not with the truth of single propositions, but rather with the necessary *relations* between the truth of one or more propositions and the truth of others. In this sense, the kind of knowledge conveyed by logical reasoning is always *conditional*: Given the truth of some propositions, the truth of other propositions follows.

Contrast this with the other capacity required by the Cartesian method: the capacity to grasp the truth of a principle. This kind of rational insight is not relational in the same way logical reasoning is. Rather, it is directed at one proposition at a time. It is the capacity to know whether a proposition is true simply by understanding it, by grasping its content. Descartes, as other philosophers before him, likens this way of coming to know the truth of a proposition to the visual. Like seeing with one's eyes, this purely mental, non-sensible seeing is not discursive (step-by-step, mediated through other cognitions, made up out of elements that are available prior to it), but intuitive (instantaneous, immediate, holistic). And it does to the mind of the philosopher just what ordinary seeing, which they say "is believing", does to the mind of the ordinary person: it commands assent. The paradigm for this kind of rational insight is grasping the truth of mathematical axioms. Descartes generalizes from this paradigm to the class of *all* propositions that can be known to be true without deriving them from other propositions; they all are known through rational insight or, as Descartes also calls it, "the light of reason". As Descartes puts it in his early work, the *Regulae*, "if we re-

7 Descartes, René: *Discours de la méthode*. In: *Œuvres de Descartes*. Ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris 1996, Vol. 6, 1–78 (cf. Part 2, 18 f.).

view all the actions of the intellect by means of which we are able to arrive at knowledge without the fear of being mistaken”, we “recognize only two: intuition and deduction”.⁸

5. Now Kant not only acknowledges, and makes explicit, that the rationalist conception of reason he inherits encompasses two distinct elements; he also goes on to identify pure reason as the capacity to grasp a priori principles. Kant first suggests a definition of reason that covers both the logical and the real use, namely reason as the faculty of principles, where “principle” can either mean the general premise or *major* of a syllogism (“comparative principle”), or “synthetic cognitions from concepts” (“principle absolutely so called”) (KrV, A 301 f./B 357 f.). He then explains (in section “B”, KrV, A 303/B 359–A 305/B 361) what the logical use of reason consists in, namely in drawing mediate inferences, that is, in syllogistic reasoning. Kant sees the main purpose of syllogistic reasoning not in deriving new knowledge from already known premises, but rather, and more generally, in making explicit the logical relations between various pieces of our knowledge. The task of subsuming the more particular pieces of knowledge under the more general ones is accomplished only when truly universal principles are reached. Therefore, Kant can ascribe to reason, in its logical use, the task to bring “the greatest manifold of cognition of the understanding to the smallest number of principles (universal conditions), and thereby to effect the highest unity in that manifold,” (KrV, A 305/B 361) – a unity, Kant calls “unity of reason” in order to distinguish it from the synthetic unity of the understanding (cf. KrV, A 302/B 358 f.).

Finally (in section “C”, KrV, A 305/B 362–A 309/B 366), under the heading “On the pure use of reason”, Kant turns to reason as a potential source of non-empirical knowledge: “Can we isolate reason, and is it then a genuine source of concepts and judgements that arise solely from it and thereby refer it to objects [...] In a word, the question is: Does reason in itself, i. e. *pure reason*, contain *a priori* synthetic principles and rules, and in what might such principles consist?” (KrV, A 306/B 363; my emphasis). These principles would have to differ from the a priori principles of the understanding in being, not only “cognition from concepts”, that is, discursive, but rather cognition “from *mere* concepts” (KrV, A 364/B 307, my emphasis), that is, independent even of the a priori forms of intu-

8 Descartes, René: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. In: *Œuvres de Descartes*, Vol. 10, 349–488; cf. Rule 3, § 4, 368.

ition, space and time. It is in this independence not only from experience, but from anything belonging to sensibility and intuition, that the purity of reason consists in.

So according to Kant's definition of reason in the *Dialectic*, reason in general is the faculty of principles, a faculty that aims at a special kind of unity among our cognitions, whereas *pure* reason is the faculty of generating a priori synthetic principles from mere concepts, which principles at least purport to say something about objects in the world. If this pure use of reason really resulted in knowledge, this would be synthetic knowledge "from mere concepts" (KrV, A 301/B 357; A 307/B 364) or from "mere thought" (A 302/B 258).

