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Kant and the Interests of Reason

DE GRUYTER

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Introduction

The present work argues that we can only develop a proper grasp of Kant's practical philosophy if we appreciate the central role played in his thought by the notion of the interests of reason. While it is generally acknowledged that reason, for Kant, is not a purely instrumental faculty, but one endowed with its own essential interests, few commentators have attempted to explain how the notion of the interests of reason fits into Kant's overall account of the functioning of our rational faculties—and how it is linked to his wider philosophical project. The present work attempts to fill this gap.

More specifically, it will try to show that a proper understanding of Kant's conception of reason as an interested faculty allows us to make sense of the following key aspects of his practical thought, which must otherwise appear puzzling:

- *The fact of reason*: in his mature work, Kant maintains that we only have grounds for regarding ourselves as (transcendentally) free because of what he calls the “fact of reason”—that is, our awareness of being subject to the unconditional demands of morality. This makes the fact of reason the very foundation of Kant's practical philosophy. However, none of the commentators consulted in the preparation for this work offers a fully worked-out explanation of how Kant's fact-of-reason is to be understood. I argue that we can make sense of this notion if we appreciate how deeply it is rooted (and prepared for) in Kant's theoretical philosophy—and how the latter, in turn, is organized around the notion of reason's interest in achieving a systematically unified worldview. I try to show that once we trace these linkages, we can give a coherent account of Kant's fact-of-reason argument.
- *The highest good as the complete satisfaction of the interests of reason*: the highest good (the combination of virtue and happiness) is Kant's vision of the best possible state of affairs in the empirical world. Commentators have generally followed Beck in accepting the juridical conception of that notion, according to which the highest good is marked by the distribution of happiness according to virtue. Yet, if we accept the juridical conception of the highest good, Kant's claim that we have a duty to realize the highest good in the empirical world becomes all but unintelligible (for what could we possibly do to bring about the distribution of happiness according to virtue?). I will show that the juridical conception is rooted in a superseded ethical framework (the one Kant had operated with in *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*)—and that it is inconsistent with his mature ethical theory. I argue that there are good reasons for rejecting the juridical conception in favor

of the maximal conception, according to which the highest good is the state of affairs in which the interests of reason in its practical application are completely satisfied.

In Chapter 1, we start our discussion by exploring Kant's conception of human beings as finite rational beings (that is, as hybrids composed of a physical body, on the one hand, and reason, on the other)—and his conception of reason, in particular. Kant conceives of reason as self-reflective and spontaneous thought, guided by its own essential interests. The most important of these is the interest in imposing systematic unity on our knowledge (in its theoretical application) and our actions (in its practical application). That is, reason, for Kant, is not a merely instrumental faculty (serving as a tool to satisfy whatever independent interests we have)—but is rather guided by its need to integrate every aspect of our life into a systematically unified whole.

The challenge for Kant at this point is to show how regarding our reason as guided by its own interests (and, hence, as spontaneous) is consistent with his conception of the world of our experience as governed by natural necessity. This question takes its most pressing form in the context of the practical use of reason. To put the issue in Kant's own terms: we have to explain how can we conceive of ourselves as transcendentally free—i. e. as able to be first causes of our actions—in spite of the fact that our actions are determined with necessity by the laws of nature.

Our discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 prepares the ground for Kant's answer to this question, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 2 highlights three results of Kant's theoretical investigations that will prove crucial in our attempt to understand his solution to the problem of transcendental freedom: a) his account of the nature of necessity, according to which the necessity we encounter in the world of our experience is imposed by our own epistemic apparatus; b) his doctrine of ideas, according to which the correct use of reason involves the use of concepts to which nothing in the world of our experience corresponds—but which is nonetheless required to satisfy the interests of reason; and c) what I will call Kant's *doctrine of practical knowledge*. This last doctrine—which, I argue, is one of the central (if unobvious) results of Kant's major theoretical work, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*—states that if the truth-value of a given judgment (such as the one regarding our own transcendental freedom) cannot be settled on the basis of theoretical fact and if, furthermore, the truth of this judgment is linked to the essential interests of our practical reason, then we are entitled to accept the judgment as objectively true, in spite of the fact that we have no theoretical basis for doing so.

Chapter 3 explores Kant's notion of the moral law. The only way to account for the necessity with which the moral law commands, Kant holds, is to understand it as valid *a priori*, i. e. as the product of our pure practical reason. Thus, if we were to accept that the moral law is valid for us (a point to be established in Chapter 4), doing so would commit us to attributing a noumenal (and, hence, transcendently free) will to ourselves. Such a noumenal will would, Kant argues, be free from the influence of any sensuous interest—and would, consequently, be necessarily guided by the interests of reason. We can thus understand the demands of the moral law, which present themselves as duties to our sensuously affected wills, as expressing the willing of our idealized pure wills—or, equivalently, as expressing the conditions under which the interests of our reason in its practical application would be fully satisfied.

On the basis of these preparatory discussions, Chapter 4 offers a reconstruction of Kant's fact-of-reason argument as his solution to the problem of transcendental freedom. Kant takes it as an uncontroversial aspect of our common moral experience that, when deciding on how to act, we find ourselves confronted with unconditional moral demands. (In fact, many moral skeptics do not dispute that we experience these demands—but rather that we have reason to take them seriously). Our reason's interest in systematic unity demands that all our experiences both as cognizers and as agents in the world be integrated into a systematically unified view of the world. Given that there is no theoretical fact of the matter as to whether the moral law is valid for us, the necessary practical interest we take in the moral law (i. e. the fact that we are confronted by its unconditional demand) entitles (and requires) us—given Kant's doctrine of practical knowledge—to ascribe objective validity to the moral law. Yet, the only way to account for the possibility of an unconditionally binding demand on us, Kant holds, is to regard it as the product of our own noumenal wills. Thus, to be able to integrate our experience of being subject to an unconditional moral demand, we have to attribute to ourselves noumenal existence as transcendently free wills. That is, Kant argues, we are entitled (and required) to assume both the objective validity of the moral law and the objective reality of our own transcendental freedom.

With the objective reality of our free will thus established, Chapter 5 discusses Kant's theory of the will—and, in particular, his account of how our will can be guided by both our sensuous interests and the interests of our reason. In this context, I highlight the need to distinguish between the different determining grounds of the will (the incentive, the subjective determining ground and the objective determining ground)—as well as the different Kantian notions of freedom (transcendental freedom, negative freedom, moral freedom and external freedom). Furthermore, I argue that there are good grounds for rejecting the claim

that, according to Kant's theory of the will, the moral value of our actions depends on our first-order maxims (*pace* Frierson) and that we cannot know our first-order maxims (*pace* Wood and O'Neill).

Chapter 6 focuses on Kant's theory of value. I argue that Kant conceives of the objective good as that which satisfies the interests of reason. This focus on the interests of reason as the core of Kant's theory of value allows us to understand why for Kant our personality (i.e. our status as beings with transcendently free wills) rather than our humanity (i.e. our ability to set ends for ourselves) is the ground for regarding ourselves as ends in ourselves (*pace* Korsgaard, Wood and Guyer) and as the final end of creation (i.e. that for the purpose of which the whole of the natural world exists). Furthermore, while most commentators accept Kant's claim that the good will is the only thing that has unconditional value, I argue that this assertion is misleading, given that his theory of value commits him to regarding our personality and the highest good as having unconditional value as well.

This discussion, in turn, prepares the ground for the argument in Chapter 7 that Kant's conception of the "highest good" (i.e. the best possible state of the empirical world) should be understood as combining the highest moral perfection with the greatest happiness (rather than as involving the distribution of happiness according to virtue, as Beck suggests). To make sense of Kant's contention that happiness forms part of the highest good, I argue, we have to understand it as consisting of the realization of our subjective ends (rather than the satisfaction of our desires, as suggested by Allison and Yovel). Lastly, I highlight how accepting the maximal conception of the highest good fatally undermines Kant's attempt to offer a moral proof for the objective reality of God.

