In the Shadow of Illusion
– Kant and Fink on the problem of philosophical reflection

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Abstract

With the help of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* this paper aims to investigate the very possibility of philosophical reflection. Starting from a reading of two Eugen Fink texts, a phenomenologically discovered question is posed and a critical response attempted. It will be shown how, by orienting itself upon the subjective feeling of reason’s demand for the unconditioned, critical thought is then able to restrict itself to a valid use of reason, thus securing its own possibility. The transcendental methodology employed by Kant and the concept of pure apperception will also be discussed as key components in the facilitation of philosophical reflection. The Kantian response offered here is largely centred around the concept of transcendental illusion as discussed in the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ and by taking related concepts such as transcendental reflection into consideration it is subsequently shown that, despite being raised here phenomenologically, the question of philosophical reflection is very much of interest to critical thought.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant, Eugen Fink, reflection, illusion, transcendental
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The following paper will attempt to tackle the question of the very possibility of philosophical reflection. This problem of philosophical reflection will first be raised by a reading of two key Eugen Fink texts, “The Problem of the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl” and “Operative Concepts in Husserl’s Phenomenology”. Starting here, with Fink’s concept of philosophical wonder it will be shown how that in questioning the world philosophical reflection simultaneously puts its own validity in question. This will be further elucidated through a brief analysis of Fink’s idea of operative and thematic concepts, and the self-grounding nature of philosophical thought will be brought into question as reflection is shown to be in a state of disorientation.

There is an obvious kinship between the questions raised by Fink and Kant’s critical project – as developed in the Critique of Pure Reason. Awoken from a slumber and thrown into a state of astonishment, Kant displaced all previous delusions of speculative thought, dislodging the relationship of objects and knowledge from its dogmatic axis. Kant drew into question the very nature of things, transforming them from a thing in itself to mere appearances. After Kant knowledge takes control of the given and moulds it to the requirements of its subjective necessity. So with this in mind, a critical answer will be offered to the question of philosophical reflection’s possibility in the face of a seeming lack of objectively valid grounds to stand on.

By first orienting philosophical reflection in a subjective feeling, and revealing the transcendental ideas that give thought its direction, Kant’s concept of transcendental illusion will then be investigated to offer a potential solution to how reflection is able to secure its own validity. In discussing transcendental illusion it also becomes necessary to investigate the concepts of noumena, phenomena and the transcendental object that underpin much of the critical project. To further investigate philosophical thought’s validity, Kant’s methodology of transcendental reflection will be discussed as a key concept for the possibility of philosophy. Before moving onto the concluding remarks the paper will finally cast its gaze upon the unity of self-apperception, the central finding of critical thought that – as it will be argued – enables not only cognition in general but also the very act of philosophical reflection
which reveals it. So, finally this paper hopes to offer a critical answer to the phenomenological question: how is philosophical reflection possible when the very validity of thought has been drawn into question?

Limitations of the research

This paper hopes to offer a critical answer to a phenomenologically posed question and does not in any way mean to attempt a Kantian critique of phenomenology. The paper’s question has been found in “The Problem of the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl” and “Operative Concepts in Husserl’s Phenomenology” by Eugen Fink, and as this paper is not trying to respond phenomenologically the research was limited to these two texts in establishing the boundaries of the investigation. The proposed critical answer was discovered predominantly within Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and more specifically takes as its starting point the concept of transcendental illusion found in the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’. Where necessary, the research extends to other sections of the Critique and finds further support in elucidating this Kantian response within “What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?” and Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.

It is also worth pointing out that the paper has been restricted to Kant’s first Critique and does not extend to the realm of practical reason or that of aesthetic judgement, which could also be considered relevant sources of extended support or suitable starting points. Any judgement on the suitability or success of the proposed answer has been suspended, and perhaps left to the reader, as this would most definitely require extending the investigation beyond its scope into a phenomenological assessment of the critical method. The seeds of much of this potential phenomenological critique can already be found in the two selected Fink texts, and even the process of writing the paper – and tackling the seemingly circular labyrinth of Kantian concepts – lends evidence to many of Fink’s assertions. Such a phenomenological analysis would be of course highly interesting but goes well beyond the scope of this paper. With that in mind, all attempts have been made to keep the formulation of the phenomenological question and corresponding critical answer separate, and an attempt at reading the texts as faithful to their respective philosophical traditions as possible has been made.
It could perhaps be considered somewhat paradoxical to reflect philosophically upon the very possibility of philosophical reflection but this is exactly what Fink does – and what this paper is also currently attempting to do. In posing a phenomenological question to a critical thinker it is not an assertion that one philosophy will be able to disprove the theories of the other – or that a communication between the two schools of thought is even possible – but rather the aim is rather to investigate Kant's contentions on the possibility of philosophical reflection from a new vantage point. In his musing on the possibility of transcendental philosophy, J.N. Mohanty claims there isn’t a moment of doubt in the Critique as far as reflection is concerned, and that for Kant philosophical contemplation has the unquestionable ability to “lay bare” the very structure of consciousness before its own gaze.¹ So it is in questioning reflection that it will be also questioned whether critical thought really has taken the possibility of philosophical reflection for granted.

