

Reason and Its *Bedürfnis*

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Abstract

In this article I argue that the notion of *Bedeutung* (meaning, sense) in Kant is closely related to that of *Bedürfnis* (need) and that the former can be better understood by clarifying the latter. After an initial overview of the needs of reason in general, I will focus on the two directions of this need in order to state that they characterise reason and make it local. By this I mean that reason, while aspiring to wholeness, only functions adequately within a limited framework. It is from the cooperation of both directions of reason's needs that meaning develops.

Keywords: needs of reason, significance, locality, metaphysics.

La razón y su *Bedürfnis*

Resumen

En este artículo sostengo que la noción de *Bedeutung* (significado, sentido) en Kant está estrictamente relacionada con la de *Bedürfnis* (exigencia) y que la primera puede entenderse mejor aclarando la segunda. Tras una primera visión de la exigencia de la razón en general, me centraré en sus dos direcciones para afirmar que estas caracterizan a la razón y la hace local. Con esto quiero decir que la razón, al tiempo que se esfuerza por alcanzar la totalidad, debe relacionarse y puede funcionar adecuadamente sólo dentro de un marco limitado. Es a partir de la cooperación de ambas direcciones de la exigencia de la razón que se desarrolla una dimensión de significado.

Palabras clave: exigencias de la razón, significado, localidad, metafísica.

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1. *Bedeutung* and *Bedürfnis*

There are many perspectives from which one can investigate the question of the notion of meaning (*Bedeutung*)² in Kant's thought. In general, the notion of meaning is attributed by Kant to concepts that are related to objects (*KrV*, A146/ B185; A155/B194; A241/B300; B575). Speaking of the principles of mathematics, for example, Kant states that:

Although all these principles, and the representation of the object with which this science occupies itself, are generated in the mind completely a priori, they would still not signify anything at all if we could not always exhibit their significance in appearances (empirical objects). Hence it is also requisite for one to make an abstract concept sensible, i.e., display the object that corresponds to it in intuition, since without this the concept would remain (as one says) without sense, i.e., without significance (A239–240/B299).³

According to this passage, something is meaningful if it can be exhibited: a concept or even a pure form of intuition must be related to possible experience in order to be meaningful:

Even space and time, as pure as these concepts are from everything empirical and as certain as it is that they are represented in the mind completely a priori, would still be without objective validity and without sense and significance if their necessary use on the objects of experience were not shown; indeed, their representation is a mere schema, which is always related to the reproductive imagination that calls forth the objects of experience, without which they would have no significance; and thus it is with all concepts without distinction (*KrV*, A156/ B195).

Furthermore, Kant uses *Bedeutung* to refer to categories in the transcendental sense, i.e. when they are considered as mere rules of pure

² The term is rendered in the English translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as 'significance' (e.g. A139/178; A146/B185; A241/B300; A239–240/B299), 'sense' (e.g. B307–309) or 'way' (e.g. A258/B313).

³ References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* use the page number of the A and B editions, while all other references are by volume and page number of the Academy edition. Translations follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (1992–2016). When the references are followed by the original text in German, translations are made by me. I cite Rousseau's *Emile* according to the book and paragraph number.

thought, without empirical use (*KrV*, A248/B305) and to the positive or negative sense of *noumenon* (*KrV*, B307–309). Moreover, the term has to do with the empirical meaning of objects, i.e. the way they can be represented as objects of a possible experience (*KrV*, A258/B313) or is synonymous with the sense or use of a word, such as ideas (*KrV*, A312–313/B369), world-concepts (*KrV*, A420/B448), thinking (*KrV*, B411), and can indicate the absolute or comparative use of a term (*KrV*, B511).

As can be seen, it is possible to distinguish between a weak use of *Bedeutung* as ‘sense’ or ‘way’ and a stronger one, such as in the cases of empirical or transcendental (see Engelhard, 2015) *Bedeutung*, as shown above. Here I want to focus on this stronger sense, according to which something has a meaning, when it is intelligible. Now, the conditions of intelligibility are fulfilled, as we saw above in the quotation (A239–240/B299), when an intellectual function of unity (e.g. a concept or a principle) can be exhibited in an appearance. In other words, there are two conditions of meaningfulness: on the one hand, there must be a conceptual element that works as a function of unity, and on the other hand it must be possible for the object to which this conceptual element corresponds, to be displayed in intuition. This is a way to interpret the famous sentence: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (*KrV*, A51/B75). The first part of the sentence is about the fact that if intellectual functions (such as concepts, principles or ideas) cannot be exhibited in intuition, then they are empty functions of unity, which might have a logical meaning, but not a proper one, i.e. they merely express logical characteristics of judgements but do not increase our cognition and are therefore called ‘empty’. Through the second part of the sentence, Kant argues that intuitions need to be unified in order to constitute a proper object and not merely as an indeterminate object (*KrV*, A20/B34), which lacks the unity provided by the function of the understanding and its categories. Without such unity, intuitions would be meaningless. It is the need for unity which led me to investigate the relationship between *Bedeutung* and the needs of reason in Kant. I believe, namely, that the notion of meaning is closely linked to that of *Bedürfnis* and one can better understand the former, by clarifying the latter.⁴