The final two chapters are concerned with filling out the details of Kant's conception of the highest good. Chapter 8 discusses Kant's conception of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as the process by which we become increasingly aware of, and capable of acting in line with, the requirements for the proper use of both our technical-practical reason (i.e. our ability to realize our ends) and our moral-practical reason (i.e. our ability to choose good ends), thus coming closer to realizing the highest good in the empirical world. Introducing the notion of enlightenment allows us to make the important distinction between the two conceptions of the good human life Kant is operating with: on the one hand, the highest good as the ideal condition of the complete satisfaction of the interests of reason—and, on the other, our actual existence spent in the attempt to realize this ideal condition, overcoming the weakness of our imperfect wills and the temptation posed by our sensuous nature.

Lastly, Chapter 9 discusses how, for Kant, the realization of the highest good is possible only as the result of a collective effort. Kant holds that we require so-

cial interaction for the development of our talents (and, in particular, the correct use of our rational faculties), that we have to enter into a society governed by shared external laws to be able to make secure and effective use of our technical-practical reason in the pursuit of our ends and that satisfying our reason's interest in the systematic unity among the wills of all rational beings requires that we determine our wills on the basis of shared moral principles. As a consequence, we should understand Kant's notion of the highest good as offering an essentially social conception of the good human life.

1 Humans as hybrids

“Zweifaches ich. Sofern ich leidend oder tätig bin, tierisch oder menschlich.” [R 278, XV, 105]

The central structural element in Kant’s anthropology is the hybrid character of human nature: on the one hand, man is part of physical nature, governed by natural necessity—on the other, he is endowed with reason, and thus in a position to regard himself as free. Much of Kant’s practical philosophy is a meditation on the interaction between these two elements of human nature:

Wir bemerken daher auch im Menschen zweierlei ganz verschiedenartige Teile, nämlich auf der einen Seite Sinnlichkeit und Verstand und auf der andern Vernunft und freien Willen, die sich sehr wesentlich von einander unterscheiden... Der Mensch muss für zwei ganz verschiedene Welten bestimmt sein, einmal für das Reich der Sinne und des Verstandes, also für diese Erdenwelt: dann aber auch noch für eine andere Welt, die wir nicht kennen, für ein Reich der Sitten. [SF, VII, 70; see also: MS, VI, 418; MAM, VIII, 116n]¹

For Kant, humans are physical beings, living as part of the empirical world, in which everything is perfectly determined by natural necessity [KrV, III, 374]. Every event in this world is caused by a previous state of affairs in combination with the laws of nature—and is, in turn, the cause of other events that follow in time. Everything that happens in the empirical world is part of an indefinite causal chain beyond anyone’s control². To be part of this world is to be passive: even living beings are only so many billiard balls made to move by external stimuli. When an animal leaps, snaps, or squeals, it does so because of certain de-

¹ “In Kantian terms, the rational and the non-rational differ not in degree or in form, but in kind; they are not two stages along a single scale, but two heterogeneous and mutually exclusive principles” [Yovel, 1989, 281]. The divide between reason and sensuous nature maps neatly onto a series of further key distinctions—active versus passive, formal versus material, objective versus idiosyncratic and noble versus base—which we will explore in the following chapters.

² “[J]ede Begebenheit, folglich auch jede Handlung, die in einem Zeitpunkte vorgeht, unter der Bedingung dessen, was in der vorhergehenden Zeit war, [ist] notwendig ... Da nun die vergangene Zeit nicht mehr in meiner Gewalt ist, so muss jede Handlung, die ich ausübe, durch bestimmende Gründe, die nicht in meiner Gewalt sind, notwendig sein, d. i. ich bin in dem Zeitpunkte, darin ich handle, niemals frei. Denn in jedem Zeitpunkte stehe ich doch immer unter der Notwendigkeit, durch das zum Handeln bestimmt zu sein, was nicht in meiner Gewalt ist, und die a parte priori unendliche Reihe der Begebenheiten, die ich immer nur nach einer schon vorherbestimmten Ordnung fortsetzen, nirgend von selbst anfangen würde, wäre eine stetige Naturkette, meine Kausalität also niemals Freiheit” [KpV, V, 94–5].

sires or feelings, reliably triggered by the physical conditions it finds itself in. Man is just such an animal, endowed with a physical body and subject to desires and urges. Like any other animal, he is a natural being whose actions are perfectly determined by natural necessity:

Wenn wir alle Erscheinungen seiner Willkür bis auf den Grund erforschen könnten, so würde es keine einzige menschliche Handlung geben, die wir nicht mit Gewissheit vorher-sagen und aus ihren vorhergehenden Bedingungen als notwendig erkennen könnten. In Ansehung dieses empirischen Charakters gibt es also keine Freiheit, und nach diesem können wir doch allein den Menschen betrachten, wenn wir lediglich beobachten und, wie es in der Anthropologie geschieht, von seinen Handlungen die bewegenden Ursachen physiologisch erforschen wollen. [KrV, III, 372]

Kant's conception of reason

Yet, human beings are different from other animals in that they are endowed with reason (“[Der Mensch ist ein] mit Vernunftfähigkeit begabtes Tier (*animal rationale*)” [A, VII, 321; see also: KrV, IV, 452])³. To understand Kant's notion of reason we have to spend a moment to understand his conception of human thought more generally. First, human thought is *self-reflective*. Kant holds that, as rational beings, we are self-conscious—that is, in thinking and judging we experience ourselves as thinking and judging [KrV, III, 108; see also: A, VII, 127]⁴. This self-consciousness distinguishes us from all other living beings: “Dass der Mensch in seiner Vorstellung das Ich haben kann, erhebt ihn unendlich über alle andere auf Erden lebende Wesen” [A, VII, 127].

3 As Kemp Smith points out, Kant's uses the term “reason” in different ways [2003, 2]. The two most important uses for our purposes are what I will call the narrow and the broad meaning of “reason”. In the narrow sense, reason is contrasted with the understanding. The understanding is that aspect of our thought concerned with cognition of the external world, while reason is concerned with guiding our understanding in a way that makes the most complete use of the understanding possible [KrV, III, 427]. In the broad use of the term, reason refers to the entirety of our self-reflective thought, comprising both the understanding and reason in the narrow sense. In the following, “reason” will typically refer to reason in the narrow sense, unless otherwise specified.

4 “We cannot conceive or represent to ourselves an x as F without not only doing it, that is, consciously taking it as such, but without also in some sense ‘knowing what one is doing’. This peculiar mode of cognitive self-awareness is what Kant terms ‘apperception’. As such, it is not another thing that one does when one judges (a kind of second-order knowing that one is knowing); it is rather an inseparable component of the first-order activity itself” [Allison, 1990, 37].

Secondly, human thought is *spontaneous*. As rational beings we have to regard ourselves as free—both in our theoretical activity (i. e., in making judgments about what is the case in the world) and in our practical activity (i. e. in determining our actions). That is, we attribute to ourselves both freedom of judgment and of action (Kant calls the latter *transcendental freedom*, a term we will discuss in more detail below)—i. e. we do not see either our thinking or our actions as subject to deterministic forces. This is particularly obvious when it comes to our freedom of judgment. For the very notion of thinking to be coherent we have to regard our thought as self-guided, i. e. as not determined by natural necessity: “[Die] Idee der Freiheit als eines Vermögens absoluter Spontaneität [ist] nicht ein Bedürfnis, sondern, was deren Möglichkeit betrifft, ein analytischer Grundsatz der reinen spekulativen Vernunft” [KpV, V, 48]⁵.

To say that freedom is an analytic principle of reason is to say that we cannot reject it without this leading to contradiction. Thus, if we regarded our thought as unfree—as determined by external factors –, we would have lost all ground on which to ascribe truth to any of our judgments (including that regarding the unfreedom of our own thought). As Henrich puts it: “[D]ie Annahme der Urteilsfreiheit ist unvermeidbar, weil es ohne sie kein Denken gibt” [1975, 72; see also: Allison, 1996, 133]. Certainly, we cannot *prove* that our thought is not determined by natural forces. Yet, if we are to think at all, we have to do so under the assumption of our own freedom of judgment. As self-aware beings seeing themselves as required to ascribe freedom to their own thought, we regard our beliefs and our actions not as foisted onto us by external factors. Rather, we see ourselves as having the ability to reflect on them and decide, on reflection, whether to accept or reject them⁶.