§1 Philosophical wonder

For Fink, all philosophy begins with wonder. The philosopher wonders at the world, questioning what is known and what is yet unknown. For Fink philosophy is an “unsettling of the grounds of knowledge and the questioning of the existent qua existent”; it is not merely an expecting-to-know – a knowledge of an absence of knowledge – but rather the perpetual development of an expecting-to-know; it is the constant discovery of previously unknown unknowns.² Philosophy is an experience of questioning – a questioning experience? – not a resolvable search for truth, but rather a perennial searching for questions. In this state of wonder, in the never-ending act of questioning the world, “[a]stonishment descends upon man”.³ It is in astonishment that what was previously known becomes unknown; the truths of everyday life are interrogated and called into question. Starting in a state of wonder, the philosopher

³ Ibid.
turns the world upside down in astonishment. So astonishment can be seen, with Fink, as a ‘forcing out’ of preconceived ideas and long accepted prejudices.\(^4\)

Here it can be useful to compare this conception of wonder with that of Aristotle from which Fink presumably draws inspiration. For Aristotle philosophy also begins with wonder and, much like Fink, this wonder is a continuous questioning of how things are.\(^5\) But from the Aristotelian point of view philosophical thought is not carried out for practical reasons; philosophy is only possible once all life’s practicalities are taken care of; philosophy is not concerned with ontic puzzles. Philosophy is not a positive science in that it does not single out particular existents for study but rather takes objects in general as its subject.\(^6\) Aristotle’s first philosophy wonders and it is through this wonder that the philosopher desires the most perfect knowledge concerning Being \textit{qua} Being. But for Aristotle this most perfect knowledge can only be fully possessed by God, so it can be said that philosophical Wisdom is the continuous striving after knowledge purely for the sake of knowledge and without the possibility of ever truly knowing. The philosopher becomes progressively wiser although never fully attaining this perfect knowledge that is chiefly possessed by God.\(^7\) Reading both conceptions of wonder in this way then there would seem to be much in common between Fink’s concept of wonder and the Aristotelian conception. Both would seem to be attempts to “escape ignorance” as questions regarding the puzzling phenomena set before the philosopher are answered and a progression in terms of Wisdom is made.\(^8\)

But as Fink points out, philosophical wonder is the questioning of the very basis of human knowledge; philosophical wonder is a questioning of Being and Truth. So through Fink it can be said that philosophy considered as a progression of knowledge, or a path towards Wisdom, presupposes the firmly fixed concepts of Being and Truth that it is meant to be calling into question. So Fink’s wonder does not just question the known, converting it into an unknown within the already pre-conceived boundaries of the relationship between Truth and Being, but rather with astonishment “the known

\(^4\) Ibld., 24.
\(^6\) Ibld., [1003a].
\(^7\) Ibld., [983a].
\(^8\) Ibld., [982b].
becomes unknown in as yet unknown sense” [sic].\(^9\) So philosophy must – paradoxically – question the very act of questioning and try to gain knowledge while at the same time questioning what it is to know. Philosophy cannot just hold the Being or Truth of beings in its sights but must rather focus its light upon the being of Being and the truth of Truth.

What this means is that there is a disorientation of thought, as philosophical reflection seems to lose all grounds of validity upon entering a self-referential loop. How is it possible to investigate Being’s way of being without presupposing just what it means to be? Philosophy’s investigation into the being of Being and the quest for knowledge of Knowledge, when seen through Fink’s eyes, would appear to be a naive case of begging the question. So rather than assuming that philosophical reflection can delve into what Being and Truth are it would seem that if even philosophy’s way of knowing becomes unknown or as Fink says, known in an unknown sense, the very possibility of philosophical reflection is drawn into question. From where does philosophical thought draw its validity if it finds itself in this state of disorientation brought about by this seemingly inescapable activity of self-grounding? To better understand just what Fink means, and to extrapolate the question further, it could be useful to look outside of this text for the concepts operating behind the scenes and allowing Fink to reach his ground shaking conclusions.

\section*{§2 Operative and thematic concepts}

For Fink, the problem of philosophy is not to be found in its scientific methodology, but rather that which is thematised by a philosophy is that which is standing behind the theme (in the positivistic scientific sense of the term).\(^10\) So for Fink a philosophy is not only distinguished by its thematic concepts, those concepts standing at the forefront and explicitly investigated, but also by the conceptual field that inherently supports the philosophical thought. There is an unconsidered conceptual medium that the philosopher operates within and which Fink would describe as the operative concepts of a philosophy. These concepts are the ‘shadow’ which the explicitly thematised is thought through and this shadow of philosophy is the un-reflected upon

\(^10\) Ibid., 21.
thematic substrate of philosophical reflection.  

So the explicit concepts of philosophical reflection are always grounded in inherent concepts that remain unconsidered by the philosopher. In this sense philosophy cannot break free of a pre-philosophical state, as it remains anchored in the concepts and language of everyday life.

So, for Fink, philosophy, with its operative and thematic concepts, finds itself in a self-grounding loop as – in shifting its gaze – philosophical reflection pushes its previously thematic concepts back into the shadows. Using the example of movement and time Fink elucidates the paradox of philosophical reflection which arises as each respective concept is taken as thematic, consequently relying on the other as its operative medium. An object can move in time only because time itself is moving. So as the thematic gaze is focused upon movement, the concept of time retreats into the shadows but does not completely disappear. In the same way, when time is turned into the theme of reflection, movement shifts out of focus while remaining hidden as a conceptual presupposition. Related back to philosophical reflection’s search for Being and Truth it can be seen how even this mode of thought is based on a self-grounding. The investigation of the being of Truth and the truth of Being leaves the philosopher without a firm ground to stand on; an initial state of wonder leaves the philosopher in a subsequent state of disorientation. So, according to Fink, even Aristotle’s first philosophy, which also began in wonder and claimed to go beyond all science to a study of Being qua Being, would seem to be based on a naive presupposition of what it means to be.

