

Defending Kant's Arguments on the Division of Noumena and Phenomena in the Critique of Pure Reason

PHIL 314 2024

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Abstract

This paper examines Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and analyzes his attempt to reconcile rationalism and empiricism through the division of phenomena and noumena. Kant argues that while our knowledge is constructed from sensory data, it is inherently shaped by the mind's structures, such as space, time, and categories, setting the limits of our understanding. This paper addresses critiques of Kant's division and defends the coherence of Kant's system by carefully detailing its epistemological workings. By clarifying Kant's contributions to the debate on the origins and boundaries of human knowledge, the paper highlights his role in bridging these two philosophical positions.

Background

Philosophy, in the 17th and 18th centuries, was dominated by two positions: rationalism and empiricism. These were two sides aiming to solve the same problem: where does knowledge come from? Rationalist philosophers believed that the senses were inadequate and deceiving, and could not be trusted to provide us, as humans, with true and universal knowledge. Instead, rationalists argued the importance and reliability of what is innate and natural of a human, which is reason and rationality. It is through reason that rationalists believe is the source of all truths in the world. Empiricists argue the opposite, claiming that knowledge does indeed come from sensory experience. As empirical philosopher John Locke writes in 1689, the mind begins as “tabula rasa”, meaning a “blank slate” and lacking any knowledge. Empiricists argue it is through the experiences of the world that knowledge is gained. Both these positions made significant progress, but neither could fully nor consistently explain the role of the human in the obtaining of knowledge.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant, born 1724, was not convinced by either side of this knowledge debate and aimed to resolve the problems they both had. Kant wrote several works throughout his lifetime, and created a comprehensive and daring philosophical system that both challenged and appreciated the previous reigning philosophical positions. One of such works was the *Critique of Pure Reason*, released in 1781, which I will refer to as the CPR in this paper. The CPR was Kant's first major work, and was the result of more than a decade of philosophical work. The first edition of the CPR released with a mixed reception, where most criticized the work because of its complexity, dense writing, and argumentative style. Kant then created his second edition in 1787, six years later, where he

revised significant portions of the first edition in the aim of clarity and better presentation of his ideas, arguments, and his intentions in the CPR. The CPR was received increasingly well after this second edition, and its importance grew as time went on. Nowadays, both versions of Kant's CPR are commonly read, and this highlights Kant's fascination of precise writing and accurate terminology, which differentiated him from other contemporary philosophers.

Introduction

The purpose of Kant's CPR was to investigate both the nature and the limits of human knowledge. At the core of Kant's discourse about the limits of human knowledge is his crucial distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomena refers to the thing as it appears and noumena is the thing in itself, which cannot be grasped by the human senses. Since phenomena is the subject of cognition, and it is ever-changing and non-universal, it contributes to illusion and false understanding. While humans do have knowledge absent of influence from the outside world, Kant's epistemology in the CPR emphasizes the role of the mind in organizing sensory data to form additional knowledge. Kant argues that since the human understanding of the world is shaped by the mind's cognitive abilities, which are only able to operate on the inherently misleading phenomena of the world. Then, there is a clear limitation in what humans can understand of the external world.

Critics of Kant's division of phenomena and noumena often claim that there are contradictions within Kant's system, and attempt to argue that this derails his otherwise airtight system. Often, criticism comes from those who believe rationalism and empiricism are not compatible, as the existence of noumena and phenomena is Kant's driving effort to bridge the two philosophical positions. Some critics argue that Kant cannot claim that noumena is unreachable, and then simultaneously claim its existence. However, upon further examination, many of these claimed contradictions are due to misinterpretation of Kant's arguments.

This paper aims to explicate this division's implications on human knowledge, and defend Kant's division of the knowable into noumena and phenomena in the CPR. Using a thorough investigation of the CPR as well as cross-examinations with other interpretations of the CPR, I will discuss how and why Kant's system of obtaining knowledge from observation works, what the division of noumena and

phenomena means for human knowledge, and prove that the division of noumena and phenomena reconciles the empirical and rational.

Noumena and Phenomena

The Things as We Experience Them and As Themselves

In the introduction, I described phenomena as the physical representation of a thing that can be grasped by the senses. We require a more specific definition to fully explain phenomena and how it exists. It is important to clarify that phenomena are not straightforward representations, like a painting could be. Phenomena are the quality of knowledge resulting from the interactions between the things as they appear and human cognition. Phenomena is the substance of all a posteriori knowledge, and it is the a priori intuitions, space and time, that structure both these phenomenon and sensory experience as a whole. Space, organizing the external things and perception, is foundational to experiencing phenomena, while time is essential to understanding phenomena. It is through the a priori that phenomena are both experienced and understood. The a priori intuitions of phenomena are how humans have perceptions of the external world. Everything a person experiences using their senses is phenomenal, and it is through the usage of synthesis that these phenomenal experiences have meaning.