⁴ We can see this also in examples taken from everyday life: we recognise that something has meaning for us, that is, when it speaks to us, when it answers our search for knowledge (or happiness, peace,

As we shall see, Kant attributes some needs to reason. This image could be misleading in two ways: on the one hand, one could think that Kant conceals psychological-anthropological presuppositions that lead him to attribute some needs to reason (it is the human being as natural being who has needs, not reason); on the other hand, one could completely disregard these statements, thus missing, in my opinion, something very important, namely that reason is unhappy, needy. i.e. in a locus or dimension of tensions and conflicts.

I will try to clarify this point by stating that the needs of reason characterise and direct the various uses of reason. I see two main directions of these needs: one towards the completeness and the suprasensible, while the other towards the particular and the empirical level. By this I mean that reason, while striving for completeness, functions adequately only within a limited framework. It is from the cooperation of both directions of reason's needs that meaning develops. This picture provides us a view of reason as local: on the one hand, we can easily see that Kant uses notions such as reason, objective justification or *sensus communis* to respond to the threat of solipsism and the lack of an always-valid universal standard; on the other hand, we have to face the criticisms that are directed against his universal image that seems to describe reason as something ideal, abstract, and to confront what we could call "the antinomies of our time", namely that beliefs made in different times and places find their justification in different and incompatible systems. Already a few decades after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's notion of reason was severely criticised: Hamann in his *Metakritik über den Purismus der reinen Vernunft* (1825) accused him of having proposed an idea of reason as purified, abstract, idealised; while Beneke in his *Kant und die philosophische Aufgabe unserer Zeit* (1832) claimed Kant's description of the transcendental faculties had concealed empirical-psychological assumptions and was—*de facto*—empirical. However, I believe that Kant really wanted to introduce a conception of reason that could address these dilemmas and make relativity (or limits) a key notion, indispensable for reason insofar as there can be no

justice, etc.). This implies that there is a need, a demand for understanding that guides our research according to a specific direction, providing it with unity. However, this need, paradoxically, does not arise in a situation of absolute lack of understanding, but rather the opposite: we assume that cognition or morality are possible and therefore inquire into their specific features. If this were not the case, if there were not already a situation of meaningfulness, then there would be no search for it. We are thus inquiring into something that, in a certain way, is already partially in our possession.

absolute statements because every statement must be justified within a context or within its limits of possibility. My intuition is that Kant saw this and I will demonstrate this by focusing on the *Bedürfnis* of reason and its directions.

2. On the Uses of the Term *Bedürfnis*

Before proceeding further, I will provide an overview of some of the main uses of the term *Bedürfnis* in Kant's works.

Firstly, this notion can describe natural and empirical needs, such as hunger—as we read in the *Reflections to the Anthropology*: “More need: less choice, thus indifference between two in hunger” [“Je mehr Bedürfnis: desto weniger Wahl, also gleichgültigkeit zwischen zweyen beym Hunger”] (*Refl.*, AA 15: 727)—or inclination—*Neigung*—(*Refl.*, AA 15: 245, 558, 562) and pain: “If (only) he is satisfied who desires nothing. As a need i.e. [without which] the lack of which is connected with pain” [“Ob derjenige Zufrieden sey, der nichts begehrt. Als Bedürfnis. d.i. [ohne welches] dessen Mangel mit Schmerz verbunden ist”] (*Refl.*, AA 15: 455).

Secondly, the term is used in the social sphere,⁵ to indicate the human need to be part of a community: “The need of sociality. Hence reading, taste, finery, pain because of a bad meal. The fear of falling below equality and respect. Nullity of the happiness of life in front of a wise man” [“Bedürfnis der Gesellschaft. Daher Lesen, Geschmack, Putz, Gram über schlechte Mahlzeit. Furcht, unter der Gleichheit und Achtung zu sinken. Nichtigkeit des Glücks des Lebens vor einen Weisen”] (*Refl.*, AA 15: 723). Besides, Kant writes about the *Bedürfnis* of love and friendship in the reflections to the moral philosophy (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 681, 684).