5 See Reflektion 4220: “Freiheit ist eigentlich nur die Selbsttätigkeit, deren man sich bewusst ist. Wenn man sich etwas beifallen lässt, so ist dieses ein Akt der Selbsttätigkeit, aber man ist sich hierbei nicht seiner Tätigkeit, sondern der Wirkung bewusst. Der Ausdruck: ich denke (dieses Objekt), zeigt schon an, dass ich in Ansehung der Vorstellung nicht leidend bin, dass sie mir zuzuschreiben sei, dass von mir selbst das Gegenteil abhängt” [XVII, 463; see also: SF, VII, 27]. The novelty of Kant’s conception of reason as spontaneity is highlighted by Yovel: “Kant conceives of reason mainly as a spontaneous activity, not as a mere set of forms. This dynamic conception of reason is radically different from that of Plato and, indeed, breaks away from the whole classic view of the logos as fixed and independent, governing the mind and the world as a thing in itself” [1989, 12]. See also Henrich: “Im Gegensatz zu der *vis representativa* Wolffs hat Kant die Vernunft als reine Aktuosität verstanden” [1973, 245].

6 This foundational thought of Kant’s conception of reason is highlighted by Korsgaard: “The animal finds herself in a world that consists of things that are directly perceived as food or prey, as danger or predator, as potential mate, as child ... These normatively or practically loaded teleological perceptions serve as the grounds of the animal’s actions—where the ground of an

The third important characteristic of human thought for Kant is that it is *discursive*: it works on the basis of concepts rather than through intuitions [KrV, III, 85]. Empirical concepts are rules for recognizing objects in the world around us on the basis of certain selective attributes, which abstract from the multitude of impressions provided by our senses [KrV, III, 136]⁷. In this sense, our understanding is the faculty of rules [KrV, III, 131]. In thinking, we judge whether a given concept does or does not apply to a given object that we represent to ourselves [KrV, III, 86]⁸.

Yet, the understanding has an even more fundamental function, namely that of impressing its own order onto the material of our experience, the intuitions provided by the senses. Instead of merely deriving empirical concepts by abstracting from our experience, it structures these in a way that the inchoate chaos of our senses appears to us as orderly experience⁹. It does so through

action is a representation that causes the animal to do what she does ... We human beings ... are aware not only of our perceptions but also of the way in which they tend to operate on us ... I believe that this awareness is the source of reason ... Once the space of reflective awareness—reflective distance, as I like to call it—opens up between the potential ground of a belief or action and the belief or action itself, we must step across that distance, and so must be able to endorse the operation on that ground, before we can act or believe. What would have been the cause of our belief or action, had we still been operating under the control of instinctive or learned responses, now becomes something experienced as a consideration in favor of a certain belief or action instead, one we can endorse or reject” [2008, 31].

7 In this sense, it is the mark of the discursive mind that it goes from the general to the particular, while an intuitive mind would be one that has direct epistemic access to the specific content of our experience, without requiring any contributions from the senses: “Unser Verstand ist ein Vermögen der Begriffe, d. i. ein diskursiver Verstand, für den es freilich zufällig sein muss, welcherlei und wie sehr verschieden das Besondere sein mag, das ihm in der Natur gegeben werden und das unter seine Begriffe gebracht werden kann; so kann man sich auch einen intuitiven Verstand (negativ, nämlich bloß als nicht diskursiven) denken, welcher nicht vom Allgemeinen zum Besonderen und so zum Einzelnen (durch Begriffe) geht, und für welchen jene Zufälligkeit der Zusammenstimmung der Natur in ihren Produkten nach besondern Gesetzen zum Verstande nicht angetroffen wird, welche dem unsrigen es so schwer macht, das Mannigfaltige derselben zur Einheit des Erkenntnisses zu bringen” [KU, V, 406].

8 Only in the later *Kritik der Urteilskraft* will Kant distinguish between the understanding and a newly introduced faculty of judgment. For a discussion of this change in his epistemological theory, see note 54 in Chapter 6 below.

9 “Kant’s idealism, as an idealism of epistemic conditions, is inseparable from his analysis of the discursive nature of human cognition ... [T]his analysis is based on three bedrock epistemological assumptions: (1) cognition of any kind requires that an object somehow be given (this applies even to the problematic intellectual or archetypal intuition); (2) since a finite mind like ours is receptive rather than creative, its intuition must be sensible, resting on an affection by objects; and (3) sensible intuition, of itself, is insufficient to yield cognition of objects and requires the cooperation of the spontaneity of the understanding” [Allison, 2004, 77].

the pure concepts of the understanding, which Kant calls the *categories*¹⁰. One category is that of causality: because of the structure impressed on empirical reality by our understanding, this reality presents itself in the forms of chains of cause and effect, rather than a mere “rhapsody of perceptions” [KrV, III, 144]. In this sense, the order we perceive in the world is not something existing in itself, but something we project onto it: “Es ist also der Verstand nicht bloß ein Vermögen, durch Vergleichung der Erscheinungen sich Regeln zu machen: er ist selbst die Gesetzgebung für die Natur, d. i. ohne Verstand würde es überall nicht Natur, d. i. synthetische Einheit des Mannigfaltigen der Erscheinungen nach Regeln, geben” [KrV, IV, 93]. Thus, on the Kantian picture of cognition, our senses are affected by the world around us, and the content of this sense-experience is structured by our understanding (by means of concepts) into the coherent, orderly experience we have of the world¹¹.

This is the importance of the Kantian notion of the discursive nature of our understanding: our thought does not generate its own material content¹²; rather, it orders the content given to it from external sources (our senses)¹³. The essential function of our mind is to impose order according to its own rules. Hence, for

10 We will discuss the Kantian notion of the categories as pure concepts of the understanding in more detail below.

11 “Allein die Verbindung (conjunctio) eines Mannigfaltigen überhaupt kann niemals durch Sinne in uns kommen und kann also auch nicht in der reinen Form der sinnlichen Anschauung zugleich mit enthalten sein; denn sie ist ein Akt der Spontaneität der Vorstellungskraft, und da man diese zum Unterschiede von der Sinnlichkeit Verstand nennen muss, so ist alle Verbindung ... eine Verstandeshandlung, die wir mit der allgemeinen Benennung Synthesis belegen würden, um dadurch zugleich bemerklich zu machen, dass wir uns nichts als im Objekt verbunden vorstellen können, ohne es vorher selbst verbunden zu haben, und unter allen Vorstellungen die Verbindung die einzige ist, die nicht durch Objekte gegeben, sondern nur vom Subjekt selbst verrichtet werden kann, weil sie ein Akt seiner Selbsttätigkeit ist” [KrV, III, 107].

12 “Nicht dadurch, dass ich bloß denke, erkenne ich irgend ein Objekt, sondern nur dadurch, dass ich eine gegebene Anschauung in Absicht auf die Einheit des Bewusstseins, darin alles Denken besteht, bestimme, kann ich irgend einen Gegenstand erkennen” [KrV, III, 267].

13 Kant insists that the only source for the content of our experience that our discursive understanding can avail itself of are the intuitions (*Anschauungen*) of our senses [KpV, V, 45], referring to our understanding as “unser diskursiver, der Bilder bedürftiger Verstand” [KU, V, 408]. In thus stressing the importance of the senses in cognition, Kant is opposing Leibniz’ theory of knowledge. Kant argues that the senses make an independent, irreplaceable contribution to our epistemic access to the world—and do not, as Leibniz claims, offer the same knowledge the intellect has access to, only in a more muddled way [KrV, III, 220]. In Kant’s model, the senses provide the matter, and the intellect the form—in a way that knowledge results from the contributions of two independent sources, neither of which could do without the other. Kant specifically rejects Leibniz’ suggestion that the understanding has access to its own innate and pure intuitions (“angeborene reine Verstandesanschauungen” [A, VII, 141; see also: VT, VIII, 389]).

experience to be possible, we need the contribution of both our senses and our understanding, where the senses play a passive-receptive role (being affected by the world around us [KrV, III, 107]) and the understanding a spontaneous one (giving form to the content of our sense experience) [KrV, IV, 92]¹⁴.