Noumena is the thing independent of observation, and by its nature it is impossible to cognize it, hence why Kant argues that humans cannot have direct knowledge of noumena. Kant says that it is only possible to know noumena as a logical necessity, but nothing can be derived of its properties or nature. Therefore, noumena refers to everything that the human mind cannot know.

First Criticism: I. Kant's Doctrine of the "Things in Themselves" and Noumena

This is where the first criticism appears, which is that Kant claims nothing can be known of noumena, but then claims to know noumena exists. The Russian philosopher, T. I. Oizerman, argues that Kant contradicts himself here as Kant claims that nothing can be known of noumena, but he still claims noumena is necessary. This criticism challenges Kant's model and threatens to destabilize the entire system. Kant uses his system to understand the limits of human knowledge, which is essential to the CPR, but simultaneously needs to make a claim outside of the boundaries of reason and human knowledge to demarcate human knowledge. Then, a contradiction seems clear. Oizerman himself writes

“if the concept of noumenon is deprived of positive content, then the assumption of the existence of metaphysical reality is put in doubt” (Oizerman, 340). Oizerman says that Kant seems to rely on noumena far too heavily since Kant asserts noumena’s existence in a negative, not positive way. To explore Kant’s attempt at rectify the differences between the phenomenal and noumenal, Oizerman examines the division of the two realms. This division is crucial for Kant’s account of the boundary of human knowledge. However, Oizerman says this apparent contradiction is not just an oversight, but a reflection of the complex intersection of rationalism and empiricism as understood in the context of its time. As Oizerman argues, this highlights the limitations of the mechanist system Kant is using to account for both phenomena and the human mind.

Defense

Kant can claim noumena’s existence, because he finds the existence of a negative space in the reaches of human knowledge, and refers to it as the noumenal. It is not asserting the existence of actual entities of noumena, but rather claiming the existence of the concept of the noumenal, without saying anything direct about it. Then, by this distinction, Kant’s account of noumena can be defended, and it is not contradictory. This existence rather reinforces the critical boundaries of human knowledge, distinguishing between what humans can know and what humans assume exists but cannot know directly. Kant also discusses the regulatory use of ideas of reason, which includes the concept of noumena. He argues that noumena serve not as objects of knowledge but as regulative ideals that guide the understanding and exploration of phenomena. The argument I will make is that noumena are not suggested as actual objects of knowledge but rather as necessary for the coherence of Kant's system. Kant cannot say anything about noumena, but must assert that there is a negative space outside of human knowledge for his system to work. This approach avoids the contradiction that Oizerman examines by interpreting the existence of noumena not as an empirical or metaphysical claim but as an epistemological one.

Defending Kant also involves reinterpreting what it means for noumena to exist, rather than the idea that noumena exist. This could be understood in a way that is compatible with his critical philosophy. This means considering existence in a non-empirical sense, referring to the conditions of possibility for experience rather than entities that exist independently, in the same way that phenomena do. Kant does not argue that instances of noumena exists, but rather asserts its existence from a safe distance, and

refers to noumena as an abstract interface that can potentially instantiate in an unknowable form. I suggest that the supposed contradiction of noumena and its usage arises from a misunderstanding of Kant's critical method. I argue that a closer reading of Kant reveals a sophisticated approach to dealing with the limits of human knowledge while maintaining the integrity of his philosophical system.

Alternative View: The Complementarity of Phenomena and Things in Themselves

In the exploration of Kant's critical philosophy, specifically the noumena problem, a noteworthy discussion arises from W. H. Werkmeister, an American historian, who views the philosophical debate of the validity of noumena's existence as creating a barrier between human knowledge and noumena. He argues that this interpretation misses the complementary nature that phenomena and noumena can have within Kant's epistemological framework. Werkmeister criticizes the popular interpretation that claims phenomena and noumena as categorically separate domains, which leads to the apparent contradictions within Kant's system. Then, he suggests that this division is not meant to imply two distinct realms of reality, but rather two complementary perspectives on the same reality which is contingent upon the cognitive stance one adopts. This follows from the defense I claimed against Oizerman, where I claimed that the negative existence of noumena was abstract and not actually instantiating noumena.

