Book Review

Marcus Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics: The Dialectic of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. xii + 298,

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The Transcendental Dialectic occupies more pages of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* than the Aesthetic and Analytic combined, but it has received incomparably less scholarly attention. A central reason for this relative neglect is the traditional view that the Aesthetic and Analytic contain the positive part of the *Critique*, in their accounts of the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding, whereas the Dialectic merely presents a negative counterpart: an "all-destroying" refutation of previous systematic metaphysics and its principal objects, the soul, the world as a whole, and God.

Marcus Willaschek's Kant and the Sources of Metaphysics, a sparkling achievement that should become the standard work on its topic, argues against this outmoded reading, in the wake of a series of scholars (including Michelle Grier, Nikolai Klimmek and Jannis Pissis) who have relatively recently insisted on the importance of the Dialectic. The core of Willaschek's argument is that the Dialectic contains a constructive side as well as a destructive one. Willaschek dubs the constructive side Kant's "rational sources account": an account of the sources of metaphysical thinking. Metaphysical thinking goes beyond the limitations of cognition (Erkenntnis) famously set out in the Critique's Aesthetic and Analytic. Cognition requires contributions from both the receptive faculty of sensibility and the spontaneous faculty of understanding: sensible intuitions must be subsumed under intellectual concepts. Metaphysical thinking, by contrast, has its source in the faculty of reason. Willaschek aims to reconstruct Kant's account of how metaphysics inherently stems from our everyday use of reason. He defends this as an underappreciated Kantian analysis that should appeal to contemporary philosophers, regardless of their views on other well-known tenets of Kant's theoretical philosophy.

For the reader who is not already a card-carrying Kantian, references to Kant's distinctions between faculties will sound question-begging, so the notion of "reason" here must be clarified. On Willaschek's summary, reason has three characteristics: it is discursive (it actively and sequentially processes a multitude

of elements), it is iterative (it repeatedly asks "why?", refusing to settle on an easy answer), and it seeks completeness (it wants an ultimate answer that raises no further questions) (p. 6). Reason functions by drawing indirect inferences *a priori*, that is, it logically derives particular conclusions from more general premises, typically through syllogisms (p. 22). For example: all estate agents are untrustworthy; this person is an estate agent; I should treat this person's claims sceptically. Such use of reason is unproblematic and indeed indispensable for navigating daily life. However, reason inherently tends towards metaphysical thinking and towards the illusions that Kant identifies in the Dialectic, for example when we claim to know that the soul is a persisting thing. This tendential shift from our everyday to our dialectical use of reason is the subject of what Willaschek calls Kant's rational sources account. What is at stake is Kant's question in the B Introduction: *Wie ist Metaphysik als Naturanlage möglich*? (B22). How is metaphysics possible as a natural disposition that we possess merely by dint of being rational beings?

Part 1 of *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics* is a detailed reconstruction of Kant's rational sources account. The key text is the introduction to the Dialectic and particularly what Willaschek calls the "transition passage" (A307-8/B364). Willaschek's discussion is exacting and rigorous and can only be recommended. Some aspects are well known, others are original, and yet others have been mentioned by commentators but without the clarity and systematic emphasis provided by Willaschek.

The better-known aspect concerns the move from reason's "logical maxim" to its "supreme principle". Reason, in its logical use, gives a maxim to itself. This maxim runs: for any cognition that is conditioned (i. e. there is a reason for it, which Willaschek specifies as having either inferential or epistemic grounds), seek its condition, and the condition of this condition, and so on, until you find some unconditioned cognition (Willaschek's translation of *das Unbedingte*). Reason's logical maxim is thus an imperative of sorts: seek explanations! As with the everyday use of reason, there is nothing problematic in the logical maxim *per se*. However, reason then advances to its "supreme principle". This principle states not that merely we should *seek* the unconditioned for any conditioned cognition, but that there *is* an unconditioned at the end of a series of conditions. In this move from the logical maxim to the supreme principle, reason shifts from its logical to its real use: it now produces concepts – ideas – that take the place of the unconditioned for various series.

Willaschek then provides an interpretation that is, as far as I know, original: he clarifies the transition passage using Kant's distinction in the Appendix between regulative and constitutive principles. Willaschek argues that reason takes two distinct steps after adopting the logical maxim. First, it moves from the logical

maxim to the *regulative* supreme principle: this posits the existence of the unconditioned merely as a *problem*. This is entirely legitimate and indeed a necessary presupposition for the logical maxim, because the regulative supreme principle approximates the end at which the maxim aims (pp. 128–34). Second, though, reason moves from the regulative to the *constitutive* version of the supreme principle. This is the root of reason's self-deception and illusion. Willaschek's introduction of the regulative/constitutive distinction clarifies the otherwise confusing dependency relation between the logical maxim and the supreme principle, and it constitutes the key step in his reconstruction of the rational sources account.

