

The “Regulative” Idea from Kant to William James

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There are various routes that one might take in coming to understand American Pragmatism. Few routes, however, are as direct as that which departs from Kant and arrives at William James. James, like Hegel, can be profitably understood as a direct response to Kant’s Idealism. America’s other great philosopher, John Dewey, spent his formative years deeply impressed by Hegelian Idealism, and admitted that Hegel left a permanent deposit on his thinking. James was not so profoundly effected by Hegel; instead, it was Kant with whom he labored to come to terms.

Kant’s first *Critique* marks a turning point in European thought, and its rejection of transcendental theology is among its most significant contributions. Kant’s refutations of the traditional arguments for the existence of God culminate in his postulation of God as a “regulative” ideal. The notion of “regulative” ideation was truly original with Kant, and certainly an unknown quantity at the time of its conception. In the following century, “regulative” thinking was to echo across the Atlantic, find a voice initially in the “pragmatic” philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, and then reverberate in the thinking of William James. In what follows, we bypass Peirce and reestablish the direct route from Kant’s critique of transcendental theology to James’ pragmatic, pluralist epistemology. Our hope is that such passage demonstrates the continuity between America’s seminal philosopher and the early, German Idealist tradition. Kant and James each sought to overcome a similar brand of empiricism; and in doing so, each came to formulate a notion of “regulative” ideation. There is some similarity in their notions; but more significantly, a set of profound, interesting, and all-important differences.

Kant's Critique of Transcendental Theology

In his critique of transcendental theology, Kant targets the purely theoretical conception of God: the notion of a Being altogether outside of empirical experience. He identifies three proofs in support of such a notion: the ontological proof, the cosmological proof, and the physico-theological proof. The cosmological proof will be the focus here, as it is best suited for the purpose of situating “regulative”

ideation in Kant's thinking. The ontological and physico-theological proofs will be only briefly examined.

The ontological proof argues that God exists necessarily by virtue of its definition as ens-realissimum, or "the most real being." The ontological proof states that if such a concept exists in our minds as a postulate of reason, that concept must, as that which is "most real," also exist extra-mentally. For if it exists only in the mind, then those things that exist both mentally *and* extra-mentally would be "more real" than what is purportedly "most real." Furthermore, if "the most real being" is that which is most "actual," then it must have the most predicates possible actualized within itself. One of these predicates, it is argued, must be "existence." Therefore the "most real being" must exist, by virtue of the content of its concept.

Kant's refutation of the ontological proof turns on the viability of "existence" as a predicate. Kant contends that "there is a contradiction in introducing the concept of existence... into the concept of a thing which we profess to be thinking solely in reference to its possibility."¹ For Kant, to say that something exists is to say that an actual, empirical object is experienced as synthesized under the a-priori "category" of existence. This involves no alteration in the content of this object's concept but only a change in its categorical modality. In other words, the object has simply changed from something possible to something real. Kant anticipates this move in his "Postulates of Empirical Thought." Here, something is possible when it "agrees with the formal conditions of experience."² Some concepts, Kant argues, are possible a-priori because they are conditions upon which experience in its formal aspect depends. These are the "pure" concepts of intuition: the Kantian "categories." Other concepts are possible because they were first derived from experience itself. These are "empirical" concepts. Both sets qualify as "possible" because they agree with the formal conditions of experience. If additional concepts are entertained without such qualification, their exact status cannot be known. For "their possibility must either be known a-posteriori and empirically, or it cannot be known at all."³ In other words, under this definition, concepts that are neither "pure" nor "empirical" must be empirically encountered in order to gain the status of "possibilities." They must have been "actual" once in order to be "possible" again.

¹ CPR A597/ B625.

² CPR A218.

³ CPR A222-223.

Apart from such an encounter they are “groundless,” only “arbitrary combinations of thoughts, which, although indeed free from contradictions, can make no claim to objective reality, and none, therefore, as to the possibility of an object such as we here profess to think.”⁴

Thus, in order for God to be “possible” it is not enough that the concept itself be coherent. We must encounter God in experience, as we do trees and triangles. The concept must take on the modality of “Existence,” and according to the postulates of empirical thought something exists only if it is “bound up with the material conditions of experience.”⁵ To be bound up with material conditions of experience is to become a real, empirical “object” by fulfilling the proper schematic requirements for such objects. This much the “most real being” has failed to do. There are objects that strike us as tree-like or triangular, but there has yet to be an object of experience that has struck us as omnipotent. Reason, therefore, cannot say for sure if God is even “possible.”

The “physico-theological” proof infers the existence of God from the order and design of the world. The basic assumption of the physico-theological argument is that the world is observed to have “clear signs of an order in accordance with a determinate purpose, carried out with great wisdom,” and that “this purposive order is quite alien to the things of the world.”⁶ An inference is then made that an intelligent principle must exist apart from the things of the world, providing them with teleological ends and harmonious relations. This is presumed to be God.