So in this way Fink maintains that philosophical reflection falls prey to the same naïveté as that of everyday human knowledge and in this sense Being maintains both a pre- and post-philosophical understanding which is at once both questioned and unquestioned. So what Fink’s wonder eventually draws out of the shadows and into the thematic light is the very validity of philosophical reflection’s paradoxical self-grounding. Philosophical reflection claims to cast light onto the shadows of everyday life but in doing so obscures its own medium of seeing from itself. So Fink’s wonder then is not a clarity bestowing modality of thought but rather the philosophical state

12 Ibid., 61.
13 Ibid., 57.
that throws thought repeatedly back into the obscurity of the shadows. Philosophical reflection would seem to have lost all its validity as it is caught in an endless loop, presupposing the very concepts it claims to be subjecting to its investigative state of wonder. Consequently, this brief investigation of these two key texts of Fink’s brings this paper to its main question: how is philosophical reflection possible when the very validity of thought has been drawn into question? In an attempt to offer an answer to this problematic raised – but not answered – here by Fink, an appeal to Kant and his critical project will now be made.

§3 Synthetic a priori judgements

Before continuing onto an attempted response to the questions raised by Fink it is perhaps necessary to briefly reflect on the relevance of appealing to Kant’s Critique in the defence of philosophical reflection. For Kant, the main problem of his critical philosophy can be summarised with one question: “How are synthetic judgements a priori possible?”14 Seen in this way, what Kant is essentially claiming is that critical thought is focused precisely on this problem of the possibility of philosophical reflection. In order to elucidate this point further the difference between analytic and synthetic judgements should perhaps be briefly mentioned. An analytic judgement is a proposition that contains no predicate that goes beyond the given concept, while a synthetic judgement is that in which something is predicated of the subject that could not have been discovered by a simple tautological analysis. This is of course, even in Kant’s time, nothing new to philosophy but it is more specifically synthetic judgements which can be at the same time said to be a priori – that is to say apodeictic – of which critical thought is interested.

So Kant hopes to focus his critical gaze on judgements that are not immediately given by the definition of a concept but can still be shown to be necessarily true, without of course relying on experience as proof. It is judgements that go beyond the bounds of what would normally be considered knowledge, and linking back to Fink could perhaps be said to be known in an as yet unknown sense. According to Kant it is this type of a priori cognition that, although it has been largely neglected by the metaphysical tradition, is of the utmost relevance to the possibility of philosophy.15


15 Ibid.
Without securing the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements all philosophizing degenerates into purely unfounded speculation. So, along with Fink, Kant is questioning the very possibility of philosophical thought and it is with this essential similarity in mind that the current paper has chosen to respond to Fink’s phenomenological question critically.
ORIENTING REFLECTION

With the very possibility of reflection in question it becomes necessary to first investigate how philosophical thought can ground itself despite being cast into the obscurity of the shadows as Fink describes. In attempting to propose a critical solution to this problem it will now be investigated how Kant proposes to allow for an orientation of thought despite a lack of objective validity to base judgements upon. This sense of direction will act as the starting point for demonstrating how critical thought maintains the possibility of its own philosophical reflection.

§4 The feeling of a need

For Kant, to orient oneself in thought means to decide a matter based on subjective principles when objective principles lack the authority to judge. In “What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?” Kant relies on the analogy of orienting oneself geographically by the means of a felt difference between left and right in order to arrive at a solution for how thought can find its way out of a state of disorientation. The purely subjective difference between left and right allows the subject to orient themself by way of a presupposed feeling. This feeling of a difference, within the subject, allows for an a priori differentiation in external objects and enables orientation even if all familiar landmarks were to be rearranged or to disappear completely. According to Kant the same can be said of orienting oneself logically in thought: it is a subjective feeling that is able to guide the way when all objective validity has been lost. Objectively astray in the shadows, thought is still able to cast a guiding light. So, analogous for Kant to the feeling of a difference between left and right is the feeling of a subjective need, and this need – that is felt by thought – is reason’s demand for the unconditioned. It is, for Kant, a very natural and unavoidable need that arises from reason’s logical form and is a necessity that is presupposed by consciousness in all its experiences.

17 Ibid., 8.
18 Ibid., 10.
But when mentioning reason’s logical form it is important to differentiate between two modalities of logic that Kant relies on within the *Critique*: general and transcendental. As Michelle Grier explains, general logic defines the form of thought in general whereas transcendental logic concerns itself with the formal rules that apply to thinking objects in general.\(^{19}\) That is to say that general logic concerns the normative rules of thinking whereas transcendental logic is solely concerned with the subjective conditions that make thought possible. In empirical judgements the understanding is restricted by the rules of general logic set out by reason as it descends the steps of syllogism, not concerning itself with the possibility of an end point or totality to its episyllogistic movement. While the rules of rational inference drive this descending series onwards, reason has no need to follow through this series of conditions to its theoretical end point. Rather than an *a priori* necessity, it is merely a straightforward task for the understanding as this series of reasoning is potential but not given.\(^{20}\)

But, considered in the ascending direction as it is spurred on by transcendental logic, reason must, according to Kant, presuppose that the prosyllogistic series can be gathered together as a totality and that this ascension beyond experience will lead to an absolute unconditioned. This is because the *a priori* possibility of a certain judgement rests upon this very presupposition. Reason can only be justified in its judgements if the totality of all conditions of a judgement is given to thought. As Kant points out, it is an *a priori* presupposition of a series of conditions that act as the originary concept of a particular cognition; it is the subjective necessity that validates its accompanying series of inferred concepts of pure reason.\(^{21}\) So with every cognition, that is to say a syllogistic conclusion of the understanding, a totality of conditions is *a priori* necessary, and this totality – a series of that which is conditioned – is considered by reason to lead to an absolute unconditioned. So, unlike the pure understanding which is always restricted to the conditioned, pure reason always engages in a prosyllogistic movement towards the unconditioned lying outside of experience. It is these necessary presuppositions of pure reason that allows thought to orient itself despite a lack of objective validity.


\(^{20}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 404 [B388].