Thirdly, Kant writes about a specific kind of needs called true needs. They are related to wide duties (which require the agent to pursue obligatory ends) allowing, however “latitude” [“latitude”] (*MS*, AA 06: 390), meaning

⁵ Another meaning attributed to the term, which is relevant to the social and legal sphere, concerns ownership: “The need to extend the concepts of “mine” and “yours” to external objects, as long as this is done within the limits of general freedom, is therefore in the nature of man as a purely rational being” [“Das Bedürfnis also die Begriffe von Mein und Dein auch auf äußere Objecte auszudehnen sofern es nur in den Schranken der allgemeinen Freyheit gehalten wird liegt in der Natur der Menschen schon als blos vernünftiger Wesen”] (*HN*, AA 23: 226).

that it is up to the agent to recognise or decide how to fulfil and promote the obligatory ends. An example of this is sacrifice:

But I ought to sacrifice a part of my welfare to others without hope of return, because this is a duty, and it is impossible to assign determinate limits to the extent of this sacrifice. How far it should extend depends, in large part, on what each person's true needs are in view of his sensibilities, and it must be left to each to determine this for himself. For, a maxim of promoting others' happiness at the sacrifice of one's own happiness, one's true needs, would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law. Hence this duty is only a wide one; the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done. – The law holds only for maxims, not for determinate actions (*MS*, AA 06: 393).

And later in the text:

By avarice in this context I do not mean greedy avarice (acquiring the means to good living in excess of one's true needs), for this can also be viewed as a mere violation of one's duty (of beneficence) to others; nor, again, do I mean miserly avarice, which is called stinginess or niggardliness when it is shameful but which can still be mere neglect of one's duties of love to others. I mean, rather, restricting one's own enjoyment of the means to good living so narrowly as to leave one's own true needs unsatisfied. It is really this kind of avarice, which is contrary to duty to oneself, that I am referring to here (*MS*, AA 06: 432).

The meaning of such true needs is debated between, on the one hand, Rawls⁶ and Herman,⁷ who suggest that true needs are universally shared by all human beings and, on the other hand, Sticker (2022), who assumes a more subjectivistic interpretation, according to which true needs should be understood as personal priorities. According to Sticker's interpretation, Kant

⁶ He claims that true needs are “basic –even universal– needs of human beings conceived as finite rational agents in the order of nature” (Rawls, 2003, p. 234). Examples of these are social order, security, which are necessary for rational agency.

⁷ For Herman, true needs are the basis for those ends that are “necessary to sustain oneself as a rational being” (1984, p. 586). Helping others in a situation in which someone's life is in danger, for instance, might be a case in which helping meet the true need of that person.

radicalises Rousseau's notion⁸ when he states that it is up to the individual to decide what their true needs are.⁹

I will not go into further details of this discussion because I am interested here in a more fundamental and abstract use of *Bedürfnis*, which Kant attributes to reason itself.

2.1 *Bedürfnis* as Need of Reason

In his practical philosophy, Kant uses the term *Bedürfnis* to refer to God and what reason needs in order for the highest good in the world to be realised. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,¹⁰ he writes:

For how could we find perfect unity of purpose among different wills? This will must be omnipotent, so that the whole of nature and its relation to morality in the world may be subjected to it; omniscient, so that it may know the innermost of sentiments and their moral value; omnipresent, so that it may be immediately close to all needs [*allem Bedürfnisse*] which the highest good in the world [*Weltbeste*] requires; eternal, so that in no time this concord of nature and freedom may be lacking, and so on (*KrV*, B843).

Not only does the highest good have requirements for its realisation (e.g. morality) and these are discovered through reason, but God¹¹ itself is the ideal object of reason's need. Kant constantly repeats that reason has the

⁸ Rousseau distinguishes between the needs of the imagination [“besoin de fantaisie”] (*Emile* 2: 239), which are a kind of whim resulting from education, and the true needs [“vrai besoin”], which is natural (*Emile* 2: 239) and the object of the *amour de soi* (*Emile* 4: 756). True needs do not only concern biological needs, but also what is necessary to satisfy the *amour propre* (which could be interpreted here as a kind of recognition). The social context thus plays a key role in determining what the true needs are (Neuhouser, 2014).

⁹ Sticker points out that Kant in the *Groundwork* claims that inclinations are the “sources of need” [“Quellen des Bedürfnisses”] (*GMS*, AA 04: 428, 413). Now, one might believe that our inclinations are based on our needs, but Kant thinks it is the other way around, and this gives support to a subjectivist reading, according to which there is no set of basic human needs that we all share and that produce universal stable inclinations, but that everyone's needs depend on subjective inclinations.

¹⁰ In a Reflection to the Philosophy of Religion we find a similar formulation: “but it is a moral need in the intention to demand the highest good in the world. To believe in such a future life” [“aber es ist ein moralisches Bedürfnis bey der [abs] auf das höchste Gut in der Welt zu befördern gerichteten Absicht. Eben so ein künftig Leben zu glauben”] (*Refl.*, AA 19: 643–644).