Kant is sympathetic toward much of this argument. It is not only the oldest and clearest proof in his estimation, but it proceeds from empirical experience. Kant argues, however, that the inference made from the order of the world to an intelligent will is presumptuous and thus, in the end, fallacious. For even if the world does operate with the same degree of order and purpose as do humanly-designed artifacts (such as a watch), it is only by analogy that one proceeds to posit the existence of a God who bestows such an order on nature. To prove such a claim, one would have to demonstrate that the order of the world is impossible without God's designing influence. This cannot be accomplished simply by employing an analogy. And even if it could, this particular analogy only suggests the existence of an “architect” God; it says nothing whatsoever about God as eternal being, omnipotent power, perfect, and so on. When

⁴ CPR [A223/ B270](#).

⁵ CPR [B266](#).

⁶ CPR [A625/ B653](#).

proponents of the physico-theological argument construe God in such terms regardless, they unconsciously fall back upon the “groundless” concept encountered in the ontological proof. The “most real being” is reintroduced. As Kant sees it, this only highlights the tenacity of fallacious reasoning in theological thinking.

The cosmological proof, which we here examine at greater length, blends the rationalism of the ontological proof and the empiricism of the physico-theological proof. The proof begins from the fact that things exist empirically, conditioned in space and in time. The inference is then made that things must have a cause. The causal chain, it is then presumed, must end at a cause that is itself un-caused and therefore necessary. The manner in which Reason generates the concept of “necessity” is first introduced in Kant’s “Fourth Antinomy,” where we see Reason advancing the thesis that “there belongs to the world... a being that is absolutely necessary.”⁷ In the “Fourth Antinomy,” Reason moves from what is conditioned in experience to the postulation of an ultimate, unconditioned ground of being. As soon as this unconditioned ground is treated as an object and personified as “God,” we have the object of a transcendental theology.⁸

The “concept” of this ground is taken as proof of its own existence in the ontological argument. The manner in which Reason proceeds from the existence of an empirical “something” to a theological “concept” that appears to necessitate its own existence is articulated in portions of “Ideal of Pure Reason.” Here, Kant argues that if we admit that anything at all exists without necessity: that is, exists in contingency, the faculty of Understanding automatically presupposes another contingent existence that stands to that thing as condition for its existence. This triggers an infinite regress, and Reason naturally balks. Reason therefore postulates a conditioning thing which is itself unconditioned and hence necessary in its existence rather than contingent. Reason finds that the concept of the “most real being” best satisfies the requirements of such a chain of reasoning. The “most real being” is again that concept which admits of no contingency, no defect, and as wholly actual, harbors no unrealized possibilities. According to the natural procedure of human Reason, such a concept is inevitable and indispensable. For “we have no choice in the matter, but find ourselves constrained to hold it.”⁹ Reason militates against

⁷ CPR A453/ B481.

⁸ CPR A584/ B612. note a, A580/ B608.

⁹ CPR A586/ B614.

the irrationality of infinite regress and postulates a “first cause.” This becomes God in the cosmological argument.

In his refutation of this argument, Kant does not deny that it is a perfectly rational exercise to assume an unconditioned cause. What he argues is that Reason over-extends itself in such a move by employing “deceptive principles.” These “principles” can be reduced to two. First, the argument assumes that we can infer from an empirical object a causal chain that trails back beyond the empirical realm. Second, the argument infers from the impossibility of infinite regress in the sensible realm the necessity of a first cause in the non-sensible. Against the first principle, Kant insists that “Causality” is a judgment that is operative only in the sensible world and “outside that world it has no meaning whatsoever.”¹⁰ Kant considers the reasoning of the second principle equally illegitimate. While the cosmological argument begins with empirical experience it immediately employs the principles of Reason beyond that experience. Kant contends that these moves become nothing more than an excuse to evoke the “most real being” and that in fact “the appeal to experience is quite superfluous.”¹¹ The conclusion is once again a “necessary” being the non-existence of which is assumed to be unthinkable. With its reliance on this “transcendental” concept, the cosmological argument ultimately fails.

