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REASON AND INEVITABLE TRANSCENDENTAL ILLUSION ("TRANSZENDENTALER SCHEIN")

Mario Caimi

In *Critique of Pure Reason* A 298f. / B 355f., pure reason is presented as "the seat of transcendental illusion".¹ This sentence might be taken as a hint at the program of the first *Critique*: reason must be subject to critical examination, because it harbours the illusion of having knowledge of metaphysical objects by means of transcendent judgments.²

In the section we refer to, there is, however an ambiguity. There, it is asserted both that deception originated in the deceptive illusion can be avoided, and, on the other hand, that reason produces by its very nature an unavoidable illusion. Our task in the present paper will be to clear this ambiguity as well as to find an explanation for it.

The illusion that may be avoided

In its real use, reason produces something (the idea or rather the *object in the idea*) which has an illusory appearance of actual existence. This illusory appearance may give rise to the illusion that we are facing an actually existing unconditioned object, whereas we are instead in the presence of an *object in the idea*. The said illusory appearance is inevitable *as an appearance*, as are optical illusions adduced by Kant as illustrations on this point. Granting assent to it is an ulterior, independent deed.

Now, the relations empirical data and objects bear to the *object in the idea* are the same which the said empirical data and objects would have borne to an actually existing metaphysical object (supposing that such object were an actually existing one). The *identity of the relation* two known items bear to one another, with the relation a third known item bears to a fourth unknown one, allows the kind of knowledge of the unknown fourth item, called by Kant "knowledge by analogy".³ This does not pretend to be knowledge in a full

1 The *Critique of Pure Reason* is quoted according to Kemp Smith's translation.

2 KrV A 297 / B 354.

3 About knowledge by analogy see Prol, AA IV, 357. Compare FM AA XX, 280.

sense, but just a symbolic one. Thus, there is no deception in the real use of reason, provided that we do not take its results as an actual cognition, but just as an *analogical* one. The illusory appearance impels us to taking the *object in the idea*, together with all its determinations, for an actual object, whereas all we have is but a *symbol* for an unknown *something=X*, which we suppose to bear to some known item the same relation other already known items bear to one another. For instance: God (the unknown item) bears to mankind the same relation a human father bears to his children.

The foregoing description of the illusion originated in reason reveals the generation of the illusory *appearance* as a mechanism solely dependent on pure reason. We should bear in mind that merely undergoing an illusion differs from granting assent to it. Error does not lie in reason's real use (that is, it does not lie in the production of an idea or of an *object in the idea*), nor in the illusory appearance generated by reason in so doing, but in the ensuing mistaken *judgment*. Indeed, the mistake lies in letting illusory appearance lead us to misinterpreting the *object in the idea* for an actual object.

Thus, although reason may be "the seat of" an inevitable illusory (deceptive) appearance that compels to deceit, it does not produce deceit itself. This deceit does not lie in the appearance itself, but in the judgment about it.⁴ It consists in erroneously interpreting the principle of reason, which states that "if the conditioned is given, the entire sum of conditions, and consequently the absolutely unconditioned (through which alone the conditioned has been possible) is also given";⁵ as were it valid for actual empirical objects. The turning of the maxim of reason which commands "to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion"⁶ into a principle claiming validity for actual objects is due to the surreptitious introduction of sensibility in the operation of reason.⁷ But, then, deceit based on an illusory appearance would not be altogether inevitable: In

4 KrV A 293 / B 350: "For truth or illusion is not in the object [...] but in the judgment about it, in so far as it is thought"

5 KrV A 409 / B 436. The word "given" is employed in KrV in at least two senses: as "existing in space and time" and as "proposed as a task". See KrV A 498, B 526. See also Willaschek: *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, p. 72-3. Also Klimmek: *Kant's System*, 36.

6 KrV A 307 / B 364.

7 In such case, the word "given" is taken as meaning "existing in space and time".

order to avoid being misled by illusory appearance it would be enough to pay due attention to keeping sensibility out of the activity of pure reason.⁸

How can this be made to agree with the statement that the real use of reason does *always, inevitably*, lead to a deceptive illusory appearance?