¹¹ Moreover, according to the christian tradition, God himself is also said to have a need, namely to have a creature towards whom to direct his love: “The purpose of creation, as people would like to think of it, is that God has a need [something], as it were, to have another being that he can love and that loves him in return” [“Der Zweck der Schöpfung, so wie ihn Menschen sich denken möchten, ist, dass Gott gleichsam ein Bedürfnis hat [etwas], ein andres Wesen zu haben, was er lieben könne und was ihn dagegen liebt”] (*Refl.*, AA 19: 644).

inescapable demand to move from the conditioned to the unconditioned or from a particular cause to the cause of all causes, turning to: “The need of reason to recognise a supreme being” [“Die Bedürfnis der Vernunft, ein höchstes Wesen zu erkennen”] (*Refl.*, AA 18: 601, n4582). In the notes for his short treatise of 1790 *On a Discovery whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason Is to Be Made Superfluous by an Older One*, he writes about: “Ideas that are based on the need of our reason to think of the unconditional in addition to the conditional” [“Ideen, welche sich auf dem Bedürfnis unserer Vernunft, zum Bedingten sich das Unbedingte zu denken”] (AA 20: 381). While in his *Lose Blätter*, we find the claim that: “It must have been a need of reason (a theoretical or practical need) that compelled it to go from its judgements about things to the reasons up to the first ones” [“Es muß ein Bedürfnis der Vernunft (ein theoretisches oder practisches) gewesen seyn was sie genöthigt hat von ihren Urtheilen über Dinge zu den Gründen bis zu den ersten hinaufzugehen”] (*FM/Lose Blätter*, AA 20: 340–341). And in the *Religionsphilosophie Volckmann*: “The concept of God is a natural need of reason. Knowledge can either be a common one, in which case it is an aggregate; or it can be a system, in which case it is theology” [“Der Begriff von Gott ist ein natürliches Bedürfnis der Vernunft. Die Erkenntnis kann entweder eine gemeine, dann ist’s ein Aggregat; oder ein System sein, und dann ist’s Theologie”] (*Refl.*, AA 28: 1134).

But not only God—understood as the ideal object of the search for the unconditioned—must be considered as a need of reason,¹² but also metaphysics itself: “Yes! for when the idea of a metaphysics inevitably strikes human reason and it feels the need to develop it, but this science lies entirely in the soul, although only embryonically prefigured” [“Ja! wenn nämlich die Idee einer Metaphysik der Menschlichen Vernunft unvermeidlich aufstößt und diese ein Bedürfnis fühlt sie zu entwickeln diese Wissenschaft aber ganz in der Seele obgleich nur embryonisch vorgezeichnet liegt”] (*FM/Lose Blätter*, AA: 342).

The highest good, God and metaphysics are needed by reason. Even if it is known that an adequate cognition of an unconditioned cause is not possible, thinking about it is necessary for reason. The question is why reason has such necessities, what is their origin? Certainly, there is nothing in nature

¹² See *Refl.*, AA 06: 139: “Now, in accordance with this need of practical reason, the universal true religious faith is faith in God”.

that compels us to assume such a necessity: we have no experience of the unconditioned. The source of this inescapable necessity of reason can therefore only reside in reason itself, i.e. there is something in reason, or rather in its procedure and action, that requires us to face the idea of the unconditioned. In other words, the idea of the unconditioned seems to be necessary for reason¹³ to function properly.

3. On the Sources of Reason's Needs

Reason is often compared by analogy to an organism (*KrV*, A832–833), an architect and Kant even writes that human reason has a peculiar fate (to be tormented by questions to which it cannot find an adequate answer). These images underline that reason is, so to speak, alive, active, i.e. it has needs and interests.¹⁴ Far from being a neutral external observer, it yearns for meaning, i.e. for completeness and systematicity according to necessary laws:

reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping reason, as it were, in leading-strings; for otherwise accidental observations, made according to no previously designed plan, can never

¹³ Here I am not claiming that the thought of the unconditioned is necessary for the understanding but for reason: the unconditioned, namely, as mere thought, is not required for justifying experience and claims of cognitions *per se*.