While Reason's inclination to posit the existence of God results from an over-extension of its principles, Kant believes that “human reason has a natural tendency to transgress these limits.”¹² This tendency is “natural” insofar that it mirrors the subsuming of objects under the categories of the Understanding, which for Kant is the defining activity of the human mind. The Understanding brings the manifold of intuition under concepts in order to unify the manifold;¹³ similarly, Reason employs its principles beyond empirical experience in order to bring systematic unity to knowledge.¹⁴ The potential for misguidance in latter case, however, is clear. In the former case, when the manifold of the intuitions is unified in the Understanding, one is performing an activity constitutive of one's experience. There can be no mistake in the application of transcendental categories such as Space and Time, only a mistake in judgment (such as an “optical illusion”) which can always be corrected. The application of principles, however, is another

10 CPR [A609/ B637](#).

11 CPR [A607/ B635](#).

12 CPR [A642/ B670](#).

13 CPR [A306/ B362](#).

14 CPR [A616/ B644](#).

matter altogether. Kant admits that, “the term 'principle' is ambiguous.”¹⁵ They function somewhat like categories in that “knowledge from principles is that knowledge (by) which (one) apprehends the particular in the universal through concepts.”¹⁶ The crucial difference between categories and principles is that the former are constitutive: that is, absolutely imperative, while the latter can be employed at our discretion. This does not mean that principles are without their proper jurisdictions. Principles do not apply to just anything; but rather, they apply only those objects of the Understanding that agree with them. Thus the principle employed in the cosmological argument, that of “Causality,” is employed correctly until it leaves the boundary of its proper application: the empirical realm. Its use is “immanent” up until it is projected beyond this realm and into a realm unseen, where its use becomes “transcendent.”¹⁷ To posit the existence of objects or beings that must, according to the misapplied principle, populate the unseen realm, is to suffer “transcendental illusion.” Kant believes that Reason can be forgiven its over-enthusiasm; but in transcendental theology and metaphysics, such moves must no longer be indulged.

The Regulative Idea for Kant

Kant leaves no hope of determining through transcendental theology whether or not God exists: “to advance to absolute totality by the empirical road is utterly impossible,” he tells us.¹⁸ Turning to pure Reason for a concept such the “most real being,” we find that “we can no more extend our stock of insight by (such) ideas than a merchant can better his position by adding a few noughts to his cash account.”¹⁹ As Kant sees it, transcendental theology seeks certainty where there is none to be found, and in the process of this hopeless search misapplies Reason's own principles. Yet even if the inferences of transcendental theology are fallacious, they are still carried out “naturally” and are deserving of respect. So while Kant chides “transcendental illusion,” he does not fail to recognize that the concept of God represents the best effort of what he considers to be the highest human faculty to synthesize and unify thought. He still regards the concept of God as one that “completes and crowns the whole of human knowledge.”²⁰

15 CPR A300.

16 CPR B357.

17 CPR B352.

18 CPR A628/ B656.

19 CPR A 602/ B630.

20 CPR A641/ B669.

Kant's critique of transcendental theology, and metaphysics in general, is a critique of the “transcendent” employment of transcendental ideas. Transcendental ideas are formulated by Reason in order to unify knowledge - yet, in respect to our actual experience, “no possible empirical knowledge ever obtains.”²¹ Unlike the categories of pure Reason, metaphysical and theological ideas are never represented in the world “constitutively.” Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is grounded on the belief that the pure “categories,” such as “Unity,” “Reality” and “Community,” in fact are. Learning to tell our categories from our ideas is the first step towards “disciplining” Reason. The “transcendent” employment of ideas signals an undisciplined Reason, one that insists on applying ideas “constitutively” to a transcendent, noumenal realm. To Kant, this is the activity of a Reason which is totally out of touch with itself.

Kant maintained that the ideas of transcendental metaphysics and theology are arrived at “naturally,” that is, derived from the structure and function of Reason itself. Kant believed that since transcendental ideas were so formulated they must have a proper domain. He suggests that, “we are entitled, therefore, to suppose that the transcendental ideas have their own good, proper, and therefore immanent use; although, when their meaning is misunderstood, and they are taken as concepts of real things, they become transcendent in their application and for that very reason can be delusive.”²² Thus the ideas can be employed “immanently” just so long as we don't mistake them for the “real.” Kant considers the proper use of ideas to be identical to what he held to be the proper use of principles: that of positing a certain unity to our knowledge. They thereby serve a heuristic function by providing that which is required to advance systematic thinking. Kant suggests that “under their guidance we seek to determine the constitution and connection of the objects of experience.”²³ Ideas, then, are generated by Reason for the purpose of prescribing its own formal rules for the extension of experience within the bounds dictated solely by the pure categories of the Understanding.