The unavoidable deception

Notwithstanding, Kant indicates that there lies *in the very nature of reason* an inevitable compulsion to error. In the prologue to the *Critique of Pure Reason* mention is being made of “concealed errors” in the very fundamentals of rational activity.⁹

The *maxim* of reason to seek for the unconditioned corresponding to the conditioned knowledge of the understanding¹⁰ seems to become a *principle* urging to the transgression of the limits imposed by the critique, thus turning out to being a principle that claims to be valid for things in themselves.¹¹ Kant’s utterances in the *Critique of Pure Reason* seem apt to allow both the utterly inevitability of this failure of reason, as also the possibility of avoiding the deception originated in an illusory (deceptive) appearance.¹² In spite of there being some passages of the *Critique of Pure Reason* which state that we can

8 Which of course entails renouncing to get knowledge by means of pure reason alone.

9 KrV A VIII: “[H]uman reason precipitates itself into darkness and contradictions; and while it may indeed conjecture that these must be in some way due to concealed errors, it is not in a position to be able to detect them.” Already since 1768 Kant questioned himself about the possibility that the operation of reason (he called it then “the operation of intellect”) may fail to be valid: in Refl. 5037, he sets forth his suspicion (aroused earlier than 1769) of an illusion that might lie –as Kant thought at that time– in the understanding, which would then reveal itself as the origin of the Antinomy.

10 KrV A 307, B 364.

11 KrV B 353f.

12 Translation of the German word “Schein” is problematic. The usual meaning of this term is “appearance”, the outward aspect a thing offers. Kant, however, explains the word as denoting something that does not lie in the object but in the judgment about it (KrV A 293f., B 349f.). Translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* bring either “illusion” (Norman Kemp Smith), “ilusão” (Fernando Costa Mattos), or else “appearance” («appareance» Tremesaygues et Pacaud; “aparência” Manuela Pinto dos Santos and Alexandre Fradique Morujão). “Illusion” alludes to something that takes place in the subject but not in the thing. “Appearance” seems to point at something that resides in the object, even though it has no consequences other than just the perception that the subject has. We have tried

avoid (or else amend) the mistake generated by the transcendental illusion,¹³ provided that we take care not to introduce sensible representations in rational utterances,¹⁴ yet, in other passages of the first *Critique*, Kant points out that it is *reason itself* that compels us to deceit by producing the illusory appearance:

“There exists, then, a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason –not one in which a bungler might entangle himself through lack of knowledge, or one which some sophist has artificially invented to confuse thinking people, but one inseparable from human reason”.¹⁵ Thus, deceit becomes entirely unavoidable, in spite of all precautions we might take against it.

In accordance with this passage, many interpreters take the real use of reason as being unavoidably deceptive.¹⁶ According to Heimsoeth, the cause of the illusion “lies in the essence of reason as a finite and human faculty”.¹⁷ In Theis’ account of the transcendental illusion we find that illusory appearance cannot be just due to an error of procedure. It rather “belongs to the essence of reason”, since only provided that it is so “is it legitimate to submit to critique the traditional discourses of metaphysics by stating that they are inevitably dialectic”.¹⁸ Enskat refers to the inevitable negative result of the “experiment of reason on itself”¹⁹ in the manner it is carried out in the fourth antinomy.²⁰ He points out that this experiment reveals the illusory nature of the claim

to maintain the connotation of an aspect –however illusory– of an object; hence our choice of the wording “illusory appearance”

- 13 KrV A 297 / B 354: “The transcendental dialectic will therefore content itself with exposing the illusion of transcendent judgments, and at the same time taking precautions that we be not deceived by it.”
- 14 KrV A 294 / B 350: “error is brought about solely by the unobserved influence of sensibility on the understanding.” (Kemp Smith’s translation).
- 15 KrV A 298, B 354. Compare KrV A 339, B 397: Dialectical sophisms “are not fictitious and have not arisen fortuitously, but have sprung from the very nature of reason. They are sophistications not of men but of pure reason itself.”
- 16 See Caimi: “On the Concept of Real Use of Reason”. In: *Open Philosophy*, 5, 2022, 403-423.
- 17 Heimsoeth: *Transzendente Dialektik*, 13f..
- 18 Theis: “De l’illusion transcendantale”, 135f. Also Theis: *Approches*, 130-148.
- 19 “By an experiment of reason, which it performs on its own powers”. (Cambridge edition p. 380). *Fortschritte der Metaphysik*, AA XX 291. See also Kant: Refl. XXXIII, AA XXIII, 25.
- 20 KrV A 452f., B 480f.; and KrV A 559f., B 587f..