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 405 [A333/B390].
What Kant means is that it would not be possible to think at all if it wasn’t for this transcendental logic which, upon reflection, casts light upon the subjective conditions which allow thought to operate conceptually. The subjective conditions that reason presents to thought in its search for “the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding” is a complete system of ideas upon which all experience relies. So, where Fink sees the presupposition of concepts as something that draws the possibility of philosophical reflection into question, Kant claims that the presupposition of certain ideas is not only desirable but rather unavoidable due to the very nature of reason. So, for Kant, there are presupposed ideas that do not draw the validity of thought into question but rather give thought its firm ground upon which to orient itself. Being demanded by reason these ideas are necessary for cognition, and even though they go beyond the original concepts from which they are inferred they are not to be found within experience. In other words this system of ideas is exactly what Kant is referring to when he talks of the synthetic a priori propositions that make up the subject of philosophical reflection. So it is upon a feeling that philosophy can orient itself, finding direction in the form of synthetic a priori truths.

§5 Transcendental ideas
This system of ideas that Kant relies upon here are the supersensible beacons on which pure reason orients itself and are what Kant chooses to name the transcendental ideas. These ideas – the concepts of pure reason – “consider all experiential cognition as determined through an absolute totality of conditions” and are the natural problems presented to thought by reason’s demand for the unconditioned. They are the “unconditioned synthetic unities of all conditions in general” that reason brings before understanding and which subsequently facilitate the comprehension of experience by thought. For Kant the transcendental ideas are the absolute unities – exactly three in number – under which all experience belongs. It is the subjective necessity of the transcendental ideas that ground critical thought’s authority in a natural feeling and ground the synthesis of the conditioned of experience. It could even be argued that

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22 Ibid., 366 [A260/B316].
23 Ibid., 392 [B364].
24 Ibid., 402 [B384].
25 Ibid., 405 [A334].
these are the operative concepts of critical reason that philosophy is able to ground itself upon without needing to search for any further concepts lurking in the shadows.

The first such transcendental idea which gives direction to thought is that of the soul, a concept of reason at which the understanding arrives via the subjectively necessary unity of the thinking subject. Here, unity is given to the manifold of experience by proceeding ‘as if’ the human mind were a persisting, numerically identical simple substance. The second concept of reason is that of the world, an idea relating to the “absolute unity of the series of conditions of appearance”. Last, but not least, comes the idea of God, the unconditioned unity of the condition for all objects in general. The two latter transcendental ideas provide unity to thought respectively by prompting the understanding to operate ‘as if’ nature was infinite and ‘as if’ there were a supreme being acting as first cause of the universe.

So these three transcendental ideas are not themselves objects of experience, but rather the a priori conditions of all objects in general and their sole utility is pointing the understanding “in the right direction” and bestowing thought with consistency. That is to say that despite not having any claim to objective validity, the transcendental ideas are the concepts of reason upon which philosophical reflection can ground itself. It is the shadowy medium through which critical thought is able to see. Seen from an objective standpoint there is no way to adjudicate on these operative concepts of reason but when determined according to a subjective principle, reason’s need for these unconditioned unities is felt by thought and it is this feeling of necessity that gives the justification for belief.

So an infinite being as first cause, taking the idea of God as an example, is a subjectively necessary concept of reason even though no corresponding object can be cognized within the bounds of experience. So, for Kant, the concept of God is a perfectly justifiable – and necessary – being of reason whenever one wants to judge about the first cause of the contingent domain of experience. If experience was not synthesised from a series of causes and effects, extending all the way back to a supreme being, then experience would be incomprehensible. So, this transcendental proof is enough for Kant to show that God as first cause of the universe is a synthetic a priori cognition. Where Fink would perhaps argue that any grounding of

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26 Ibid., 606 [A672/B700].
27 Ibid., 406 [B391/A334].
28 Ibid., 400 [B380].
philosophical reflection is based upon an arbitrary decision of a concept in a self-referential loop, Kant sees an unshakeable point outside of experience which is subjectively necessary.

In *The Bounds of Sense*, which has become a central part of the analytical philosophy canon as far as Kant interpretation is concerned, P.F. Strawson presents his sceptical view of this presentation of the transcendental ideas within the *Critique*. For Strawson, Kant, at least in the case of a need for the concept of God, confuses tradition with a genuine demand of reason, arguing that there is no plausibility of the logical need for a supreme being as creator.\(^{29}\) But here, this reading of the concept of God seems to be overly influenced by the eventual use of this idea for practical purposes and the obviously Christian God upon which Kant bases his moral metaphysics. The God presented in the *Critique* – in its theoretical form – however needs to be read as a secular notion and a mere – completely empty – placeholder for the original cause in a series of causes. It is the need of reason for a starting point in a chain of interrelated causes which is felt by thought. Or alternatively, if Strawson is aiming at the philosophical tradition of positing this very first cause, then the Kantian reply to this complaint would be that there is such a tradition only because it is a natural need of reason in the first place. The reason that philosophical reflection is driven to this speculative notion is the perfectly natural – and inescapable – dialectic of reason.

So, for Kant, even without the authority of traditions lying behind concepts such as ‘soul’, ‘world’ and ‘God’ there is a genuine need of reason for these unconditioned unities. And these transcendental ideas are able to operate as regulative principles for the systematic unity of the manifold of experience, and despite not being able to be shown to be objectively necessary, their presupposition by the understanding allows for the grounding of the empirical use of reason.\(^{30}\) These transcendental ideas therefore give thought its subjective feeling on which to orient itself. Perhaps it is possible to say, reading Kant through Fink for a moment, that the transcendental ideas are the shadow of critical thought. But unlike for Fink, for Kant there is nothing lurking in the shadows of these concepts as they don’t attempt to orient themselves in objects of thought but rather draw their validity from a feeling of a subjective


\(^{30}\) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 608 [A675/B703].
necessity. So although the transcendental ideas can be made thematic by philosophical reflection, a Kantian response to the problem of thought’s self-grounding would be to appeal to the fact that thought is actually grounded in a subjective feeling and that these concepts of reason – which orient thought – are the synthetic *a priori* conditions of thought itself. Being synthetic *a priori* means that although they may be first revealed by thought’s reflection upon concepts found within experience, experience’s very dependence upon them grants them an *apodeictic* character. They are not reliant on experience but rather are prior to all experience.