As the understanding structures the intuitions of our senses, so reason structures the concepts of the understanding, in a way that unifies our experiences, turning them into experiences of a single, connected world [KrV, III, 253]¹⁵. Reason, for Kant, is the ability to relate the particular to the general. In its merely *formal-logical* use, it operates in the form of syllogisms: the general rule is given and recognized to apply to a given particular item, in a way that properties about the item can be inferred (All men are mortal; Socrates is a man etc [KrV, III, 255]). In its *hypothetical* use—the one we will be mainly concerned with –, reason is confronted by a multiplicity of particular items and projects an overarching order into which they are embedded [KrV, III, 429]¹⁶. Where the understanding by itself only offers us structured bits of experience, our reason guides its use to make possible the integration of these bits into a unified and coherent worldview, thus achieving “systematic unity in the use of our understanding” [KrV, III, 440]¹⁷. That is, the principles of reason provide an *a priori* structure

14 Kemp Smith points out that Kant's analysis of consciousness radically breaks with a philosophical tradition that had treated “consciousness merely as a medium whereby the existent gets itself reported”: “From the Kantian standpoint ... all awareness, no matter how rudimentary or apparently simple, is an act of judgment, and therefore involves the relational categories. Not passive contemplation but active judgment, not mere conception but synthetic interpretation, is the fundamental form, and the only form, in which our consciousness exists” [2003, xlvi; see also: Allison, 2004, 195].

15 More precisely, as Kemp Smith highlights, we should speak about reason as that aspect of our understanding that allows it to regulate itself: “Reason, Kant teaches [in the *Dialectic of Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*], is not a faculty separate from the understanding, and does not therefore produce any concept peculiar to itself. Reason is simply a name for the understanding in so far as it acts independently of sensibility, and seeks, by means of its pure forms, in abstraction, from all empirical limitations, to grasp the unconditioned” [2003, 478–9].

16 Confusingly, Kant refers to the *hypothetical* use of reason also as the *real* use of reason: “Es gibt von [der Vernunft] wie von dem Verstande einen bloß formalen, d. i. logischen Gebrauch, da die Vernunft von allem Inhalte der Erkenntnis abstrahiert, aber auch einen realen, da sie selbst den Ursprung gewisser Begriffe und Grundsätze enthält, die sie weder von den Sinnen, noch vom Verstande entlehnt” [KrV, III, 237]. The distinction between the logical and the real (or hypothetical) use of reason is highlighted by Beck: “[R]eason in its logical use is the faculty of drawing inferences and of systematizing knowledge, of finding a ‘wherefore’ for every ‘therefore’; and ... in its real use it posits certain a priori synthetic propositions or principles which are supposed to state the unconditioned conditions for all that is found in experience” [1960, 75].

17 In fact, seeing everything that is particular as necessarily subsumed under general rules is, for Kant, the hallmark of rationality itself: “Und dies, dass alles unter dem Allgemeinen stehe

of our experience, which serves as the guideline for the understanding's exploration of the world of experience¹⁸. This is the most profound sense in which our knowledge, for Kant, is not passive-receptive, but active-creative. Before any actual experience, reason provides the understanding with a framework into which to organize its knowledge. Without this *a priori* order, Kant claims, no coherent use of our understanding, and therefore no empirical knowledge, would be possible [KrV, III, 432].

Thus, reason, as the faculty coordinating the activity of the understanding, is the ultimate source for the order in the world of our experience¹⁹. While reason supervises the understanding, it itself is not supervised by any other faculty. It is autonomous in the sense that it is required, and able, to supervise itself [KpV, V, 119]. This raises the question: How—and on the basis of what—does this auto-supervision take place? The answer is: on the basis of reason's own essential interests. Reason, for Kant, is as an interested faculty, in the sense that it has its own essential ends (*wesentliche Zwecke* [KrV, III, 542]), which it strives to achieve. In this sense, Kantian reason is, as Yovel puts it, an “erotic” faculty [1989, 9], aiming to satisfy its interests [KpV, V, 120], “inclinations” (*Hang* [KrV, III, 518]), “needs” (*Bedürfnis* [SDO, VIII, 136]) and “desires” (*Begierde* [KrV, III, 517]).

Kant defines an “interest” as the “principle that contains the conditions under which alone [a faculty's] exercise is being promoted” (“ein Prinzip, welches die Bedingung enthält, unter welcher allein die Ausübung desselben befördert

und in allgemeinen Regeln bestimmbar sei, ist eben das Prinzip der Rationalität oder der Notwendigkeit (*principium rationalitatis sive necessitatis*)” [Logik, IX, 120].

18 “Übersehen wir unsere Verstandeserkenntnisse in ihrem ganzen Umfange, so finden wir, dass dasjenige, was Vernunft ganz eigentümlich darüber verfügt und zu Stande zu bringen sucht, das Systematische der Erkenntnis sei, d. i. der Zusammenhang derselben aus einem Prinzip. Diese Vernunftseinheit setzt jederzeit eine Idee voraus, nämlich die von der Form eines Ganzen der Erkenntnis, welches vor der bestimmten Erkenntnis der Teile vorhergeht und die Bedingungen enthält, jedem Teile seine Stelle und Verhältnis zu den übrigen *a priori* zu bestimmen. Diese Idee postuliert demnach vollständige Einheit der Verstandeserkenntnis, wodurch diese nicht bloß ein zufälliges Aggregat, sondern ein nach notwendigen Gesetzen zusammenhängendes System wird. Man kann eigentlich nicht sagen, dass diese Idee ein Begriff vom Objekte sei, sondern von der durchgängigen Einheit dieser Begriffe, so fern dieselbe dem Verstande zur Regel dient. Dergleichen Vernunftbegriffe werden nicht aus der Natur geschöpft, vielmehr befragen wir die Natur nach diesen Ideen und halten unsere Erkenntnis für mangelhaft, so lange sie denselben nicht adäquat ist” [KrV, III, 428].

19 From the Kantian perspective, nature itself—i.e. the product of our creative-cognitive efforts—consequently forms a rule-governed whole: “Alles in der Natur, sowohl in der leblosen als auch in der belebten Welt, geschieht nach Regeln, ob wir gleich diese Regeln nicht immer kennen... Die ganze Natur überhaupt ist eigentlich nichts anders als ein Zusammenhang von Erscheinungen nach Regeln; und es gibt überall keine Regellosigkeit” [L, IX, 11].

wird” [KpV, V, 119])²⁰. In this sense, the interests of reason are simply the conditions that allow for the most complete use of our highest mental faculty. One important interest of reason is that of *systematic unity*. Reason aims at the harmonious integration of everything that is particular into a systematic whole, in a way that eliminates any form of contradiction. Rules of reasoning that generate contradictions lead to defective thought. In this sense, it is an interest of reason to avoid contradiction—and to operate on the basis of principles that allow it to do so: “Vollständige zweckmäßige Einheit ist Vollkommenheit (schlechthin betrachtet)... Die größte systematische, folglich auch die zweckmäßige Einheit ist die Schule und selbst die Grundlage der Möglichkeit des größten Gebrauchs der Menschenvernunft. Die Idee derselben ist also mit dem Wesen unserer Vernunft unzertrennlich verbunden” [KrV, III, 456; see also: KrV, III, 432].