¹⁴ One might ask in what sense it is possible to distinguish needs from the interests of reason. Now, the notion of interest (as that of *Bedürfnis*) is used by Kant in a polyvalent way (see Birken-Bertsch, 2015) and the reader could differentiate among architectonic interest (*KrV*, A475/B503), aesthetical interest (*KU*, AA 05: 296), logical interest (*GMS*, AA 04: 460), formal interest (*KrV*, A616/B664), moral (*GMS*, AA 04: 459f. anm., 461; *KpV*, AA 05: 75, 79, 207; *MS*, AA 06: 212), practical (*KrV*, A466/B494, A742/B770, A797/B825, A805/B833; *GMS*, AA 04: 413) and speculative (*KrV*, A462–476/B490–B504, A666/B694, A676/B704, A742/B771, A830/B858; *KpV*, AA 05: 120). Interest generally means something dear to us, which gives us pleasure when we represent its existence (*KpV*, AA 05: 204). A stronger sense of it, however, is the case of moral interest, which refers to the fact that the moral Law is binding and is sufficient to determine the will. Moreover, as practical, interest is concerned with questions of human destination („Was soll ich thun?“ und „Was darf ich hoffen?“ [*KrV*, A805/B833]), and the three ideas; while in a speculative sense, however, interest concerns reason insofar as it cannot but regard nature as if every connection in the world depends on a supreme cause (*KrV*, A686/B714). Now these two last meanings of interest, together with the architectonic one (according to which reason is architectonic, i.e. it regards all cognitions as belonging to one possible system A474/B502) could be better approached as needs or as interest in the strong sense, insofar as they refer to tendencies or operations of reason which reason cannot do without. Thus, we could say that an interest is to be considered in a superficial sense, when it regards something that is dear, but which reason can do without, or as an interest in a stronger sense (and then it is a *Bedürfnis*), when it is simply unavoidable.

connect up into a necessary law, which is yet what reason seeks and requires [welches doch die Vernunft sucht und bedarf] (*KrV*, Bxiii).

As Ferrarin (2015) points out, reason, as an organism, transforms its passivity and needs into activity: this neediness makes it what it is.

Reason's neediness is not merely its unfortunate predicament of lacking what it desires, for this very condition reveals that it has drives and aspirations it deeply cares to realize. It is involved in the world. [...] it values the importance of applying itself to the world in maximally coherent ways (Ferrarin, 2015, p. 26).

But there are cases in which it seems that reason is afflicted by a separation within itself and that it is impossible to realise this necessary unity according to laws: it seems, for instance, that reason can provide good arguments for both the claim that the world has a beginning and for the claim that it does not. It is not surprising, therefore, that Kant himself, admits that he turned to critical philosophy because he was tormented by antinomic reasonings:

It was not the investigation of the existence of God, immortality, and so on, but rather the antinomy of pure reason: – “The world has a beginning; it has no beginning, and so on, right up to the 4th [sic]: There is freedom in man, vs. there is no freedom, only the necessity of nature” – that is what first aroused me from my dogmatic slumber and drove me to the critique of reason itself, in order to resolve the scandal of ostensible contradiction of reason with itself (*Br*, AA 12: 258).

Kant's solution to this struggle of reason with itself is as follows: on the one hand, it is possible (if not necessary) to unveil the hidden fundamental error that leads reason to these metaphysical statements and, therefore, it is possible to free reason from these conflicts; but, on the other hand, metaphysical questions remain an inescapable need of reason, because reason itself is characterised by features that are the very sources of the metaphysical tendency. The need for repetitive iteration, for the search of unity and completeness, are general intrinsic features of reason that must be recognised as the very sources of metaphysical reasonings. As Willaschek clearly states:

On the one hand, the structure of rational thinking is discursive and iterative [...]. On the other hand, as rational inquirers we want our questions to come to a satisfactory conclusion, which they can find only in ultimate answers, that is, in answers that do not raise further questions of the same kind. [...] Kant gives us good reason to think that discursivity, iteration and striving for completeness are fundamental features of rational thinking and that, taken together, they give rise to a specific kind of metaphysical speculation (2018, p. 1).

This need for unity and completeness is easily seen in both the practical and the theoretical spheres. In its theoretical use, reason shows this peculiar need, when: “starting out from known objects (of experience), wants to extend itself beyond all of experience” (*WDO*, AA 08: 136), and thus assumes, as a hypothesis, an unconditional primordial reason, to complete the series of reasons and to bring the “inquiring reason [...] to satisfaction” (*KrV*, AA 05: 142). Unconditionality is the main characteristic of the necessity of reason also in its practical use: “Far more important is the need of reason in its practical use, because it is unconditional, and we cannot merely presuppose the existence of God. when we want to judge, but because we must judge” (*WDO*, AA 08: 139). In the postulates of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, this need of reason seems to find its ultimate satisfaction (*FM*, AA 20: 300).