to judge, exclusively by means of pure concepts, about the actual existence or non-existence of certain elements of the idea of the world.²¹ For Grier, all principles and maxims of reason have an “illusory nature”, regardless of whether they are rightly used or not.²² Keller, in *Kant-Lexikon*, explains that “the deceptive illusion is inseparable from the use of reason”.²³ Noller points out, that error originated in the transcendental illusion *presupposes* rationality.²⁴ It should not be taken for simple irrationality, but for “rationalizing”, that is, for reason’s activity which results in intentionally creating a merely seeming rational order in appearances.²⁵

The history of metaphysics shows that *reason itself* runs into a mistake which consists in the “confusion of the subjective conditions of thought with its objective conditions”.²⁶ This seems to be so, regardless of any intervention of sensibility. How can we account for this falling astray of reason, whereby it yields to deceit provoked by its own legitimate activity?

Why and when does the necessary supposition become illegitimate (dialectical in the negative sense)

The decision of granting objective validity to the maxim, and thus turning it into a principle referring to objects, is due to the fact that reason is by nature,

21 Enskat: *Urteil und Erfahrung*, 411f. Surely, Enskat’s interest is focused on the possibility of making judgments beyond the limits of experience (*Urteil und Erfahrung* p. 416) and is not specifically aimed at reason itself as the seat of transcendental illusion.

22 Grier: *Kant’s Doctrine*, p. 114. I would like to suggest that what Grier here calls the “inherently illusory nature” of its [reason’s, MC] concepts and principles, should not be taken as meaning “deceiving character” but rather as meaning the manner of being of an “*object in the idea*” (what the late scholastic called “objective being” or “objective reality”). See the explanation of this concept in KrV A 670, B 698. About objective reality see Caimi: “Über den Begriff der objektiven Realität”.

23 Pierre Keller: “Schein”, 2009.

24 Noller: “Logik des Scheins” 26.

25 Noller: “Logik des Scheins”, 34.

26 Refl. 5553, part IV, AA XVIII, 227. According to Theis: “De l’illusion transcendante”, 129, this thesis is “the main argument of the exposition of the illusion”.

autarchical (self-sufficient).²⁷ Its tribunal is the utmost instance. It issues its verdict without submitting itself to the conditions of sensibility, or to anything else. All judgments of reason are unappealable: reason “announces its verdict²⁸ as being determined a priori and as necessary, either in itself, in which case it needs no grounds, or, if it be derivative, as a member of a series of grounds, which itself, as a series, is unconditionally true.”²⁹

Just by following its own inner dynamic and without having recourse to other faculties, reason is unable to set limits to itself. Reason making allowance to external limitations would mean having recourse to another faculty: sensibility. Mere reason, in its pure and unmixed development may lead to the Antinomy, though not to the “great light” accounting for it.³⁰

Reason’s own judgment is a priori determined and is necessary; the absolute unrestricted validity of its judgment is the very essence of reason (when considered alone and isolated), since it (reason) by itself does not acknowledge (nor can it acknowledge) any conditions of the validity of its judgments other than those arising from the correct logical use of itself.³¹

In KrV B 362 Kant had intended to accomplish that isolation of reason so as to examine reason’s autonomous operation by way of analysis (avoiding the interference of other faculties). The questions Kant asks in this passage,

27 Ferrarin: *The Powers of Pure Reason*, p. 31 note: “The autarchy of reason, entirely occupied only with itself and its self-knowledge, is a literal refrain disseminated throughout Kant’s works”.

28 In the German original: “Erkenntnis”. Kemp Smith translates “knowledge”. But herein it would be preferable “verdict”, which is the juridical sense of “Erkenntnis”. See Caimi: “Über den Ausdruck ‘Erkenntnis’”.

29 KrV A 332, B 389.

30 Acknowledgment of the need for sensibility is the result of self examination performed by reason whereof the critique consists. This is an undertaking of reason, though to fulfill this task reason must turn to something beyond itself, namely, to sensibility and to experience. Against this Heimsoeth: *Transzendente Dialektik*, 10: “It is possible for reason to set the limits of our knowledge”. It is well to note that the term “Vernunft” is not always employed with the same meaning throughout the *Critique*. Probably, Heimsoeth takes here “reason” in the wide sense which includes sensibility, understanding, faculty of judgment and reason in its strict sense.