Grounding critical thought with their subjective necessity it is important to note that the transcendental ideas do not consequently become objects for consciousness. Despite their necessity for subjective experience they have no objective validity to speak of. For Kant, to be drawn into the error of assigning objective reality to these pure concepts, that have in fact simply transcendental reality, leads inevitably to sophistical inferences. ³¹ So while the possibility of philosophical reflection is grounded upon the transcendental ideas, for reflection to maintain validity, thought must regulate itself to ensure that it operates consistently. Critical thought’s orientation on a subjective feeling is just the starting point from which the philosopher must continue carefully in order to avoid fallacy and contradiction. These synthetic *a priori* principles orient philosophical reflection, but what is it that assures that the discovery of these principles by reflection is even possible?

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³¹ Ibid., 409 [A339/B397].
VALIDATING REFLECTION

Up to this point it has been demonstrated how critical thought is able to orient itself upon the synthetic *a priori* conditions of experience, which Kant refers to as the transcendental ideas. But this is of course not enough to claim the overall possibility of philosophical reflection which, in addition to a grounding and direction, requires consistency of reasoning in order to avoid fallacy and contradiction. Without validity of thought, the principles upon which philosophical reflection claims to ground itself would themselves lack validity and consequently thought would be cast back into a state of disorientation as Fink claims. With that in mind it now becomes necessary to consider how critical thought is able to validate this *a priori* knowledge it proposes without appealing to objective reality.

§6 Transcendental illusion

Kant’s critical luminescence does not fully cast off the shadows of philosophy until the opening pages of the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’. Here, finally – after laying the conceptual framework in the ‘Transcendental Doctrine of Elements’ and delving at length through the possibility of knowledge in the ‘Transcendental Analytic’ – Kant reveals his thematic concept of transcendental illusion. It is transcendental illusion which – until Kant’s Copernican Revolution – had remained hidden by the dogmatic deceptions of rationalism thus rendering philosophical thought invalid due to its reliance upon fallacious arguments and contradictions. But before explicating exactly what transcendental illusion is, it first becomes necessary to specify – as Kant does – what it is not.

The illusion (*Schein*) in question is not to be conflated with appearance (*Erscheinung*). In critical thought there is an estrangement of the two concepts as “truth and illusion are not in the object, insofar as it is intuited, but in judgement about it insofar as it is thought”.

So truth, for Kant, lies not in things in themselves, not even in appearances; truth belongs to judgements alone. And as the appearances present for intuition are *sensed* and not *judged*, there is no illusion to be found in that which is given to consciousness. Where illusion enters the equation then is in

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32 Ibid., 384 [A293/B349–B350].
judgements relating to appearances (and not in the apparition itself). That is to say, illusion begins to take effect when objects of intuition are set in relation to the understanding. This, for Kant, is enough to prove that – considered separately – understanding and intuition cannot be subject to deceit; it is only in their combination that illusion can arise. More specifically, it is when the understanding is influenced by sensibility, which pushes it towards certain judgements, that illusion becomes a potentially deceptive factor.\(^{33}\)

So reason’s demand for the unconditioned, and the resulting transcendental ideas, are, for Kant illusory in that while they may be subjectively necessary principles of experience they cannot be said to have objective reality even though the understanding must in some way think of them through analogous objects. So these concepts that the understanding is led to by the need of reason become illusions only when thought is tempted by reason’s nature to associate them with objects of intuition. So with the thematic concept of transcendental illusion Kant is driving towards an explication of “the natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason” which tempts the understanding to transcend its experientially defined boundaries.\(^{34}\)

But here there is a potentially hazardous amphiboly relating to Kant’s elucidation of illusion and to the closely related concept of deception. There is admittedly a friction between the two terms within the text, but for Kant these concepts are most definitely not to be considered synonymous. In *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* Grier tackles what she sees as the common conflation of the two terms within the secondary literature on the *Critique*. Going against the grain of the analytic tradition – in even daring to consider transcendental illusion as a thematic concept – Grier describes the schism as a difference between the inescapable source of error and the fallacies it gives rise to.\(^{35}\) Read in this way it is possible to see the centrality of illusion as it acts as the – consistency bestowing – bridge between the ‘Transcendental Analytic’ and the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ that Strawson denies when he becomes entangled in the shadows cast by ambiguity and equates deception with illusion, subsequently accusing Kant’s explication of transcendental illusion of

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 385 [A294/B351].  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 386 [A298/B354–B355].  
resulting in “unplausible claim and fallacious argument”.\textsuperscript{36} So for Strawson, Kant’s attempts at securing the possibility of philosophical reflection seem to fail, but what Strawson misses is that, for Kant, illusion is a natural dialectic borne of human reason while deception can be seen as the fallacious beliefs arising from the unbridled use of pure reason. Illusion is dialectic cause; deception is dogmatic effect. The transcendental ideas can be seen to be illusions produced by reason’s natural needs, but it is only in positing these pure concepts as objects of intuition that philosophical thought falls prey to deception.

But the critical project cannot of course make this “natural and unavoidable illusion” disappear completely; the best that Kant’s critique can muster – on his own admission – is the revelation of the potential deceit.\textsuperscript{37} And considering that it is the illusion of the transcendental ideas that is the operative medium that philosophical reflection is able to orient itself upon, then the complete removal of illusion would be disastrous for thought, casting it back into a state of disorientation. So it is not the task of critique to obliterate illusion – illusion is both indestructible and subjectively necessary – it is the task of critique to reveal the deceptions of dogmatism and simply unconceal the illusion that is its natural cause. Critique must restrict the understanding to immanence within the realm of experience, not allowing it to extend its domain into the treacherous terrain of the supersensible. In this way critical thought builds upon the subjective feeling, which acts as its grounds of orientation, and gives it fully justified subjective direction in lieu of objective validity. And by restricting the understanding to the domain its authority relates to, critical thought is able to ensure the continued possibility of consistent philosophical reflection.