A second interest of reason is *completeness*—the ability to trace back any particular item of knowledge to its conditions, without any of the chains of conditions resulting in loose ends [KrV, III, 242]. For Kant, an attempt to give an explanation of a certain fact that arbitrarily stops at another fact without, in turn, giving an explanation for that fact as well is defective because of its incompleteness. It is only when we have provided a complete chain of explanation from the given fact to its unconditioned first condition that we have given a fully satisfactory (i. e. non-defective) explanation—that is, one that satisfies the demands of reason: “Nun ist es ein wesentliches Prinzip alles Gebrauchs unserer Vernunft, ihre Erkenntnis bis zum Bewusstsein ihrer Notwendigkeit zu treiben (denn ohne diese wäre sie nicht Erkenntnis der Vernunft)” [GMS, IV, 463]²¹.

Thus, reason is that dynamic and interested aspect of our thought that seeks to integrate everything that is individual and particular (sense impressions and items of knowledge in its theoretical use and principles of action in its practical

20 Yet, Kant also says that only finite rational beings have interests [GMS, IV, 413; KpV, V, 79]. So, we should perhaps say that while reason has essential ends, only our human reason, the rational faculty of us finite rational beings, has interests. However, for convenience's sake, I will use the terms “end of reason”, “interest of reason” and “need of reason” synonymously.

21 “Denn das, was uns notwendig über die Grenze der Erfahrung und aller Erscheinungen hinaus zu gehen treibt, ist das Unbedingte, welches die Vernunft in den Dingen an sich selbst notwendig und mit allem Recht zu allem Bedingten und dadurch die Reihe der Bedingungen als vollendet verlangt” [KrV, III, 13; see also KrV, III, 243]. The problem that Kant focuses on in *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* is precisely that, on the one hand, reason only finds itself satisfied when it has traced any conditional item of knowledge back to its unconditioned cause—but that, on the other hand, the nature of our cognitive faculties makes any knowledge of the unconditional impossible [GMS, IV, 463]. We will discuss this topic in more detail below.

use) into a complete and self-consistent system²²: “Die Vernunft wird durch einen Hang ihrer Natur getrieben, über den Erfahrungsgebrauch hinaus zu gehen, sich in einem reinen Gebrauche und mittelst bloßer Ideen zu den äußersten Grenzen aller Erkenntnis hinaus zu wagen und nur allererst in der Vollendung ihres Kreises, in einem für sich bestehenden systematischen Ganzen, Ruhe zu finden” [KrV, III, 518]²³.

In doing so, reason is driven by nothing but its own essential interests. As an interested faculty, reason, in Kant’s conception, is teleological, or end-directed, aiming at the attainment of its interests. As Yovel, one of the few writers to attach appropriate weight to the Kantian notion of the interests of reason, puts it: “Kant describes reason primarily as a system of interests. Its basic feature is teleological activity, pursuing its own ‘essential ends’ or immanent tasks ... [R]ational activity is a goal-setting activity, directed to the attainment of ends not given to it from without but set or projected by reason itself” [1989, 14]²⁴. In this sense “pure reason is in effect concerned with nothing but itself” (“Die reine Vernunft ist in der Tat mit nichts als sich selbst beschäftigt” [KrV, III, 448]): in its activities in both the theoretical and the practical field, it is guided by nothing but its own essential ends—and seeks nothing but to satisfy its own essential interests. In fact, the whole of Kant’s philosophy can be understood as an exploration of the interests of reason (“Philosophie [ist] die Wissenschaft von der Beziehung aller Erkenntnis auf die wesentlichen Zwecke der menschlichen Vernunft” [KrV, III, 542])—and much of what Kant says must appear puzzling without an

22 In identifying systematic unity and completeness as central among the many interests, needs and demands of reason that Kant mentions in his texts, I follow Guyer: “[T]he two conceptions of unity I have characterized, completeness ... and systematicity..., should not be thought of as competing conceptions of the unity of reason but rather as, at least in the end, two aspects of the unity of reason, or two criteria both of which must be satisfied if any body of thought is ultimately to satisfy the claims of reason” [2000, 62].

23 See also: “Denn nicht allein, dass unsere Vernunft schon ein Bedürfnis fühlt, den Begriff des Uneingeschränkten dem Begriffe alles Eingeschränkten, mithin aller anderen Dinge zum Grunde zu legen; so geht dieses Bedürfnis auch auf die Voraussetzung des Daseins desselben, ohne welche sie sich von der Zufälligkeit der Existenz der Dinge in der Welt, am wenigsten aber von der Zweckmäßigkeit und Ordnung, die man in so bewunderungswürdigem Grade (im Kleinen, weil es uns nahe ist, noch mehr wie im Großen) allenthalben antrifft, gar keinen befriedigenden Grund angeben kann” [SDO, VIII, 137].

24 Brandt also notes the importance of the notion of the interests of reason: “Wenn diese Rekonstruktion der KrV von ihrem Ende und Endzweck her richtig ist, dann leitet sich die juristische Verfassung aus einem Rechtsanspruch des Interesses der Vernunft und der Moral her, und damit ist die Rechtlichkeit keine austauschbare Metapher, sondern eine normative Rede auf der Ebene der Moral und ihrer Voraussetzung” [2007, 336].

appreciation of how central the notion of the interests of reason is to his thinking²⁵.

Given that, for Kant, the principles of reason express the very conditions for the complete and non-stultifying use of our mental faculties [KrV, III, 432; see also: O'Neill, 1989, 38], he regards their validity as independent from any personal characteristics or preferences of any given individual²⁶. This distinguishes them from our desires, which are idiosyncratic, in the sense that each human being has his own, at least partly non-overlapping, set of desires. The principles of reason are shared in that they are the same for all rational individuals. That is, they are, Kant holds, *objectively valid*²⁷.

Freedom and necessity

We have now explored Kant's conception of reason—and are in a position to consider the fundamental tension that marks Kant's vision of the human condition: on the one hand, human beings are natural beings with physical bodies, living in a world in which everything is perfectly determined by natural necessity. On the other hand, as rational beings they have to regard themselves as free both in their theoretical activity (that is, they attribute to themselves freedom of judgment) and in their practical activity (that is, they attribute to themselves transcendental freedom).

25 One could, for instance, easily be under the impression that Kant offers an ethics of disinterestedness. Yet, this would be to misunderstand him. As we will see below, the moral law—the law of reason—for him is the set of rules that allow us consistently to satisfy the interests of reason in its practical application. What he urges us to do is to give priority to the interests of reason—the interests of our proper self (see below)—over those of our physical nature. Thus, his moral theory is crucially built on the notion of the interests of reason, and in this sense not disinterested at all.

26 Kant uses the term “principle” to refer to rules under which reason operates and which it gives to itself [GMS, IV, 448]. As we have seen, reason essentially aims at the satisfaction of its own interests—and the principles of reason are the tools it employs for this purpose. In this sense, the principles of reason express the conditions under which the interests of reason are satisfied. Consequently, the principles of reason are valid *a priori* [L, IX, 110]—that is, their validity does not depend on anything given to us in experience, but rather on the interests of reason, which we are confronted with independently of the content of any particular experience.

27 “Also entspringt das Gesetz, anderer Glückseligkeit zu befördern, ... bloß daraus, dass *die Form der Allgemeinheit, die die Vernunft als Bedingung bedarf*, einer Maxime der Selbstliebe die objektive Gültigkeit eines Gesetzes zu geben, der Bestimmungsgrund des Willens wird” [KpV, V, 34, my emphasis; see also: KpV, V, 76].

How we can regard ourselves as free if we exist as part of a deterministic world? Or, put differently, what justifies us in attributing freedom to ourselves in spite of us being part of a world that is subject to natural necessity? The logical form of this problem recurs in many of Kant's investigations. It is the problem of certifying that the concepts we are using are well-grounded, that there is something in the world corresponding to them, rather than them being bogus concepts, which in spite of their grammatical correctness, refer to nothing at all. Solving this type of problem involves two steps: first, showing that the concept in question can be thought coherently and can be integrated into our general worldview without contradiction (this is what Kant calls establishing the concept's *logical possibility*) and, secondly, showing that we have grounds to believe that there is in fact some reality corresponding to it (establishing its *real possibility* [KrV, III, 17n])²⁸.