31 Noller: “Logik des Scheins”, 34 explains the autarchy of reason as its “immunization” against external corrections. In this immunity originates an illegitimate, though structural tendency of reason to “rationalizing”. This –I take it– is meant by Noller as a kind of real use of reason, one that generates the transcendental illusion.

namely: “Can we isolate reason, and is it, so regarded, an independent source of concepts and judgments which spring from it alone [...]?”³² may be understood as a kind of program of the research carried out in the Transcendental Dialectic. Now, in the Dialectic, we are presented with that isolated reason, which we examine as it operates regardless of the conditions of sensibility and of experience. That is how it is considered in passage KrV A 680, B 708 which states: “Pure reason is in fact occupied with nothing but itself. It can have no other vocation.” Thus, reason itself is prone to fall into the illusion aroused by the illusory appearance generated by the very same reason: its own autarchy prevents it from noticing that this illusory appearance is a mere illusion.

Therefore, when taken in itself (when reason is isolated as demanded in B 362), reason is constrained to ignore sensibility, which means as much as overlooking the conditions of possibility of knowledge established by the critique. It inevitably operates as if mere *thinking* were equivalent to *knowing*. This is what reason inevitably does, when operating in isolation, following only its own nature taken in itself, as were it an autarchical faculty.³³ This unilateral judgment that reason frames about itself can be amended only by the critique of reason. The critique makes the amendment, as is known, by bringing reason to acknowledge sensibility as a source of knowledge that is different from reason, but of equal rank as this one and equally indispensable for knowledge. In this way, the critique imposes a limit to reason.

Summing up, the illusory appearance does inevitably arise in reason if reason remains isolated. This illusion would not be deceitful, only if when aiming at *knowing*, we do not restrain our consideration to reason alone, but instead we consider, besides reason, other conditions: namely, sensibility and experience, which are needed so that there can be *knowledge* and not just mere *thinking*.

Reason, in its real use, gives rise to an inevitable illusory appearance. We cannot avoid yielding to this illusory appearance. Nevertheless, we can avoid

32 KrV B 362. Further on, the quoted text introduces the question of the either regulative or else constitutive use of rational activity, without dealing with the real, but not constitutive use of reason.

33 Ferrarin: *The Powers of Pure Reason*, 32: “In its autarchy reason will not let any restriction stand in its way. It shows its ‘abhorrence’ of limits and of all ‘principles that are not its own work’ (Ak. 18: 272-75).” See KrV B 814: “reason, when obsessed by passionate desire for the speculative enlargement of its domain, is not easily to be restrained”.

granting our assent to the opinion originated in the illusion, thus being led into deceit by it.

As a conclusion, we may state that analogical use of reason in metaphysical reasoning produces some kind of illusory appearance. We risk being led into deceit by this illusion; that is, we risk to unduly grant assent to this illusion. There are two possibilities of indulging in this mistake. One of them is to take the symbol generated by reason for an actual metaphysical thing. In so doing, we are led to believe that the judgments we formulate about this object express true knowledge of it (whereas this is just an analogical thought about an unknown thing-in-itself). This mistake is but evitable, if we take care to avoid the interference of sensibility in our rational judgment, since sensibility intervenes in the representation of symbols generated by reason in its real use.

On the other hand, the error originated in the autarchy of reason cannot be avoided. Autarchy means, in the case of reason, the claim of achieving knowledge without taking into account any other faculty than itself. It is unavoidable to incur in the said mistake by entirely disregarding sensibility, namely if we do not take into account sensibility as a *limitation* imposed upon reason's autarchy (a limitation needed in order to attain real knowledge). Self-sufficiency (autarchy) is inherent to reason when taken in itself i. e. entirely isolated, disregarding any connection with other faculties. Due to this autarchy, reason is unavoidably led to take its own judgments as absolutely valid beyond any criticism. Thus, *knowing* and *thinking* are not distinguished from one another, but jumbled. This becomes unavoidable once the "uncritical dogmatist"³⁴ admits the unrestricted autarchy of reason. Only in so far as reason is submitted to critical examination (that is, only if reason puts its autarchy and isolation aside and admits, under the guide of the critique, the need for sensibility in order to attain knowledge), can the said error be avoided.

This is how we can explain the coexistence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of the seemingly contradictory utterances regarding the evitability and the unavoidableness of deceit produced by reason.

34 KrV A 768, B 796.

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