The transcendental ideas are necessary illusions brought about by the natural dialectic of reason, but it is when the understanding is tempted to give these formal conditions an objective reality that deception arises and the possibility of philosophical reflection is once again thrown into question. These pure concepts are \textit{a priori} conditions of cognition, as their absolute unity allows for the synthesis of experience, but this unity is a transcendental illusion in that its subjective necessity tempts thought into stretching itself beyond the validity bestowing empirical boundaries and into the supersensible domain where it has no claim to validity. So in order to reflect consistently the philosopher must be on guard against the deceptive

\textsuperscript{36} Strawson, \textit{The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason}, 156.

\textsuperscript{37} Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 386 [A298].
nature of the transcendental dialectic brought about by reason’s very nature and to do this there must obviously be some way of recognising where the authority of the understanding begins and ends.

§7 Noumena and phenomena

Coming to the aid of the critical philosopher at this juncture are Kant’s thematic concepts of noumena and phenomena. It is these two concepts that allow critical thought to very accurately demarcate its own domain, thus ensuring a valid use of the understanding. It is the role of noumena and phenomena – or perhaps more accurately noumena alone – to indicate the boundaries within which the understanding can operate consistently and avoid the constant temptations of speculative thought that are brought about by the transcendental dialectic.

Of phenomena it can be said that they are “beings of sense”, while noumena are to be considered “beings of understanding”.\(^{38}\) Phenomena are the appearances that are given to intuition in sensible form; noumena on the other hand are products of the pure understanding fuelled by reason’s demand for the unconditioned. Noumena are thought (pure understanding); phenomena are known (empirical understanding). To know an object – to cognize it – the object must actually be possible, but to think an object relies solely upon the non-contradiction of thought.\(^{39}\) This means that thinking an object does not prove the possibility of the object itself, but rather merely the conceivablevability of the thought in question. Said in another way, noumena are conceivably possible objects (and as a result also conceivably impossible) but not necessarily possible (which would consequently render their impossibility inconceivable). Noumena are pure concepts; they are \textit{ens rationis}, thought-entities, empty concepts. Noumena are “[s]omething in general”; noumena are not some thing.\(^{40}\) A noumenon is not possible but not impossible either; a noumenon is intelligible and conceivable; but a noumenon is perpetually potential – i.e. never actualised.

From this it can be seen that the transcendental ideas are to be thought of as noumena and not phenomena, they are concepts without a corresponding object. These beings of the understanding correspond to nothing but intellectual intuition, and

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 360 [B306].  
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 115 [Bxxvi.].  
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 349 [A252].
as the critical understanding accepts its inability to intuit, then these beings become nothing for cognition at all.\textsuperscript{41} So, while the understanding can think and make use of the transcendental ideas – in the form of noumena – it can know nothing about what they are in themselves. The soul, the world and God can be used by the understanding as regulative principles without it ever needing to make any claims about their actual existence. Read through Fink, it could be said that these ideas, supported by the concept of noumena, are able to remain operative without needing – or not even being able – to be grounded objectively.

That is to say that noumena, for Kant, are to be understood in the negative sense; they are to be seen as sensible boundaries for the understanding rather than the possible domain of other – non-human – intuition.\textsuperscript{42} Taken in this negative sense, as Kant proposes, it can be seen how noumena demarcate the understanding’s domain of authority and play an important role in bestowing validity upon philosophical reflection. Noumena are to be considered conceivable objects but it would be to fall prey to deception to believe that they are also, as phenomena are, necessarily possible objects. So if the philosopher reflects within the boundaries demarcated by the noumena then it is possible to reason critically, that is to say that a consistency within philosophical reflection is made possible. By accepting that the \textit{a priori} cognition of the transcendental ideas does not allow for a transcendent knowledge of things lying outside the bounds of experience, but rather orients and regulates the understanding in its empirical use, critical thought is able to restrain itself from fallacious arguments and ensure a validity to the results of its philosophical reflection. The transcendental ideas can remain validly operative.

\textbf{§8 The transcendental object}

But here the dichotomous pair of the noumenon and phenomenon must be reorganised into a tripartite structure, and the transcendental object revealed from the shadows. The transcendental object – the ‘unknown something’ – is the ‘cause’ standing behind the noumenon and phenomenon; it is that which acts as an general something for thought; it is the transcendental condition for the apparition.\textsuperscript{43} The phenomenon can be considered then as the intuition of this transcendental object and the noumenon as

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 346 [A248/B305].
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 362 [A255/B311].
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 381 [B344/A288].
the conception of this irreal something. The transcendental object is the subjective necessity that enables and validates knowledge, but it is itself unknowable; the transcendental object is “given in itself prior to all experience” and is what connects all possible perceptions.\(^{44}\)

It is important to point out that, just like the transcendental ideas, this subjectively necessary object is not to be given the status of an object that can be present in experience. The transcendental object is the unknowable ‘X’ which cannot even be separated from the sensible data that allows it to be thought (as noumenon).\(^{45}\) Kant’s ‘X’ is the \textit{a priori} cognition of an object in general which helps in defining the boundaries of sensible intuition, and grants the understanding validity in its operation by restricting it to making judgements on appearances and not things in themselves.\(^{46}\) This fissure between appearances and things in themselves is of the utmost importance to critical thought and one upon which Kant relies heavily throughout the literature.