Convinced that ideas such as “God” exemplify this mode of thought to an unparalleled degree, Kant introduces a special term. He calls the idea of God an “ideal” because it “seems to be further removed from objective reality even than the idea.”²⁴ Kant contends that the ideal of God, as most removed,

21 CPR A568/ B596.

22 CPR A643/ B671.

23 CPR A671/ B699.

24 CPR A568/ B596.

provides the highest of formal unity that an idea can grant: “the purposive unity of things.”²⁵ This ideal is not purely conceptual, as was the “most real being.” It is instead derived in much the same manner as theologians of the physico-theological persuasion derive their concept of God: by appeal to empirical evidence. For Kant, the argument by design works until it makes the leap, by analogy, to the actual existence of God. The only appropriate analogical move would be from the unity and design of the empirical world to the thought of God the Architect “as object in idea and not in reality.”²⁶ Kant maintains, however, that the idea of unity and purpose is one “inseparably bound up with the very nature of our Reason.”²⁷ Therefore we must anticipate it a-priori (although in an “indeterminate manner”) in the empirical world. We are justified in holding the world to the “regulative” ideal of the greatest possible systematic unity. Indeed, the ideal is only valid in respect to the employment of Reason in the world.

This “regulative” ideal that there is a supreme intelligence guiding nature endorsed the scientific investigation of nature's laws. Securing such endorsement was one of Kant’s main objectives in the first *Critique*. The introduction of the “regulative” function of thought made possible the replacement of the misguided “constitutive” notion of God: a notion held dogmatically by most theologians. Kant believed such undisciplined beliefs hindered scientific investigation. For, “instead of looking for causes in the universal laws of material mechanism, we appeal directly to the un-searchable decree of supreme wisdom,” making the ostensible investigation of nature “a very easy task.”²⁸ Kant regarded such folly a failure of nerve on Reason's part. As experimental science began to flourish in Europe, such lack of discipline was the last thing, in Kant's opinion, that learned communities needed - second perhaps to the return of Humean skepticism.

Kant believed that there was a New World waiting to be discovered if Reason was only strong enough to resist the lazy postulation of a “constitutive” God and consider the purpose and unity of the world to be instead an “ideal” that “regulated” scientific inquiry. If Kant's contemporaries could be content to proceed only “as if” there was an intelligent ordering to the world, forfeiting the possibility of ever encountering such an ideal complete in concrete experience, then nothing would prevent them from ascending the causal chain as far as Reason would carry them. Such a shift would finally eliminate the

25 CPR [A686/ B715](#).

26 CPR [A697/ B725](#).

27 CPR [A695/ B723](#).

28 CPR [A691/ B719](#).

stubborn, philosophical remainder of outworn scholastic theologies that did nothing but hinder such progress. This procedural turn was accomplished by Kant, commencing the “late modern” age in European thought.

Kant's introduction of the “regulative” ideal was revolutionary. What was this innovation to make possible other than scientific investigation? What was the consequence of encouraging civilization to march into a New World merely “as if” some ideas were true? And more importantly, what might result if the a-priori parameters of the Kantian world were to become uncertain, leaving civilization to march into the future with nothing but “regulative” ideals?

An Epistemological Alternative: William James

The sophistication of Kant's philosophy lies in its careful statement of the "a-priorist" position in epistemology. Kant contends that the “manifoldness” of the objective world is a result of the a-priori categories of Understanding spontaneously conditioning sensibility. Sensibility is the activity of intuition, apprehension and imagination culling from the unknowable, “noumenal” realm the manifold of “phenomenal” objects. This is the most primitive level of synthetic activity, which ultimately finds completion in the “Transcendental Unity of Apperception.” The transcendental categories of Understanding, classified under "Quantity," "Quality," "Relation" and "Modality," alone condition the objects of experience that constitute this final synthesis. This transformation of noumenal reality into a phenomenal world, and its final unification in apperception, is known as “Understanding.”

The elegance of Kant's system is not to be denied. However, when later thinkers dissent from Kant's categorical scheme, they more often than not take issue with this neatness and necessity. What actually justifies Kant's distinction between “metaphysical” ideas and his set of “pure” categories? What are the criteria for inclusion as a “pure” category? One thinker who challenges Kant in this manner is William James. As early as his Principles of Psychology, James mounts an attack on the Kantian “a-priorist” approach to experience. James recognizes that Kant “believes in a reality outside the mind of which he writes...” although, “it is not a verifiable phenomenal thing.”²⁹ The noumenal realm is, of course, totally

²⁹ PP Vol. I p. 363.

unavailable for inspection or description. Thus the qualities which constitute the manifold of sensibility cannot be regarded as present in this postulated reality which lies “outside” the content of thought. “The 'manifold' which the intellectual functions combine,” James wrote, “is a mental manifold altogether, which thus stands between the Ego of Apperception and the outer Reality, but still stands inside the mind.”³⁰ For Kant, the complex set of procedures that culminate in the unification of “object” and “apperception” are located entirely within the mental apparatus of the thinking subject. All that is left over, then, is a vacuous “noumena” of which nothing can be said. James refuses to accept the consequences of Kant's description of mental life, the complex elaboration of which he derides as “mythological.”³¹ According to James, the multiplicity that characterizes the objective world cannot be entirely accounted for by the activities of mind. James prefers to put the multiplicity back into the world and “leave the mind simple.”³² This particular way of “lodging it,” contends James, “will be the better, which, in addition to describing the facts naturally, makes the 'mystery of synthesis' least hard to understand.”³³ He wants to insist that this 'mystery of synthesis' - the peculiar union of “thing” together with “thought” - remains, however, whether we accept the Kantian terminology or not. James prefers to approach this mystery in its bare form, not muddled by elaborate schemes and technical vocabulary. The puzzling relation for James is still that between “thing” and “thought,” or as he terms them, “percept” and “concept.” We turn now to James' own treatment of this puzzling relation.