The concepts under investigation here are that of our freedom of judgment and that of our transcendental freedom. Let us start with the notion of freedom of judgment—i. e. our ability to guide our thought on the basis of the principles of reason, without our reason, in turn, being determined by external factors. To establish its *logical possibility*, we require a central piece of Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism: the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. As we have seen above, Kant holds that the world of our experience, located in time and space and ordered by laws of nature, is the creation of our own cognitive faculties. Time and space are not properties of objects in themselves,

28 As Kant highlights in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the fact that we have to distinguish between logical and real possibility (or what we would call possibility and reality) is directly linked to the discursive nature of our understanding, i. e. the fact that a mere thought is just the empty form of a judgment—and that only when that form is given material content by the intuition of our senses can we say that the judgment is true: “[W]ären zu dieser ihrer Ausübung nicht zwei ganz heterogene Stücke, Verstand für Begriffe und sinnliche Anschauung für Objekte, die ihnen korrespondieren, erforderlich: so würde es keine solche Unterscheidung (zwischen dem Möglichen und Wirklichen) geben. Wäre nämlich unser Verstand anschauend, so hätte er keine Gegenstände als das Wirkliche. Begriffe (die bloß auf die Möglichkeit eines Gegenstandes gehen) und sinnliche Anschauungen (welche uns etwas geben, ohne es dadurch doch als Gegenstand erkennen zu lassen) würden beide wegfallen. Nun beruht aber alle unsere Unterscheidung des bloß Möglichen vom Wirklichen darauf, dass das erstere nur die Position der Vorstellung eines Dinges respektiv auf unsern Begriff und überhaupt das Vermögen zu denken, das letztere aber die Setzung des Dinges an sich selbst (außer diesem Begriffe) bedeutet. Also ist die Unterscheidung möglicher Dinge von wirklichen eine solche, die bloß subjektiv für den menschlichen Verstand gilt, da wir nämlich etwas immer noch in Gedanken haben können, ob es gleich nicht ist, oder etwas als gegeben uns vorstellen, ob wir gleich noch keinen Begriff davon haben” [KU, V, 401–2]. For further discussions on the Kantian distinction between logical and real possibility, see Beck [1960, 272] and Guyer [2000, 356].

but are instead the way our senses represent these objects to us [KrV, III, 16]. Similarly, causality is not a feature of the world as it is in itself, but part of the tool-set our understanding employs to synthesize the material provided by the senses into objects of our experience [KrV, IV, 93].

When we abstract, for any given experience, from all contributions made by our senses and our understanding, we are left with the notion of the object as it exists in itself—that is, that object x which the representation by our senses is a representation of [KrV, III, 209]. This is what Kant calls the “noumenon”. The world of the noumena is not some mysterious, deeper reality, but merely the logical correlate of assuming that the structure of the world of our experience (i. e., that it is presented in time and space and operates according to the laws of causality) is imposed by our epistemic apparatus (our senses and our understanding), rather than being part of reality as it is in itself²⁹. That is, to speak of the world of the noumena is merely to assume a particular perspective on the world of our experience—namely, to consider it insofar as it exists independently from the contribution made to it by our epistemic apparatus.

Crucially, we can have no experience of the world of the noumena—for all experience is given to us in the form of time and space and the world of the noumena is precisely the world as it exists independently from these forms of intuition. The world of the noumena is, in a term that we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2 below, a mere idea of reason, a necessary assumption we have to make to be able to regard the structure of the empirical world as provided by our senses and our understanding³⁰. Thus, the noumenon is a merely negative

29 “Sobald dieser Unterschied [zwischen Erscheinung und Ding an sich selbst] einmal gemacht ist, so folgt von selbst, dass man hinter den Erscheinungen doch noch etwas anderes, was nicht Erscheinung ist, nämlich die Dinge an sich, einräumen und annehmen müsse, ob wir gleich uns von selbst bescheiden, dass, da sie uns niemals bekannt werden können, sondern immer nur, wie sie uns affizieren, wir ihnen nicht näher treten und, was sie an sich sind, niemals wissen können” [GMS, IV, 451].

30 “Der Verstand begrenzt demnach die Sinnlichkeit, ohne darum sein eigenes Feld zu erweitern, und indem er jene warnt, dass sie sich nicht anmaße, auf Dinge an sich selbst zu gehen, sondern lediglich auf Erscheinungen, so denkt er sich einen Gegenstand an sich selbst, aber nur als transzendentales Objekt, das die Ursache der Erscheinung (mithin selbst nicht Erscheinung) ist und weder als Größe, noch als Realität, noch als Substanz etc. gedacht werden kann (weil diese Begriffe immer sinnliche Formen erfordern, in denen sie einen Gegenstand bestimmen) ... Wollen wir dieses Objekt Noumenon nennen, darum weil die Vorstellung von ihm nicht sinnlich ist, so steht dieses uns frei. Da wir aber keine von unseren Verstandesbegriffen darauf anwenden können, so bleibt diese Vorstellung doch für uns leer und dient zu nichts, als die Grenzen unserer sinnlichen Erkenntnis zu bezeichnen und einen Raum übrig zu lassen, den wir weder durch mögliche Erfahrung, noch durch den reinen Verstand ausfüllen können” [KrV, IV, 185].

notion, a mere residual that we cannot know anything about, given that we can only learn about the world through our epistemic apparatus—and this only acquaints us with representations of objects, not the objects as they are in themselves [KrV, IV, 166].

This distinction between the phenomenal (i.e. the world we are acquainted to through experience) and the noumenal opens the conceptual space for conceiving of our reason as noumenal—that is, as existing in itself outside the spatiotemporal realm (i.e. the world of the appearances). Thus, while we know we exist as natural beings, as part of the phenomenal world, in which all events are perfectly determined by natural necessity, Kant's transcendental idealism allows us to conceive of the possibility of our reason's noumenal activity³¹. In so far as we conceive of our reason as noumenal we can integrate without contradiction the notion of its spontaneity with that of our empirical existence being governed by natural necessity—i.e. we can explain the *logical* possibility of our freedom of judgment³².

With the *logical* possibility of our freedom of judgment secured, establishing its *real* possibility (i.e. establishing that the concept really applies to us) is a small step, given the results of our earlier discussion of the spontaneity of reason: we found there that if we are to think at all—and think of ourselves as thinking—we have to regard our thought as free (i.e. as guided by its own interests, rather than as determined by natural necessity). That is, in reflecting on our own status as thinking beings, we have to ascribe freedom of judgment to ourselves.

31 “Kant’s task as a philosopher is to show how the thought of the I and its spontaneity can be reconciled with this naturalistic story ... Transcendental idealism, construed in terms of a contrast between two ‘points of view’ or ‘ways of considering’, as opposed to two ‘worlds’ or sets of entities, is the key to Kant’s solution to this problem. It accomplishes this goal by providing a conceptual space in which the thought of freedom can be held alongside of the thought of nature, not by the positive assignment of freedom to an inaccessible noumenal world” [Allison, 1996, 128].

32 The obvious question arising at this point is how the spontaneity of reason can interact with the determinism of the empirical world. As we will see below the same problem is replicated in Kant’s account of the possibility of transcendental freedom. In that latter case, Kant holds that no explanation of the compossibility of freedom and necessity is possible: “[W]ie der Prädeternismus, nach welchem willkürliche Handlungen als Begebenheiten ihre bestimmende Gründe in der vorhergehenden Zeit haben (die mit dem, was sie in sich hält, nicht mehr in unserer Gewalt ist), mit der Freiheit, nach welcher die Handlung sowohl als ihr Gegenteil in dem Augenblicke des Geschehens in der Gewalt des Subjekts sein muss, zusammen bestehen könne: das ist, was man einsehen will und nie einsehen wird” [R, VI, 49n]. The similarity between these two problems in the theoretical and the practical spheres suggests that the same answer applies here.