Willaschek identifies three main characteristics of reason (iteration, unity, completeness), from which, I claim, specific needs of reason are derived. Ferrarin (2015) identifies the following needs of reason:¹⁵ to assume freedom as absolute beginning (*KrV*, A452/B480); to admit God (*KrV*, A603/B631); to form hypothesis and postulates (*KpV*, AA 05: 142); to seek a unity of laws (*KU*, AA 05: 184); to assume a finality of nature in conformity with our faculties (*KU*, AA 05: 181s.); to seek the highest possible unity of cognitions (*KrV*, A686/B714), and to realise the vocation of reason (*KrV*, A651/B679).¹⁶

These specific needs can be derived from the three main characteristics of reason: for example, the assumption of God and of a finality of nature depend on reason being iterative, seeking unity and completeness. If this were not so, there would be no natural tendency to assume an end to

¹⁵ These are based, according to Nuzzo (2008), on the duty to transform the world of nature into a moral world.

¹⁶ Namely, the unity between the constitution of nature and the principles of reason.

the series of causes or a unity and harmony to guide our inquiry into nature and our moral decisions.

Now, it might be thought that the needs of reason have only one direction, namely, to tend towards the unconditioned. However, given the main teachings of Kant's critical philosophy—namely that, firstly, cognition has limits and that it is from an awareness of them that adequate cognition can arise, and secondly, that in order to be moral human beings, we must live according to the moral law and strive for its realisation in nature—we must assume that reason's needs must be realised in two directions: one towards wholeness and the supersensible, while the other towards the empirical level.¹⁷ Therefore, one way to try to further clarify the notion of needs is to focus on their directions, i.e. completeness and particularity. It is this tension, which makes reason local: on the one hand, statements must be justified within a limited or local framework, on the other hand, when there are tensions or contradictions between the frameworks, we must strive to find unity or, in other words, to construct a new, broader framework.

4. Towards the Absolute

In *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* Kant writes that reason has a “feeling of its own needs” (*WDO*, AA 08: 136) and that:

One can remain safe from all error if one does not undertake to judge where one does not know what is required for a determinate judgment. Thus ignorance is in itself the cause of the limitations of our cognition, but not of the errors in it. But where it is not arbitrary whether or not one will judge determinately, where there is some actual need - and moreover one attaching to reason in itself - which makes it necessary to judge, and yet we are limited by a lack of knowledge in respect of factors which are necessary for the judgment, there it is necessary to have a maxim according to which we may pass our judgment; for reason will be satisfied (*WDO*, AA 08: 136).

¹⁷ It could be argued that there are even more than two directions. The need for systematicity, for instance, leads to organising the products of understanding in an organic way, which does not imply a bottom-up or top-down relationship, but rather a ‘flat, horizontal’ one. However, since organisation must take place according to an idea that gives unity to the whole, it seems legitimate to consider systematicity as a case of cooperation between the two levels: top-down (the idea regulating the organisation of the content) and bottom-up (in the event that the idea proves unable to organise the whole).

Reason has a right to satisfy its need:

Yet through this, namely through the mere concept, nothing is settled in respect of the existence of this object and its actual connection with the world (the sum total of all objects of possible experience). But now there enters the right of reason's need, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds and consequently for orienting itself in thinking, solely through reason's own need, in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night (*WDO*, AA 08: 137).

For Kant, the critical point of orientation of thinking is thus—what he calls in the *Critique of Practical Reason*—a “subjective necessity (a need of pure reason” [“*Bedürfnis der reinen Vernunft*”] (*KpV*, AA 05: 5)). While in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, he emphasises that: “our power of cognition feels a far higher need than that of merely spelling out appearances according to a synthetic unity”, in the sense that it elevates itself to ideas: “our reason naturally exalts itself to cognitions that go too much far for any object that experience can give ever to be congruent, but that nonetheless have their reality and are by no means merely figments of the brain” (*KrV*, A314/B370).

Now, Kant sometimes uses terms related to nature to describe reason and its needs (e.g. reason is analogous to an organism and there is an instinct linked to the act of philosophising),¹⁸ but this should not mislead us, because the need of reason is distinguished from a mere need from inclination [*Neigung*] and, more generally, from natural needs: natural needs give with the need the end necessary to satisfy the need (i.e. to free ourselves from a privation—pain, thirst, etc.—by seeking objects external to us to fill this lack). In another way, the need of reason is peculiar because it is directed towards an ultimate end:

Reason is driven by a propensity of its nature to go beyond its use in experience, to venture to the outermost bounds of all cognition by means of mere ideas in a pure use, and to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting

¹⁸ In the reflection n. 4881 we find: “Instinct drives the philosopher to systematic treatises, and this has a great benefit in the expansion of knowledge” [“Der Instinkt treibt den Philosophen zu systematischen Abhandlungen, und das hat einen grossen Nutzen in der Erweiterung der Erkenntnis”] (*RefL.*, AA 18: 18).

systematic whole. Now is this striving grounded merely in its speculative interest, or rather uniquely and solely in its practical interest? I will set aside the good fortune of reason in a speculative regard, and ask only about those problems the solution of which constitutes its ultimate end, whether it may reach this or not, and in respect to which all other ends have merely the value of means. These highest ends must, in accordance with the nature of reason, in turn have unity, in order to advance, in a united manner, that interest of humanity which is subordinated to no higher one. The final aim to which in the end the speculation of reason in its transcendental use is directed concerns three objects: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God (*KrV*, A797–798/B825–826).