James calls “things” known to us “percepts.” Perception, therefore, is nothing but the presentation of “things” to consciousness. James makes an important distinction between “perception” and “sensation.” Pure sensation would reveal a chaotic world of “simple bits of immediate experience,” all of which “run into one another continuously and seem to interpenetrate.”³⁴ A return to the purely sensible world would reveal the “big blooming buzzing confusion” that exists beyond normal perceptual experience.³⁵ Such a state would be like a return to the world of the newborn infant, a world that each of us has experienced yet cannot clearly recall. The reason we cannot clearly recall such primitive experience is that it was devoid of both percepts and concepts. It was overflowing and completely without discrimination: a sheer

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 *ibid.*

33 *ibid.*

34 *PU* p. 282.

35 *SPP* p. 50.

“muchness.” This world of primitive sensation is still there, according to James, yet “a pure sensation is an abstraction never realized in adult life.”³⁶ Adult life is characterized instead by an accumulation of experience, which conditions both perception and conception.

This experience constitutes the growth of the brain, the formation of patterns of relation and interpretation that can be re-awakened by subsequent sensations. Thus, “anything which affects our sense-organs also does more than that: it arouses processes in the hemispheres which are partly due to the organization of that organ by past experience.”³⁷ Through experience we acquire the cognitive tools that allow us to distinguish from sheer “muchness” particular material things. James suggests that “the consciousness of particular material things present to sense is nowadays called *perception*.”³⁸ Thus the “things” thereby known to us by our senses are called by James “percepts.”

The movement from sensation to perception characterizes the most primitive stage in the development of the brain. As the percepts carved from sensation are named and identified the conceptual order gradually emerges. According to James, “we say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted *whats* are concepts.”³⁹ The generation of a concept is the generation of a certain meaning. As the mind flows along the stream of perceptive “states,” it discriminates “what” these states are - that is, what they represent - by abstracting a concept from several separate percepts. The “what” that is involved in conception is ultimately a “what does it mean?” “Meaning” here is to be understood as pragmatic in nature, referring to “what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve.”⁴⁰ The key to understanding conception is to recognize that “different states of mind can mean the same.”⁴¹ Disparate perceptual states of mind can have the same practical effect. This “sameness” is the birth of a concept.

James contends that “concepts flow out of percepts and into them again,” and that they are “interlaced.”⁴² For James, the generation and employment of concepts does not herald a bifurcation of experience. His treatment of what he calls the “psychological fallacy” is meant to preserve the essential

36 PBC p. 159.

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.*

39 SPP p. 50.

40 PRG p. 26.

41 PBC p. 95.

42 SPP p. 47.

unity and “idiosyncrasy” of every state of consciousness, avoiding such bifurcation.⁴³ The percept is a single thing, “the object of a unique state of thought; (yet) due no doubt in part to sensational, and in part to ideational currents.”⁴⁴ The sensational current is the initial carving out of perceptual “things” from the blooming, buzzing “muchness” that characterizes primitive experience. The ideational current of thought, or the “intellectual life,” consists of the “substitution” of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which experience is flowing.⁴⁵ This is not a one-way transaction, as one is inclined to think it is for Kant. The concept is not alone subsuming and synthesizing a noumenal “thing” which is absolutely given. The sensational and conceptual realms are, as James says, “interlaced.” The idiosyncratic object of thought is part sensation, yet “in no wise 'containing' psychically the identical 'sensations' and images which these currents would severally have aroused if the others were not simultaneously there.”⁴⁶ Thus, for James, real dynamism lies in the perceptual and sensational realms. Substitute as many conceptual orders as you wish, the world will produce sensations unique to each particular “state” of thought. The primordial realm of sensation is an active component in thought and cannot be reduced “purely” to categories of conception. Thus, for James, “conceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known.”⁴⁷

There are many structural similarities between James' treatment of this “puzzling relation” and that of Kant. Both find human thought to be a synthesis of sense objects and conceptual categories. The important difference is that Kant places the entire synthesis within the mind of the perceiving subject. Experience is a mental activity for Kant. Problems arise when we try to examine exactly what the role of the “noumena” is. Strictly speaking, nothing can be said about it. It is forever beyond the ken of Understanding. If we assume that it has some causal connection to our experience we are over-stepping the bounds of Reason, extending our concepts beyond that realm in which they are “constitutive.”