At the close of his reconstruction in Part 1, Willaschek makes a claim that other commentators have gestured towards but not sufficiently emphasised: that it is the perspective of transcendental realism that motivates the transition from the regulative to the constitutive supreme principle (p. 140). To avow determinate knowledge of the unconditioned, through the constitutive supreme principle, is to tacitly assume transcendental realism. Willaschek glosses the latter as the affirmation that empirical objects are noumena in the positive sense and that there is a necessary correspondence between the principles of reason and the principles of reality (pp. 142–7). While other commentators have made various claims about the significance of this perspective for the arguments of the Dialectic (see p. 139n16), Willaschek clearly and convincingly claims that transcendental realism is the basis of all illusory constitutive use of the supreme principle.

Connected to this is Chapter 9's argument that Kant's rejection of transcendental realism must not necessarily entail transcendental idealism (the claim that empirical objects are mere appearances and not things in themselves: p. 243). This is one of many points in relation to transcendental realism on which Willaschek diverges from Michelle Grier (Grier 2001, p. 151). Willaschek argues that transcendental idealism and transcendental realism make claims on different levels: the former is metaphysical whereas the latter is epistemological, so one can reject transcendental realism without accepting transcendental idealism (p. 247). Chapter 9 is aimed squarely at contemporary analytic philosophers who would dismiss the rational sources account if it were to presuppose the doctrine of transcendental idealism.

I find Part 1 of *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics* highly convincing. Whilst many individual claims have been previously made by other commentators, Willaschek is the first to provide such a lucid, coherent and holistic reconstruction of Kant's account of the rational source of metaphysics. Willaschek's discussion has the rare virtue, as Russell wrote of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, of not being obviously wrong at any point. This achievement is in part thanks to its comprehensive immersion in the literature.

Part 2 sees a bracing change of pace: whereas the book's entire first half could be considered a painstaking commentary on A307-8/B364, the second half speeds through the system of ideas, Paralogisms, Antinomy, Ideal, and the Appendix. This is possible because Willaschek restricts himself to (innovatively) showing how the rational sources account provides the framework for the cases of metaphysical thinking that Kant presents in each of these sections. I will target my critical remarks at the more compressed second half of *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*, but it should be noted that its brevity is often an asset: Willaschek's summaries of the Paralogisms, Antinomy, and Ideal are admirably clear. This is evident when comparing Willaschek and Grier on the antinomies: in my opinion Grier's account is often unnecessarily convoluted, for example when claiming that "substance" in the second antinomy is not only material substance (Grier 2001, pp.194–209). Willaschek simply and in my view correctly sidesteps this self-made difficulty (pp. 205f.).

One immediate question concerns the relationship between the first and second halves of the book. Part 2 seeks to show how the rational sources account outlined in Part 1 "plays out" (p. 165) or is "applied" (p. 7) on three further levels, albeit with "some flexibility" (p. 266). These levels are, first, the system of ideas (Book 1 of the Dialectic); second, the specific inferences of rational psychology, cosmology and theology (Book 2 of the Dialectic); and third, the distinction between constitutive and regulative principles and ideas (Appendix to the Dialectic).

Willaschek might have more clearly summarised how, in his view, Kant "applies" the rational sources account. His general story seems to be the following. Book 1 of the Dialectic introduces the transcendental ideas as necessary concepts of reason and attempts to present them in a systematic structure. Here, Kant makes use of only the first step of the rational sources account: reason's move from its logical to its real use. Book 2 of the Dialectic then derives the transcendental ideas pertaining to the soul, world-whole and God: in each case, this is based on reason's claim that its object is unconditioned in various respects, which is implicitly grounded on the remaining steps of the rational sources account, namely the constitutive use of the supreme principle and the assumption of transcendental realism. The relevance of the Appendix to the Dialectic for Willaschek is that it finally makes explicit the constitutive/regulative distinction, which is often tacit in Book 2; and it (again implicitly) posits transcendental realism as the ground of the illusory constitutive use of ideas and principles.

A difficulty is that much of Kant's "application" of the rational sources account in the main body of the Dialectic is, as Willaschek acknowledges, implicit. This is not in itself a problem but, in order to reconstruct Kant's rough application of the rational sources account, Willaschek must make some strong interpretative choices. These are often but not always sufficiently acknowledged and defended.

We can draw out some of the interpretative assumptions underlying Willaschek's account by contrasting it with Alfredo Ferrarin's *The Powers of Pure Reason* (2015), which takes a very different stance on some key issues.