This need can only concern reason insofar as it is autarchic, autonomous. It only regards reason, not nature and so it cannot be considered empirical (see *KrV*, AXIV/BXXIII, B23, A64–65/B89–90, A680/B708; *GMS*, 04: 437; *KrV*, 05: 120–121). However, Kant's analogy in describing reason in terms that refer to the natural world is useful, because just as in the natural world one might become enslaved by a social environment that causes mental illnesses (*VKK*, AA 2: 268–269), the same can happen to reason in its theoretical use. This leads to the transcendental illusion.

5. The Possibility of Reason to Be Enslaved and the Empirical Direction of Its *Bedürfnis*

Ideas, to Kant, are unavoidable: like optic illusion, we have a natural tendency to think them even when we recognise their groundlessness and deceptive character. But if this tendency is natural, there must be a right, meaningful use of ideas:

Everything grounded in the nature of our powers must be purposive and consistent with their correct use if only we can guard against a certain misunderstanding and find out their proper direction. Thus the transcendental ideas too will presumably have a good and consequently immanent use, even though, if their significance is misunderstood and they are taken for concepts of real things, they can be transcendent in their application and for that very reason deceptive (*KrV*, A642–643/B670–671).

For Kant, the object of reason is the understanding; while the understanding unites the empirical manifold by means of concepts, reason

unites the multiplicity of concepts by means of ideas by positing unity (*KrV*, A644/B672). Consequently, ideas are not constitutive¹⁹ of objects, but they are useful for directing the understanding towards greater unity:

they have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use, namely that of directing the understanding to a certain goal respecting which the lines of direction of all its rules converge at one point, which, although it is only an idea (*focus imaginarius*) – i.e., a point from which the concepts of the understanding do not really proceed, since it lies entirely outside the bounds of possible experience – nonetheless still serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity alongside the greatest extension (*KrV*, A644/B673).

Thus, the idea of God has the heuristic function of directing empirical investigation as if there were unity in nature (A670–671/B698–699). As the object of an idea, God is not assumed absolutely [*suppositio absoluta*] but rather relatively, that is, in relation to the sensible world and as a way for the understanding to systematise its contents:

Now I can nevertheless assume such an incomprehensible being, the object of a mere idea, relative to the world of sense, though not in itself. For if the greatest possible empirical use of my reason is grounded on an idea (that of systematic complete unity, about which I will have more to say presently), which in itself can never be presented adequately in experience, even though it is unavoidably necessary for approximating to the highest possible degree of empirical unity, then I am not only warranted but even compelled to realize this idea, i.e., to posit for it an actual object but only as a Something in general with which I am not acquainted at all and to which, as a ground of that systematic unity and in relation to that, I give such properties as are analogous to the concepts of the understanding in their empirical use (*KrV*, A677/B705).

¹⁹ However, the non-constitutive role of ideas has given rise to an ongoing and lively debate among scholars about the nature of ideas as rules and the meaning of the phrase “where the understanding alone does not attain to rules, [reason steps in] to help it through ideas” (A648/B676). The supporters of a strong interpretation of the role of ideas (Allison, 2000; Brandt, 1989) believe that even though there are differences between the Appendix to the first *Critique* and the third *Critique*, in both texts Kant maintains that regulative principles have a transcendental role because they secure coherency and connection to the empirical claims regarding objects falling under the a priori forms. Therefore, regulative principles are needed—and not just only a priori forms of intuition and pure concepts—because without them there could be no cognisable order at the empirical level. A second group of interpreters (Guyer, 1997; Horstmann, 1989; Makkreel, 2006; Tuschling, 1992) stress that in the first *Critique* Kant refers to the utility (*KrV*, A661/B689; A663/B691) of the regulative principles without ascribing them a transcendental value (that will be assigned to them only in the third *Critique*).

Ideas, then, in their regulative use can contribute to satisfying the need of reason without enslaving it. Here we can see in what sense reason is autarchic: ideas of reason contribute to satisfying the need of reason and to building a system of knowledge—as presented by Kant in “The Architectonic of Pure Reason” (*KrV*, A832–851/B861–879)—which is analogous to an organism, in which the parts are organised into a whole by a rule or an idea. Only through this idea, it is possible to organise a system, thus constituting a science. Here we can easily see that need and meaning are related: if contents of cognition are systematised, then it is possible for us to access their meaning. To use a metaphor: when we are building a puzzle, without knowing what it represents, we make a hypothesis of what it is about and use this idea to guide us. But it is only at the end, when all the pieces are assembled, that it becomes clear to us their meaning, namely, the image they compose.