James' shift has two important features, and the consequences of each are very far-reaching. First, James replaces Kant's feebly postulated “noumena” with the bold assertion that beyond perception is a world “blooming and buzzing” with activity. Second, James does not restrict the “constitutive” role in

43 PP Vol I. pp. 196-197

44 PBC p. 160.

45 SPP p. 51.

46 PBC p. 160.

47 SPP p. 78.

experience to conceptual categories. He invites that chaotic, buzzing world of sensation to play an equally vital role in constituting experience. Together, these moves make the world both richer in quality and more unpredictable. The stable set of relations that apply universally for Kant: Causality, Subsistence, Dependence, and so forth are taken to be provisional in the Jamesian model. At any time the world of sensation can suggest relations that challenge these categories. If unusual perceptions strike us as being “objective,” Kant simply calls this “illusion.”⁴⁸ For James, such experience is not so easy to dismiss. Primordial reality is replete with relations that we often fail to perceive. The idea that we must take all relations, however dim or unanticipated, as ultimately *real* is the backbone of James' “Radical Empiricism.” For James, “any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system.”⁴⁹ Such unanticipated experience is the contribution of the world outside, which James feels obliged to defer to. One's conceptual system must not be so stubbornly postulated that it is unable to yield to the influx of novelty from the buzzing universe beyond oneself.

Argued by James and rejected by Kant is the notion that conception is a “secondary process” and not one indispensable to experience itself.⁵⁰ According to James, the world of experience defies conceptual expectations at many turns. For James, this is simply reality asserting itself. Rather than postulating a “noumenal” realm and placing it such that we never have to encounter it in experience, James opens the gate so that “sensation and thought in man are mingled.”⁵¹ The result is at once liberating and perilous. We are thrown into a world where a steady stream of novel experience is constantly re-shaping us, and our concepts are provisional attempts to cope with the never-ending flow.

James and Kant are similar in that both can be read as reactions against the British empirical tradition inherited from Locke and Hume. Both are determined to offer correctives to a particular set of assumptions. Kant operates in close historical proximity to Locke and Hume while James takes issue with their assumptions in the form of a “associationist-psychology” common in his day.⁵² The most important assumption of this school is that “ideas,” or those things immediately before the mind when one thinks, are *discreet representations* of some element of experience. If an “object” contains many

48 CPR B70.

49 ERE p. 42, 49, 107.

50 SPP pp. 79-80.

51 SPP p. 47.

52 PP Vol. I pp. 277-278, 350-360.

elements - for instance, "loud," "red," and "cold," - separate ideas are postulated for each element. The assumption is that these separate ideas are "associated" in the mind of the perceiver. For Locke, they enter into an originally blank mind (tabula-rasa) that then manipulates them in the four-fold process of combining, dividing, generalizing, and abstracting. The simple ideas derived from sensation - "loud," "red," and "cold," - result in an idea of an object generated through reflection: "the loud, red, cold object." The blank mind is thus like a factory that turns our sensory impressions into so many ideas to be re-construed in thought. For Hume, the mind itself is nothing but this "bundle" of impressions that occupy the activities of thinking and the formation of abstract ideas.

James simply rejects the associationist premise that there exists a manifold of coexisting ideas in need of processing or unification. "The notion of such a thing," says James, "is a chimera."⁵³ It is a result, he says, of the "psychological fallacy." The perception of a loud, red, cold object is, in its immediacy, indivisible into several separate "ideas." Such generation of ideas can only be done after the fact as a result of describing the experience in terms of *further* thoughts *about* that thing, which, now objectified, has become nothing more than the specimen "object" of the long-since extinguished sensation. If there is a thought that contains the qualities "loud," "red," and "cold," then within it these qualities are "thought from the outset in a unity, in a single pulse of subjectivity, a single psychosis, feeling, or state of mind."⁵⁴ This unity, in its "delicate idiosyncrasy," *is* the object of thought.

Kant's response to the assumptions of "associationists" is spread throughout his first Critique. Perhaps the most direct response to such a theory of ideation is found in "The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection." Kant declares in this section that mental reflection does not handle objects of sensation "with a view to deriving concepts from them directly." Reflection indeed requires the presence of objects, but not for purposes of generating "ideas" to abstract, combine or divide. Concepts that are relevant to the phenomenal realm stand ready in the mind a-priori. Reflection, then, can only take on two forms: Logical or Transcendental. Logical reflection is "a mere act of comparison" between two objects, automatic and without cognizance of the germane "concept of reflection" subsuming them. Transcendental reflection, on the other hand, is "that state of mind in which we first set ourselves to

⁵³ PP Vol. I p. 278.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

discover the subjective conditions under which (alone) we are able to arrive at concepts.”⁵⁵ In short, transcendental reflection is what prompts the transcendental deduction of pure categories: Kant's own very elaborate program.