Alle unsere und anderer Wesen Handlungen sind necessitiert, nur allein der Verstand und der Wille, sofern er durch Verstand bestimmt werden kann, ist frei und eine reine Selbsttätigkeit, die durch nichts anderes als sich selbst bestimmt ist. Ohne diese ursprüngliche und unwandelbare Spontaneität würden wir nichts a priori erkennen; denn wir wären zu allem bestimmt und unsere Gedanken selbst ständen unter empirischen Gesetzen. Das Vermögen, a priori zu denken und zu handeln, ist die einzige Bedingung der Möglichkeit aller anderen Erscheinungen. [R 5441, XVIII, 182]

Thus, as far as our freedom of judgment is concerned, the true challenge lies in establishing its logical possibility (i. e. determining how its possibility can be coherently thought, given natural necessity). Once the Kantian distinction of the phenomenal and the noumenal allows us to do so, we are committed to attributing noumenal activity to our own reason in order to be able to account for the possibility of thought at all: “Der Mensch... ist sich selbst freilich einesteils Phänomen, andernteils aber, nämlich in Ansehung gewisser Vermögen, ein bloß intelligibler Gegenstand, weil die Handlung desselben gar nicht zur Rezeptivität der Sinnlichkeit gezählt werden kann. Wir nennen diese Vermögen Verstand und Vernunft” [KrV, III, 371; see also: SF, VII, 27]³³.

These reflections allow us to elucidate the relation between the Kantian distinctions of the higher and the lower faculties, on the one hand, and that of the

33 On reflection, we can see that this attribution of noumenal activity to our reason is not only a consequence of his theory of cognition, but even presupposed and required by it. For if the causal order governing the natural world is imposed by our reason—understood in the broad sense explained above –, reason cannot itself be subject to natural necessity, for that necessity itself is, properly understood, just a product of our reason’s activity: “Wenn wir nämlich noch eines andern Blicks (der uns aber freilich gar nicht verliehen ist, sondern an dessen Statt wir nur den Vernunftbegriff haben), nämlich einer intellektuellen Anschauung desselben Subjekts, fähig wären, so würden wir doch inne werden, dass diese ganze Kette von Erscheinungen in Ansehung dessen, was nur immer das moralische Gesetz angehen kann, von der Spontaneität des Subjekts als Dinges an sich selbst abhängt, von deren Bestimmung sich gar keine physische Erklärung geben lässt” [KpV, V, 99]. That is, the very logic of Kant’s transcendental idealism requires us to accept the notion of the noumenal activity of our reason. This is noted by Allison: “From a Kantian standpoint, the elimination of the I is not only pragmatically impossible (since the I must do the eliminating), but also incoherent on a deeper level, for the broadly mechanistic world in which the I is dissolved in the thoroughly naturalistic story is itself only for the I” [1996, 128; see also Prauss: 1982, 203]. Once we accept transcendental idealism, the skeptic’s plausible-seeming claim that our reason is itself determined by the laws of nature must be analyzed into the incoherent notion that our reason is determined by laws which are themselves a product of the spontaneous activity of our reason. If, as transcendental idealism claims, natural necessity is a product of our reason, then the spontaneity of our reason is a condition of, and cannot be restricted by, natural necessity. Kant’s doctrine of our noumenal existence as an idea of reason is an attempt to spell out how this is possible.

empirical and our pure use of our faculties, on the other (as in the notion of “pure reason”). Kant holds that both in cognition and in volition—i.e. in our theoretical and our practical activity—our reason, on the one hand, and our sensuous nature, on the other, make important contributions. That is, both cognition and volition involve a spontaneous-active and a receptive-passive element. The distinction between the higher and lower faculties coincides with this distinction of the active and the passive. Our lower faculty of cognition (*unteres Erkenntnisvermögen*) comprises the senses—i.e. the passive-receptive component of cognition—while the notion of the higher faculty of cognition (*oberes Erkenntnisvermögen*) refers to the spontaneous-active component [A, VII, 140–1; see also: KU, V, 196–7]. As we have just seen, we can only account for the spontaneity of our higher faculties insofar as we regard them as having noumenal existence—that is, insofar as we conceive them as existing free from the necessity governing empirical reality, i.e. as pure (“Die reine Vernunft, als ein bloß intelligibiles Vermögen, ist der Zeitform und mithin auch den Bedingungen der Zeitfolge nicht unterworfen” [KrV, III, 373]). Hence, we can only ascribe higher faculties (i.e. spontaneity) to ourselves insofar as we conceive them as pure—i.e. having noumenal existence.

The problem of transcendental freedom

As freedom of judgment refers to our reason’s spontaneity in its theoretical application, transcendental freedom refers to its spontaneity in its practical application (i.e. in so far as it is concerned with determining our actions). Kant distinguishes between the notion of *transcendental* freedom and that of *practical* freedom. The latter refers to the experience we have of being able to choose our actions, without being determined to act by the desires and urges we happen to be confronted with [KrV, III, 363; see also: KrV, III, 521]. Yet, the fact that, in acting, we have the impression of being in charge of our actions does not prove that we are not subject to natural necessity. In fact, if all we had were the experience of feeling in control of our actions, we would—paradoxically—have to conclude that they are subject to natural necessity after all. For, as we have seen, any event in the spatiotemporal world—i.e. any experience we have, including our own thoughts and decisions to act, regarded as empirical events—is necessarily subject to the laws of causality, i.e. caused by an event coming before it in time³⁴. While my action would still be a consequence of

34 “[E]s ist nichts in der Natur (als einem Sinnenwesen), wozu der in ihr selbst befindliche Bes-

my decision to act, this decision would, in turn, be “nature again”, in Kant’s term [KrV, III, 521], caused by the natural workings of my brain, in a way that a given decision of mine, far from disrupting the causal continuity of the empirical world, would just be an instance of its smooth working³⁵.

Transcendental freedom, on the other hand, is the notion of a freedom that starts causal chains from the beginning, without, in turn, being caused by any external factor (“[Transzendente Freiheit ist] eine absolute Spontaneität der Ursachen, eine Reihe von Erscheinungen, die nach Naturgesetzen läuft, von selbst anzufangen” [KrV III, 310]). As such, it is *prima facie* inconsistent with natural necessity, for if a given action is considered an act of transcendental freedom, it would appear that it cannot also be continuous with the causally determined realm of the empirical world [KpV, V, 97]. Thus, we are confronted with two different kinds of causality: natural causality refers to a causal relationship in which each cause is itself an effect in the endless chain of causes and effects [KrV, III, 363], while transcendental freedom refers to a causal relationship in which the cause itself is uncaused, not itself the effect of a preceding cause. For this reason, we can have no experience of transcendental freedom: all experience is experience of appearances—and appearances, by their very nature, are subject to the laws of natural causality, in a way that whatever happens in the world of appearances is caused by another appearance. Consequently, we can have no experience of transcendental freedom [KrV, III, 369].

Yet, Kant holds that we nonetheless require the notion of transcendental freedom to arrive at a satisfactory view of the world—not only because of the practical interest we take in the notion (a point we will discuss in Chapter 4), but also for purely theoretical reasons: as we have seen above, completeness in the explanation of the world is a need of reason. That is, reason demands to know the conditions for every given conditioned state of affairs. Hence, reason is only satisfied with an explanation of the world if everything that is conditioned in our experience has been traced back to its unconditioned grounds. Yet, an explanation of the world based only on natural causality cannot offer such a complete explanation of the world. For a worldview only involving natu-

timmungsgrund nicht immer wiederum bedingt wäre; und dieses gilt nicht bloß von der Natur außer uns (der materiellen), sondern auch in uns (der denkenden): wohl zu verstehen, dass ich in mir nur das betrachte, was Natur ist” [KU, V, 435].