6. If we now look back at Kant's definition of (pure) reason in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we can see that it differs from the one in the *Dialectic* in various respects. First, the distinction between reason in general and pure reason at KrV, A 11/B 24 is not drawn in terms of different *employments* of the same faculty (logical vs. real/pure), but in terms of the cognitions that fall within its *scope* (a priori vs. pure a priori). Second, there is nothing in the account of reason in A 11/B 24 that parallels the *logical* use of reason in A 299/B 355; whereas in the former passage Kant distinguishes between reason in general and pure reason, in the latter passage there are reason in general and its two employments, the logical and the pure employment. Third, the task and scope of *pure* reason is significantly different: In A 11/B 24, pure reason generates (or perhaps discovers) the principles of pure a priori cognition, which include space and time as the forms of intuition and the categories and principles of the understanding. In the *Dialectic*, by contrast, pure reason generates principles that go beyond everything that can be derived from sensibility or the understanding. Fourth, pure reason as defined in A 11/B 24 is at least partially successful in its attempt at generating cognition, whereas reason as defined in the *Dialectic* is not. And fifth, and most importantly, the definitions are based on fundamentally different epistemological distinctions. Pure reason as defined in A 11/B 24 encompasses pure intuition, whereas reason in the *Dialectic* is pure precisely in being independent from intuition. Pure reason in this latter sense is purely *discursive* – "Erkenntniß aus Begriffen" (cognition from concepts). In the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, reason is defined in terms of the a priori/a posteriori distinction: it is the faculty of non-empirical cognition; this includes mathematical knowledge, which, according to the Doctrine of Method, is "Vernunftkenntniß" and "rational" even

though it rests on (pure) intuition (cf. KrV, A 713/B 741; A 722/B 750; A 723/B 751).⁹ By contrast, the definition of reason in the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic is based not on the a priori/ a posteriori-distinction – that reason deals in the a priori is presupposed in the Dialectic –, but rather on the distinction between *intuitive* and *discursive* cognition. Kant typically expresses this distinction as that between “sensibility” and “understanding”, where the understanding (in the widest sense) is the faculty of thought.¹⁰ Thought, in humans, is always discursive. It consists in the formation and use of concepts and its paradigmatic products are judgements. One sub-faculty of the understanding in this sense is reason as the faculty of “cognition from *principles*” (which in turn Kant paraphrases as “cognition of the particular in the universal *from concepts*”, KrV, A 300/B 357, my emphasis). As we have seen, reason, in this sense, has two possible uses or employments: the drawing of mediate inferences (logical use) and synthetic cognition from concepts (pure or real use). Both, according to Kant, are special instances of discursive thought and thus of the understanding (in the widest sense). When Kant says: “In one word, the question is: whether reason in itself, that is pure reason a priori, contains synthetic principles and rules, and which principles this may be” (KrV, A 306/B 363), he means reason in the sense of a purely discursive faculty of cognition from principles. It the central aim of the Transcendental Dialectic to show that pure reason in this sense is not a source of knowledge, but of “darkness and contradictions” (cf. KrV, A VII).

7. The result of our investigation is that there are two conceptions of reason at work in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and hence two distinctions between reason in general and pure reason. While pure reason as the capacity of purely a priori cognition is the faculty at which the critique as a whole is directed, it is pure reason as the origin of purported synthetic cognition from concepts that gives rise to the metaphysical fallacies Kant discusses in the Transcendental Dialectic.

In closing, let us briefly return to Kant's definition of reason as the “entire higher faculty of cognition” in the “Architectonic” (KrV, A 835/

9 In this sense, all non-empirical cognition is rational cognition (*Vernunftkenntnis*), which even allows Kant to speak of an “intuitive use of reason” (cf. KrV, A 719/B 747.)

10 But confer KrV, A 835/B 863, where Kant calls the discursive “stems” of cognition “reason”.

B 863). What was puzzling about this definition is that it first seems to treat “reason” as antonym to “sensibility” and then as an antonym to “the empirical”, even though Kant famously insists that there are non-empirical forms of sensibility (viz. the a priori forms of intuition, space and time). I think we now can see what is going on here. Of the two different conceptions of reason at work in the first *Critique*, one is built on the contrast between the sensible (intuitive) and the discursive, and the other on the contrast between the a priori (rational) and the empirical. In the passage under discussion, Kant starts with the latter conception in mind, but then moves on to the former. It seems that Kant himself was not always aware of the fact that these two conceptions of reason, although closely related, do not completely coincide.