Willaschek often expresses suspicion about Kant's claims to architectonic completeness, and so he has little time for Kant's contention that the ideas of reason stem from the different types of logical inference (Grier is stronger on the significance of the "fallacy of the ambiguous middle" for the Dialectic). He thus considers Book 1 of the Dialectic to achieve very limited results: he denies that the deduction of the transcendental ideas takes place here and claims, quite radically, that it can be found in the very inferences treated by the Paralogisms, Antinomy, and Ideal (pp. 173–75). Willaschek can hold this position because he simultaneously argues that there are nine transcendental ideas, not, as almost all commentators have thought, three. The transcendental ideas are not the soul, world-whole and God (instead, "psychological", "cosmological" and "theological" are names for three *classes* of ideas), but are rather the topics of the eight individual Paralogisms and Antinomies, plus the topic of the Ideal, God as *ens realissimum* (p. 169).

Willaschek provides some convincing textual support for this unusual claim. But his rethinking of the transcendental ideas allows him to covertly emphasise certain aspects of the Dialectic while overlooking others. Willaschek can effectively argue that the Dialectic discredits all nine transcendental ideas. He then shows, in a six-page Postscript on Kant's "practical metaphysics" (another impressively focused account), that some of the ideas are rehabilitated as practical postulates, and so for moral purposes we are justified in contending that there is a God, our souls are immortal and our wills are free (p. 271).

By marginalising the three ideas of the soul, world-whole and God in the Dialectic, Willaschek's interpretation of the Dialectic's constructive side downplays its genuinely constructive aspect: the way that the (transcendental or speculative) ideas of soul, world-whole and God have a vital regulative use that transcends the role that ideas like pure water play in empirical science and is not exhausted by their transformation into the practical postulates. Ferrarin foregrounds this regulative role of ideas in the theoretical realm. Ideas are "indispensable for all use of our faculties" and "define the goal of reason's inquiry by diverting all its activities" (Ferrarin 2015, pp. 47, 105). Ferrarin focuses on the cosmological idea of the world-whole because, as Kant writes in the Appendix, the idea of systematic unity is unavoidably necessary for approximating the highest degree of empirical unity, or the unity of experience (A677/ B705; see Ferrarin 2015, pp. 57–59). This entails a very different conception of reason across Kant's critical philosophy: Ferrarin defines reason as "a legislative, end-setting, self-organising, architectonic, unifying and autonomous power" (Ferrarin 2015, p. 292).

On Ferrarin's interpretation, the Architectonic and the Appendix are two key chapters of the *Critique*. Willaschek treats the Appendix fleetingly: his discussion of this final level on which Kant applies the rational sources account runs to only six pages. This is because, he claims, only the illusory constitutive use of ideas is relevant to the rational sources account (p. 237). However, insofar as the rational sources account is about the sources of *metaphysics*, Willaschek should surely have traced how the regulative ideas of soul, world-whole and God make possible what Ferrarin calls "an immanent metaphysics of reason's *a priori* principles" (Ferrarin 2015, p. 240).

This difference between Willaschek's and Ferrarin's interpretations is most striking in Willaschek's account of the system of metaphysics that Kant proposes in the Architectonic. The chapter is outside the scope of Willaschek's study, but when he sketches Kant's proposed metaphysical system, he subtly alters the distinction between transcendent and immanent metaphysics of nature (p. 40). Willaschek entirely separates transcendent metaphysics of nature from metaphysics as a science: he names it only parenthetically under "metaphysics as a natural predisposition" and dubs rational psychology, cosmology and theology "pretended sciences". This is far from the standard reading: compare Willaschek's sketch with its equivalent in the notes to Jens Timmermann's edition of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1998, p. 959).

This seemingly minor detail is symptomatic of how Willaschek downplays the significance of ideas of reason for the critically-renewed metaphysics of nature that Kant intended to develop after the critical propaedeutic. Ferrarin's account of Kant's "cosmic philosophy", which stresses its orientation towards wisdom and our essential and final ends, might be said to undermine Willaschek's attempt to isolate the practical, constitutive use of ideas in a standalone postscript. Both Willaschek and Ferrarin note that it is one and the same reason, in its theoretical and practical guises, that is the topic of the first and second *Critiques*. But Ferrarin's book arguably cleaves more closely to this insight, by showing the simultaneously practical and theoretical role of reason's ideas. Alongside the rational sources account that Willaschek so brilliantly reconstructs, the doctrine of regulative ideas may represent the Dialectic's genuinely constructive contribution to Kant's conception of reason.

References

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