35 We will discuss Kant’s notion of practical freedom—which Kant refers to as negative freedom in *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*—in more detail in Chapter 5 below. As we will see in that discussion, we are warranted in attributing objective reality to our practical freedom (i.e. our belief that it is up to us whether we choose a certain action or not) only if we have reason to consider ourselves transcendently free [KrV, III, 363].

ral causality presents the world as consisting of a multitude of chains of cause and effect, without these being grounded in an unconditioned first cause. To achieve closure—and thus completeness—in our explanation of the world, Kant argues, we require a first cause that can be regarded as the unconditioned condition of the conditioned chains of cause and effect [KrV, III, 349]. That is, to achieve closure, we require the notion of transcendental freedom.

Consequently, a worldview that only allows for natural causality is deficient. Conceiving of the whole world merely as chains of cause and effect will not yield a complete explanation of nature, i.e. an explanation that meets rational standards. A complete description of the world has to involve both kinds of causality: natural causality and freedom. Without natural causality, we would have no experience at all, given that only the rule-governed regularity of natural causality makes experience possible [KrV, III, 168]. Yet, without the causality of freedom, the system of natural causality would remain unfinished, incomplete. Thus, transcendental freedom is a concept to which nothing in our experience corresponds—and which, nonetheless, we cannot do without³⁶.

As in the argument concerning our freedom of judgment, Kant's argument to establish the objective reality of our transcendental freedom breaks down into two parts: the first is concerned with establishing the *logical possibility* of transcendental freedom (i.e. showing how we can integrate the notion of transcendental freedom into our general view of the world—and, in particular, how we can make it consistent with the notion of natural necessity). The second is focused on establishing its *real possibility* (i.e. showing that we have grounds to hold that the notion applies to us). We will discuss the first part of the argument here. The second part of the argument, concerned with establishing the real possibility of our transcendental freedom, is considerably more complicated and drawn-out than was the case for the notion of our freedom of judgment—and we will spend the next three chapters discussing it.

The argument establishing the logical possibility of transcendental freedom is similar to that establishing the logical possibility of our freedom of judgment. As before, the main problem lies in showing how transcendental freedom can be thought to be consistent with natural necessity—and, as before, the tension between these two notions disappears once we take seriously Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal: natural causality governs the realm of experience, that is, the appearances—yet, this does not mean that it governs the

36 “[Die Philosophie] muss also wohl voraussetzen: dass kein wahrer Widerspruch zwischen Freiheit und Naturnotwendigkeit eben derselben menschlichen Handlungen angetroffen werde, denn sie kann eben so wenig den Begriff der Natur, als den der Freiheit aufgeben” [GMS, IV, 456].

whole of reality [KpV, V, 94]. Given that we know nothing about the world as it is in itself, we cannot exclude the possibility that transcendental freedom is realized in it. That is, while the peculiar functioning of our understanding leads us to experience the world as governed by natural necessity, this leaves open the possibility that transcendental freedom is real in the world as it is in itself [KrV, III, 377].

Applied to human beings as agents this means that while all our actions, considered as events in the empirical world, are necessarily determined by events preceding them in time (in a way that, insofar as we exist in the empirical world, we are not free [KrV, III, 372; see also: KpV, V, 97]), this still leaves open the possibility that we are free insofar as we have noumenal existence. It is important to note that Kant does not intend to establish the reality (real possibility) of our transcendental freedom with this argument. Rather, his argument merely aims at establishing its logical possibility—i.e., the point that, given his transcendental idealism, there is no logical inconsistency involved in holding, on the one hand, that empirical reality is governed by natural necessity and that, on the other, we are transcendently free [KrV, III, 377; see also KpV, V, 97–8].

This leaves us with the problem of securing the real possibility of transcendental freedom. It is tempting to believe that we can deduce it from the real possibility of our freedom of judgment, which we have already ascertained. That is, we could try to argue that our ability to determine our actions on the basis of the interests of reason and without these actions being determined by forces outside our control can be established as a corollary of the fact that, in thinking, we have to regard our thought as free. Henrich argues that Kant seriously considered arguments of this type (he cites *Reflektion 5441* [XVIII, 182–3] as an example), but that he came to recognize that, unlike in the case of freedom of judgment, no contradiction arises if we think our actions as determined by natural necessity: “Das Denken des Ich geschieht zwar aus Spontaneität, aber es entsteht kein Widerspruch, wenn man annimmt, dass der transzendente Grund [unseres] Handelns nicht Freiheit ist” [1973, 247]³⁷—and that, consequently, he abandoned this line of argument by the time he wrote *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*³⁸.

37 As a textual basis for imputing this argument to Kant, Henrich offers the rather obscure *Reflektion 5442* (“Logische Freiheit in Ansehung alles dessen, was zufällige Prädikate sind. Alle Zufälligkeit am Subjekt ist objektive Freiheit, das Gegenteil zu denken. Wenn der Gedanke auch zur Tat zureicht, auch subjektive Freiheit. Transzendente Freiheit ist die völlige Zufälligkeit der Handlungen. Es ist logische Freiheit in Vernunft-handlungen, aber nicht transzendente” [XVIII, 183]) without explaining how this passage is related to his conclusion. I contend that it is not obvious how—and that—it is. More helpful appears Kant’s assertion in *Religion* [R, VI, 26n] that there is no logical contradiction involved in conceiving a rational being as

The argument Kant finally settled on to ground the objective reality (or real possibility) of our transcendental freedom is perhaps the single most controversial element of his practical philosophy. He claims that we can establish the objective reality of our transcendental freedom on the basis of our consciousness of the moral law as making authoritative demands on us: “[W]äre nicht das moralische Gesetz in unserer Vernunft eher deutlich gedacht, so würden wir uns niemals berechtigt halten, so etwas, als Freiheit ist (ob diese gleich sich nicht widerspricht), anzunehmen” [KpV, V, 4]. Kant calls this awareness of the authoritativeness of the moral law a *fact of reason*. Both the notion of the fact of reason and the argument he offers as its justification are as obscure as they are controversial—and we will spend some time trying to make sense of them in the next chapters.

Conclusion

Kant conceives of reason as our highest mental faculty, in the sense that while all other faculties are guided, in their use, by other faculties, reason guides itself—and thus ultimately the use of all other faculties—on the basis of its own essential interests. Kant focuses on two interests of reason in particular, namely its interests in systematic unity and in completeness.

As rational beings, we see ourselves as endowed with spontaneous thought (i. e. thought guided by the principles—and, hence, interests—of reason) and with transcendental freedom (i. e., the ability to act in a way that is not determined by natural necessity). This leads to the fundamental tension marking Kant’s conception of human nature: on the one hand, man exists as part of the empirical world, marked by natural necessity—and, on the other, he regards himself as free to judge and to act in a self-guided manner. We can account for the logical possibility of our freedom of judgment and our transcendental freedom, Kant holds, by regarding our reason as having noumenal activity, i. e. as operating outside the world of our experience. Yet, this leaves us with the task

not being endowed with pure practical reason (i. e. able to determine its behavior on the basis of the demands of reason alone), for as we will see below, being endowed with pure practical reason is, for Kant, a necessary and sufficient condition for transcendental freedom.

38 This point is overlooked by Rawls when he writes (in the German translation for the anthology by Ameriks & Sturma): “Für Kant besteht kein wesentlicher Unterschied zwischen der Freiheit des Willens und der des Denkens. Wenn unser mathematisches und theoretisches Denken frei ist, wie sich dies in freien Urteilen zeigt, so auch unsere reine praktische Vernunft, wie sich dies in freien praktischen Urteilen zeigt” [2004, 51–2].

of establishing the real possibility of these two notions (i. e. the task of showing that we have grounds for holding that they really apply to us). This argument is straightforward in the case of the notion of freedom of judgment, given that if we are to think of ourselves as thinking at all, we cannot do so without presupposing our own freedom of judgment. That is, freedom of judgment is the condition of the possibility of thought. This means that as long as we do not want to forfeit the conception of ourselves as thinking, we are logically constrained to ascribe freedom of judgment to ourselves. The argument establishing the real possibility of transcendental freedom is considerably more complicated. In the next chapter, we will turn to the aspects of Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism that underpin his attempt to construct such an argument.