As discussed above, the validity of thought hinges upon the restriction of human knowledge to the empirical and, for Kant, this domain of experience is one of appearances. The proof of this fundamental concept of critical thought lies within the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’, so extends past the scope of this paper, but it is enough to say here that this separation of things as they may be in themselves and things as they appear in intuition is fundamental to the validity of philosophical reflection. Critical thought resists all urges to transcend the empirical, restricting itself from making objective claims in respect to the supersensible domain of things in themselves. And in this differentiation the transcendental object plays a subjectively necessary role because “otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears”.\(^{47}\) So the transcendental object provides thought with a something in general to compensate for the loss of a specific thing found outside of experience. It is this restriction to a thinking of things in general that allows philosophical reflection to continue to ensure its validity.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 513 [A494/B523].
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 348 [A251].
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 381 [A288].
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 115 [Bxxvi].
ENABLING REFLECTION

With thought having been grounded and regulated in its activity, and now able to avoid fallacious argument and contradiction, the critical response to the question of philosophical reflection is almost complete. There are however two concepts remaining that, in addition to helping to regulate thought, play an even more fundamental role in the facilitation of Kant’s brand of philosophical reflection. They are the methodology of critical thought that allows it to reveal its own possibility, and the absolute unity that allows for the synthesis of the manifold of experience upon which the possibility of all thought rests.

§9 Transcendental reflection

The methodology employed by the critical philosopher, as we have seen, reveals to thought the basis of its own orientation and validation. This is what Kant refers to as transcendental reflection and, wedged between the ‘Transcendental Analytic’ and the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ (as a mere appendix to the former), the importance of the elucidation of this philosophical methodology is almost concealed by the weight of the texts on either side. It is here that Kant offers a succinct definition of reflection as:

> the state of mind in which we first prepare ourselves to find out the subjective conditions under which we can arrive at concepts.\(^{48}\)

Seen in this way, reflection does not focus on objects but rather enables the empirical cognition that is experience; it is the reflection that grounds judgements and it is what this paper has been investigating through the revelation of the subjectively necessary (transcendental) ideas. In this sense reflection can be described as the synthesis of representations under the unity of concepts, but there is another mode of reflection revealed by Kant, one “which goes to the objects themselves”.\(^{49}\)

This mode Kant ordains transcendental reflection and it is “a duty from which no one can escape if he would judge anything about things \textit{a priori}”.\(^{50}\) So in other words, transcendental reflection is a necessary task for any philosopher who hopes to

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 366 [A260/B316].
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 368 [A263/B319].
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
make any kind of metaphysical progress or discovery, as it is this philosophical methodology that grants validity to critical thought and helps secure its own possibility. It is by way of transcendental reflection that the critical philosopher is able to shine light onto the murky depths of dogmatic deception and reveal the natural dialectic that has successfully deceived all pre-transcendental attempts at philosophy. It is, as discussed, through an awareness of the difference between noumena and phenomena, and the successful revelation of transcendental illusion that transcendental reflection allows for philosophical thought’s possibility.

Kant’s transcendental reflection is “the comparison of representations in general”, but this modality of reflection is not to be confused with logical reflection, which has been fallaciously employed by the dogmatic tradition. Logical reflection allows for the comparison of concepts without concern for whether a being is to be considered as noumenon or phenomenon, thus exposing itself to the inherent dangers of transcendental illusion. Transcendental reflection, on the other hand, is the luminescent beacon of critical philosophy that reveals the craggy cliffs of transcendental illusion and steers the philosopher into the safety of the appropriate ‘transcendental place’. This means that, through the transcendental mode of reflection, a position within either pure sensibility or the pure understanding can be assigned to a concept and, with the cognitive power to which a representation belongs secured, the transcendental topics (identity/difference, agreement/opposition, inner/outer, matter/form) can then be employed legitimately.

It is through these topics that thought is able to compare concepts validly dependent upon whether they are concepts of the pure understanding or pure sensibility. These transcendental topics are revealed by philosophical reflection but at the same time must be prior to any judgement, and it is this seeming paradox which leads Lyotard to designate these topics as “a kind of transcendental pre-logic” and subsequently as “thought feeling itself thinking and feeling itself thought”. This means that in Lyotard’s reading of the Critique there is an aesthetic aspect to reflection beyond just the subjective feeling of reason’s need already discussed. There is a sensation –pleasant or unpleasant – that allows critical thought to essentially

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51 Ibid., 367 [A261/B317].
52 Ibid., 371 [A268/B324].
53 Ibid., 367 [B317].
judge before knowing what valid judgement is, and that subsequently turns the problem of philosophical reflection into a “legitimate paradox”.

In order to elucidate this interaction between transcendental place and transcendental topics further Kant focuses his gaze on the fallacious dogmatism from the history of philosophy, taking Leibniz and Locke to be the archetypal victims of dialectical deception. Leibniz, on Kant’s reading, makes the mistake of employing the pure understanding to compare sensuous objects as things in general. In this sense Leibniz intellectualises appearances, thus taking them for noumena. Locke, on the other hand, relies on pure intuition and as a result mistakenly abstracts concepts from a reflection upon empirical objects, that is to say phenomena. But the deception here is not an antinomy – not an untieable knot – it is a merely a case of misguided philosophical reflection. Both Leibniz and Locke fall into the darkness of the same illusion, and rather than reflecting upon the fact that no judgement can be objectively valid without the conjunction of sensibility and the understanding, both philosophers are deluded in their application of a philosophically naïve reflection to the transcendental domain. So where the pre-transcendental philosopher makes speculative claims riddled by fallacy and contradiction, thus rendering their attempts at reflection invalid, through transcendental reflection critical thought is able to validate its own use of reason.