As has already been said, we must admit that the needs of reason direct reason not only towards completeness, but also towards particularity. This can easily be seen not only in the use of ideas to systemise the content of cognition but also in the *Typic* and in the *Schematism* chapters. I will not go into the details of these doctrines here, but merely highlight a few of Kant’s statements to underline my point. First of all, Kant clearly stresses that categories without schemes are of no use for experience: categories are the conditions of possibility of thought, of the object in general, while schemes are the conditions of possibility of particular objects, which can be given in possible experience. As Kant says, schemas are: “the true and sole condition for providing them [the categories] with a relation to objects, thus with significance” (*KrV*, A146 B185) and:

If this condition of the power of judgement (schema) is missing, then all subsumption disappears; for nothing would be given that could be subsumed under the concept. The merely transcendental use of the categories is thus in fact no use at all, and has no determinate or even, as far as its form is concerned, determinable object. From this it also follows that the pure category does not suffice for any synthetic a priori principle, and that the principles of the pure understanding are only of empirical but never of transcendental use; but nowhere beyond the field of possible experience can there be any synthetic a priori principles (*KrV*, B304).

This means that pure concepts, if they are not limited in their use, have no function in terms of increasing our cognition. The universal, in other terms, needs to be related to specific contents in order to have any kind of meaning.²⁰

Secondly, in the Typic chapter we see that to be moral human beings, we must apply the categorical imperative. This means that only when we are faced with moral dilemmas can our moral power be realised. The problem presented in the Typic chapter is: how can will be determined only through the pure practical use of judgement (*KpV*, AA 05: 69)? Kant not only affirms that there is a universal pure practical law (*KpV*, AA 05: 43), but also that and how it must be applied, namely by giving us criteria for recognising which of the particular maxims can be made universal according to the pure law.²¹ In other words, not only the categories, but also the pure moral law must have an empirical use: this, of course, does not mean that it must become an empirical law, but that it must be possible to use it to govern and direct our will in moral decisions that are made within a given empirical context.²² Again, we can see here that only when we are confronted with a particular context does it make sense to raise the question of the morality of a decision.

6. Conclusive Observation

Through this paper I have wanted to show that *Bedeutung* in Kant, in both the theoretical and in the practical domains, requires some conditions, which include not only pure formal functions of synthesis or a pure law of determination of the will, but also a certain particular content. Reason, on the one hand, has a metaphysical *Bedürfnis*, which makes it seek the greatest unity, but, on the other hand, it also needs a specific content—provided by the understanding and sensibility—in order to function properly. It is true that

²⁰ However, as already mentioned, categories still have a logical or transcendental meaning if they are considered in an abstract way, i.e. as a mere rule of thought. Categories in their pure use have a transcendental logical meaning insofar as they allow us to think the general structures of objectivity, i.e. to be a substance with accidents, to be in relations of cause and effect, to have a quantity, to be characterised by a certain intensity and modality (Willaschek, 1998).

²¹ Actually, I believe that these constraints are made explicit by Kant not in the Typic chapter but rather in the passages on the *sensus communis* in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* concerning the use of the three “maxims of common human understanding” (*KpV*, AA 05: 294), which allow a subject to change the perspective from a subjective-egocentric one to a general ethical one, thus making a proper use of one’s own reason (*KU*, AA 05: 293s.; *L*, AA 09: 57, 63).

²² One could say that the moral law must be sensitised (Mora, 2009). However, this does not mean that a pure law must become empirical, but that it must have an empirical use, namely that in moral decision the law can determine the will of a subject who lives in a world in which natural causes and freedom coexist.

Kant only refers to the tendency of reason towards the unconditioned literally as a *Bedürfnis*, yet the realisation of such a *Bedürfnis* also needs the particular. In other words, there can be no proper use of the tendency to the unconditioned without particular contents: reason functions properly when it is localised and used, although indirectly (through the other faculties) empirically. This is the dynamism from which meaning is generated: by organising cognitive contents according to a law of unity, we make them understandable; by applying the moral law in a particular situation, we make the law meaningful. As Ferrarin puts it: “Reason is moved by a fundamental need that guides it: the search for meaning” (2015, p. 26), and this need is realisable through empirical experience as well as the moral one: it moves reason in the world so that it finds in nature the stable order and constancy of laws that are demanded and it must determine the will so as to enlighten a moral dilemma. Without reason’s involvement with the world and our freedom, without its application to the empirical content, categories and the moral law would just be meaningless.

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