It's easy to see why it was Kant who inspired in James his preference to “keep the mind simple.” In Kant's philosophy the realm of mind is populated with every sort of mental creature: concepts, principles, categories, judgments, ideas, ideals, and so on. James feels that “there is something almost shocking in the notion of so chaste a function carrying this Kantian hurly-burly in her womb.”⁵⁶ James prefers to deal simply with the “percept” and the “concept.” Both thinkers, in their reaction against associationist epistemologies, permanently retire “ideas” from their post as mediator between “thing” and “thought.” Such a post no longer needs to be occupied in either system. The question, then, is what becomes of “ideas”? For Kant, ideas took on a novel role in the type of thinking that he called “regulative.” For James, ideas take their place under his umbrella term, “concept.”⁵⁷ The latter appears to serve much the same function as the former; except now with a radically different set of epistemological assumptions.

The Regulative Idea in James' Thought

“Concepts” in the thought of William James are construed as thoroughly “regulative” ideas. “They steer us practically every day,” he says, “and provide us with an immense map of relations among the elements of things.”⁵⁸ He rejects their a-priori status and opts for a naturalistic account of their origin. Yet all the while, he stresses that “a more important question than that as to the origin of our concepts is that as to their functional use and value.”⁵⁹ This is the most important role that concepts play in the philosophy of James and the pragmatists. Given the immediacy of perceptual flow, concepts serve only to widen the panorama of experience itself. They connect us with the world of perception by facilitating appreciation of the myriad relations that make up reality. They allow us to “understand our percepts better: knowing *what* these are, we can tell all sorts of farther truths about them.”⁶⁰

55 CPR B316.

56 PP Vol, I. p. 363.

57 SPP p. 48. See footnote.

58 SPP p. 73.

59 SPP pp. 55-56.

60 SPP p. 65.

James' employment of concepts can only be understood within the context of his pragmatism. To know *what* something is amounts to knowing what it *means*. To know what something *means* is to know what practical effects it has. Concepts are the abstract meanings that “regulate” transactions with the world. They provide an ideal to project upon future transactions in the form of expectation. In this way, concepts regulate experience in that they help forecast the consequences of certain courses of action or inquiry. Like Kant's “regulative” ideals, they are nothing substantial apart from experience *in the world*. For James, however, experience in the world always means experience of a “sensible difference” being made. Ideas, for James, *mean* their consequences. If two ideas lead one to identical consequences, then for all intents and purposes they are identical ideas.

James illustrates his theory in reference to God's existence in his lecture on “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered.”⁶¹ He imagines that the world has suddenly ceased, and we are confronted with the question of whether or not God or the mechanical movement of matter is to be regarded as responsible for the frozen state in which the world stands. James contends that the pragmatist can make no choice. Concepts can only be employed in experience that yields consequences; and if the world were to cease, there would be no consequences forthcoming. God and matter *mean* the same thing to a frozen world because both explain the state sufficiently, leaving no grounds for choosing one over the other. Devoid of a future to regulate, there are no longer distinct ideas.

Kant treats such matters very differently. If, when looking in hindsight at a particular causal chain of events, one finds an explanation given in mechanical terms to be sufficient, this does not dissolve the primacy of the teleological ideal represented by God. “In such a case,” Kant contends, “we merely fail to find the additional unity.”⁶² This might be a “disappointment,” but due to the a-priori nature of God's foundations as a regulative ideal, it “cannot affect the teleological law itself, in its general bearing.” Regardless of whether one explains the world in terms of God or matter, the distinction loses its significance in relation to a broader, regulative ideal that binds together Kant's world: “the systematic and purposive unity (of nature), in accordance with universal laws, even in those cases in which we are unable to detect that unity.”⁶³ This systematic unity is an a-priori condition of experience; it will never change.

61 PRG pp. 47-54.

62 CPR A688/ B716.

63 CPR A699/ B727.

When it comes to describing the world in terms of God or matter, “it must be a matter of complete indifference to us, when we perceive such unity, whether we say that God in his wisdom has willed it to be so, or that nature has wisely arranged it thus.”⁶⁴ In effect, the a-priori status of Kant’s ideal and his careful avoidance not to posit it as concept using inappropriate categories, together create a frozen world much like James hypothesized. James would point out that such conflation of ideas eliminates their meanings altogether. By pragmatic standards, what God *means* to Kant is nothing more than the advantage of making synthetic a-priori judgments with certainty. In a world where “systematic unity” obtains a-priori, the “regulative” use of such an ideal serves primarily to reveal *further* certainties. There is no such certainty in James’ world. Thaw-out the frozen world and set it moving again, and the significance of this becomes clear.