Borrowing from the language of Fink for a moment, it can said that with Kant’s attempts to thematise reflection the fact that the Critique has been seeing through the medium of transcendental reflection all along is illuminated. Transcendental reflection has been operating in the shadows of Kant’s exposition of the formal structures of cognition, facilitating the very possibility of critical thought. Mohanty takes up this point, charging Kant with operating through reflection while never actually thematising the methodology that he practises. But surely the case is more complicated than this, and hopefully this paper has been able to show that while Kant is admittedly seeing though the medium of reflection what he is actually gazing upon is this very same operative concept. So Kant reflects upon the possibility of the reflection that he is at the same time undertaking.

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55 Ibid.
56 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 372 [A271/B327].
Unity of self-apperception

Although it could be argued that Kant’s transcendental reflection is enabled by all of the illusions produced by the natural dialectic of transcendental logic, there is one illusion which is perhaps the most central of all. It is the unity of self-apperception, which is revealed by – and at the same time is largely responsible for enabling – this transcendental methodology. It is the transcendental ego of pure apperception; the formal I of the empirical ‘I think’. As Heinrich Dieter explains it is the unity that this self-apperception grants to human reason that underpins much of the Critique and which is largely responsible for making reflection possible.58

To elucidate this illusory unity further it is necessary to explain that there are two modalities of self-consciousness that are extricated – but not excised – by Kant and which are, both explicitly and implicitly, thematised throughout the entire critical project. When consciousness thinks itself – or says ‘I think’ – this self-consciousness is not apprehended but rather apperceived. It is what Kant calls a pure apperception, and is “the consciousness of understanding” as opposed to “the consciousness of inner sense”.59 It is the product of a reflection not concerned with the ego as object of experience, but rather concerned with the subjectively necessary unity that allows for the very possibility of cognition in the first place. It is an apperception of self, an “intellectual self-consciousness” or “act of the understanding”; it is the ego defined by an awareness of a unifying self that grants homogeneity to all its thoughts.60 And it is this homogeneity of thought that leads Dieter to argue that it is Kant’s ‘I think’ that bestows reflection with an omnipresence.61 It is the unity of pure apperception, first revealed by an act of self-reflection, that grants philosophical reflection not only its possibility but also its all-seeing nature that Mohanty seems to believe Kant takes on pure faith.

At this point it almost goes without saying that this act of self-reflection being discussed here does not reveal an object to be found in experience but reveals rather the a priori cognition that is the unity of the manifold of experience. Subsequently, as Kant will declare in his Anthropology: “[t]he human ‘I’ is indeed twofold according to

60 Ibid., 31.
61 Henrich, “Kant’s Notion of a Deduction,” 44.
form (manner of representation), but not according to matter (content).” 62 This transcendental unity is purely logical in form, that is to say, it is without content – without manifold – and Kant performs within the Critique an extrication of transcendental self and empirical self, not an excision of egos but rather a revelation of illusion with the help of transcendental reflection.

For Kant, “[o]ne can place all illusion in the taking of subjective condition of thinking for the cognition of an object” and from this it can be said that the positing of two separable egos – that is to say bestowing substance upon the formal ‘I’ – would be to fall into the dogmatic darkness of self-delusion. 63 What the transcendental philosopher gazes upon rather is two sides of the one ego. Illuminated in the shadow of transcendental illusion is “only the appearance of oneself, and not the human being in himself”. 64 So there is a fissure between the formal unity of self and the empirical appearance of a numerically identical living subject although with the obvious provision – in line with the preceding discussions – that this self-apperception is of consciousness as it appears to itself and not as it is in itself. Pure apperception can be seen as noumenon, empirical apperception as phenomenon, and the self as it is in itself remains, for Kant, opaque. But even without objective reality this purely formal self of pure apperception becomes not only one of critical thought’s greatest discovery but also, in some sense, that on which its very possibility rests.

For Kant, this pure apperception accompanies all acts of judgement and in that sense plays a central role in enabling the synthetic a priori judgements that are, in Kant’s eyes, so important to philosophical reflection. It is the transcendental apperception that brings an a priori unity to the synthesis of the manifold of appearances thus enabling cognition. It is the ascribing of all perceptions to a single identical consciousness that essentially enable thoughts to be thought and in this sense without the unity of the transcendental apperception philosophical reflection would not at all be possible. This self-apperception, revealed first by the gaze of critical reflection, is the very shadow upon which that reflection can claim its possibility.

62 Kant, Anthropology, 23.
63 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, 439 [A396] and 455 [B427].
64 Ibid., 31.
CONCLUSION

Fink’s wonder reveals an unquestioned conceptual substrate underlying the thematic concepts of philosophy and going further still Fink questions the very possibility of philosophical reflection as he demonstrates that, in casting light onto this concealed operative medium, the previously illuminated thematic concepts are forced back into the shadows. There is a self-grounding of philosophical thought which surely brings all claims to validity into question, with even knowledge itself now having been shown to have become an unknown. Kant’s critical luminosity reveals a similar situation of self-referentiality but, for Kant, rather than calling the legitimacy of thought into question this circularity is in fact what enables the very possibility of philosophical reflection. By orienting itself on a subjective feeling, that of reason’s need for the unconditioned, critical thought can then proceed to the transcendental ideas. Lying outside of the realm of experience, these synthetic a priori concepts can perhaps be said to be known in an as yet unknown sense, and are the operative concepts that have the task of setting thought in the right direction. By enacting transcendental reflection, thus confidently differentiating between noumena and phenomena and avoiding the pitfalls of transcendental illusion, philosophical reflection is able to secure its own validity as well as the validity of the concepts of reason upon which it has grounded itself. So philosophical reflection is made possible by a self-grounding that remains valid as long as the philosopher does not attempt to transcend the self-demarcated domain of human knowledge. Regardless of whether this critical answer to Fink’s phenomenological question is truly satisfactory or not, it hopefully shows that rather than taking the authority of philosophical reflection for granted, Kant went to great lengths in the Critique to demonstrate its very possibility.
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