Werkmeister argues an interpretation that sees the noumenal world not as the realm unknowable by human cognition, but as a transcendental view of the same reality. This reinterpretation suggests that noumena and phenomena are not in opposition but in a dynamic, epistemic interplay that respects the limits of human knowledge while affirming the critical role of reason in grasping the structure of reality, which not only prevents the allegations of contradiction, but fits into Kant's usage of noumena, and can even give a deeper understanding of the CPR.

Werkmeister's discussion reliably suggests that many criticisms of Kant's noumenal and phenomenal division is due to a misunderstanding of the nature of this division. Werkmeister's account rectifies the alleged contradictions within Kant's system, and suggests how Kantian thought seemingly anticipates contemporary discussions on the foundational role of conceptual frameworks in understanding the world and, while being extremely mechanical and precise, shows flexibility in its response to criticism.

Second Criticism: The Bounds of Sense

The article by H.E. Matthews, titled “Strawson on Transcendental Idealism”, defends Kant’s system against P.F. Strawson's interpretation and critique of Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism in the book titled *The Bounds of Sense*. Strawson's view is that Kant's transcendental idealism is incoherent, and that its analytic and synthetic aspects are independent of each other. Instead, Matthews proposes an interpretation of Kant that sees the analytic and synthetic as deeply interconnected, forming a coherent whole that responds to the limitations of human knowledge and experience.

Strawson criticized what he interpreted as Kant's suggestion of a dualistic world of phenomena and noumena, and suggesting speculative metaphysics which Kant himself intended to discredit. Strawson claims this as a significant flaw in his system, arguing that Kant undermines his own project by relying on this incoherent distinction, and threatens to destabilize Kant’s system. Matthews defends Kant by arguing the division not as a claim about two worlds or realms of entities but as a critical stance on the conditions under which human beings can experience and understand the world, as Werkmeister argued. This division highlights the role of human cognitive faculties in structuring experience of the world. It doesn't argue a separate realm of noumena that exert causal influence on phenomena, since Kant claims causality does not apply to noumena. Rather, it demonstrates the limits of human cognition and the impossibility of gaining knowledge beyond these limits. However, Matthews adds to the discussion by further referring to Kant’s argument that all human experience is necessarily of appearances shaped by our cognitive faculties, which doesn't lead to phenomenalism, as Strawson suggests, because Kant acknowledges the empirical reality of spatial objects. To clarify, phenomenalism is the term used for the notion that the external world does not exist independently of the individual human’s perception, and while Kant does not claim phenomenalism, this is not Kant claiming the existence of noumena either. Kant's point is epistemological, emphasizing that our knowledge of the world can be universal, and is shaped by the way our faculties interact with it, not that reality only exists internally and is entirely subjective. Matthews also critiques Strawson's claim that Kant's division of noumena and phenomena and his analysis of the conditions of experience are independent. He asserts that the investigation into the conditions of experience derives its significance from the division’s mechanics, which argues that the human experience is necessarily of appearances and that this shapes all possible knowledge for human beings.

Matthews' article is a strong defense of Kant's division of noumena and phenomena against Strawson's critiques, arguing for a coherent and significant philosophical project that critically examines the epistemology of Kant's system, and the conditions that makes human knowledge possible.

Reflection

In this section, we have discussed Kant's division of noumena and phenomena, and defended it against Oizerman's and Strawson's criticisms, and incorporated the interpretations of Werkmeister and Matthews. Despite Oizerman's allegations of contradiction, we have carefully described what exactly Kant means when he claims that noumena exists. It is not a claim of instances of "noumena" but is simply a rectification to ascribe meaning to phenomena and Kant's system, and everything that needs to be known of noumena, for Kant's system to work, can be known. Werkmeister and Matthews both give an important interpretation of Kant's division not as a metaphysical claim about reality but only as an epistemological division demarcating human knowledge and demonstrating the complex interplay between phenomena and noumena, and this justifies Kant's account for human knowledge.

Conclusion

Kant's CPR had a grand goal, and that was to bridge empiricism and rationalism, through his distinction between phenomena and noumena. This paper has thoroughly examined Kant's division, defending its coherence and essential role within his epistemological framework. It has addressed critiques, showing the division's strength in Kant's project of demarcating human knowledge. Kant's division of the world into noumena and phenomena remains a cornerstone of his philosophical system, instrumental in advancing our understanding of the limits and nature of human knowledge. Kant successfully reconciles the contributions of empiricism and rationalism, and presents a unified model that accommodates knowledge through sensory experience and the a priori.

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