In James’ world, concepts regulate our connection to the future on the most fundamental level and have consequences that go far beyond the advancement of scientific inquiry. They “bring new values into our perceptual life, they re-animate our wills, and make our action turn upon new points of emphasis.”⁶⁵ The fact that ideas are not furnished a-priori means that our acquisition of them must be done as conscientiously as possible. To weigh the consequences of ideas, for James, is more important than expounding their origins or their abstract relations to one another. James is not endorsing the abandonment of rational reflection altogether; he seeks instead to compensate for the intellectualization of thought by stressing that ideas are also essential components in the art of everyday life. When he asks, “Who can decide offhand which is absolutely better, to live or to understand life?”⁶⁶ he is recommending that we do both, and that ideas play a crucial role in “regulating” many aspects of both.

Thus James broadens the scope of the “regulative” function in ideation far beyond the scope that Kant recognized. For Kant, regulative ideas are really nothing more than Reason reflecting upon its own pure, a-priori categories and are as such necessary. This element of *rationality* is what compels Kant to recognize their “naturalness.” James has a very different approach. He begins with a conception of what a *natural* mode of thought is and from there derives a definition of what is “rational.” A natural mode of thought can be said to model the laws of nature itself, which for James are, “nothing but the

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ SPP p. 73.

⁶⁶ SPP p. 74.

immutable habits which the different elementary sorts of matter follow.”⁶⁷ Habits, both of nature and of thought, “(simplify) the movements required to achieve a given result, (making) them more accurate and (diminishing) fatigue.”⁶⁸ Given what is natural, James derives what is rational. What James calls the “sentiment” of rationality is nothing more than a feeling towards an idea of “the absence of all need to explain it, account for it or justify it.”⁶⁹ Rational ideas are those that we “think with perfect fluency.” Rationality is a simplification of life and a diminishment of puzzle and perplexity. It grants us a “feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment,” and “in a general way at least, banish(es) uncertainty from the future.” This is, in the broadest sense, the “regulative” role of ideas in James’ thought.

Kant's critique of transcendental theology is a critique of a certain type of thinking. Transcendental concepts of God or the “most real being” are rejected when they are purported to exhibit characteristics of the “real.” They are not entitled to such a designation according to Kant. Ideas cannot be objectively “real” only “immanent” in their employment. Any move that gives such ideas status as concrete realities is bound to be fallacious. James shifts the criteria for the “real” and makes it more consistent with what Kant referred to as the “immanent.” James defines the “real” as anything “of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way.”⁷⁰ This means anything that effects our transactions with the world: anything that regulates experience in any way. Under such criteria, James also finds concepts such as the “most real being” lacking in reality. In considering the “scholastic inventory of God's perfections,” he applies the pragmatic principle and comes away asking how “such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life.” He seems prepared to reject them outright, for he cannot “conceive of its being of the smallest consequence to us religiously that any one of them should be true.”⁷¹

James' rejection of transcendental theology differs from that of Kant, and this difference will serve as a point of closure. James' main concern is with a God that makes our lives more peaceful, more natural, and more secure. This is the meaning of God as a “regulative” concept for James. “God!,” he writes, “means that 'you can dismiss certain kinds of fear.’”⁷² The ideal of God means something very different for Kant, at least in respect to his agenda in the first Critique. Here God must mean “the purposive unity

67 PP Vol. I p. 104.

68 PP Vol. I p. 112.

69 WWJ *The Sentiment of Rationality*. pp. 317-345.

70 SPP p. 101.

71 VRE pp. 445-446.

72 SPP p. 62.

of things,” the guarantor of orderly progression along the road of rational investigation. In these two thinkers, we see God called upon to “regulate” experience in two very different spheres: for Kant, the scientific; and for James, the emotional. What an accurate reflection this is of the *personal* temperaments of these two philosophers! Confident, stable, and predictable is Kant; uncertain, temperamental, and often melancholic is James. And so it will go, contending with the “regulative” function of our most cherished ideals with and without a-priori foundations. Given such foundations, we can expect orderly progress towards greater and greater certainty. Without such foundations, we are at once given absolute control and absolute contingency. It is to James' credit that he overcame his doubts and, through his philosophy, extended the possibility of pursuing a creative and fulfilling human life unsupported by certitude. It is to Kant's credit that, about a century earlier, he unknowingly laid the foundation.

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- ERE James, W. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1922.
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- PP James, W. *Principles of Psychology*. 2 Volumes. Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1923.
- PRG James, W. *Pragmatism*. Edited by Bruce Kuklick. Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1981.
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- SPP James, W. *Some Problems in Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1996.
- VRE James, W. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1912.