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# The transcendental deduction of ideas in Kant's critique of pure reason

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# The Transcendental Deduction of Ideas in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

This article explores the problem of the transcendental deduction of ideas in the controversial pages of the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic* of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It suggests that Kant's difficulties with the deduction can be explained in light of a tension between two notions of purposiveness: purposiveness as design and purposiveness as normativity. While the latter is shaped by the practical demands of reason, the former relies on an argument about the teleological structure of nature. The article further shows that although the *Critique of Pure Reason* tries to ground the unity of reason in a notion of purposiveness as normativity, it lacks the resources to do so. The result is a unifying attempt which collapses the demand for unity of reason in a demand for the unity of nature and which grounds the unity of nature on a notion of purposiveness as design. This outcome challenges not only Kant's unifying project, but the success of the entire critical enterprise. Explaining how it unfolds by considering Kant's analysis in the first *Critique*, and in minor writings of the same period, provides the most textually accurate account of Kant's oscillations in the *Appendix*, whilst also doing justice to its future developments.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most perplexing features of the defence of the unity of reason in the first *Critique* concerns Kant's treatment of the function of ideas in the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic*. Often read as a precursor to the analysis of the role of reflective judgment in the *Critique of Judgment*, the pages of the *Appendix* have generated several interpretive controversies.[1] Firstly, there is the controversy about what kind of experience the ideas of reason help systematise. On a weaker reading, their role is to support reason in the activity of ordering the empirical laws of nature. On a stronger reading, they are essential to the very conception of an empirical law, as opposed to a contingent generalisation. Secondly, there is the controversy about the presupposition of the systematic unity of nature on which this kind of enquiry relies, and about the status of ideas in supporting such presupposition. On a weaker reading, the role of ideas is purely methodological. The pure concepts of reason are simply useful as heuristic devices required to project a hypothetical unity necessary to render coherent the activity of scientific enquiry. On a stronger reading, the kind of unity they project is not purely methodological but presupposes a purposive arrangement of nature

[1] What follows is a rough outline of debates to which I will give detailed references in the following pages.

itself. Thirdly, there is the issue of the principles on which the hypothetical use of ideas relies. On the weaker reading, this use rests on logical principles of homogeneity, specification and continuity. On the stronger reading, such principles are themselves grounded on a further, transcendental, principle. Finally, there is the controversy about what kind of necessity is at stake in this last statement, the statement that logical principles must *necessarily* rest on transcendental grounds. For some, the necessity in question is of a theoretical nature. For others, it is eminently practical.

In this article, I try to shed light on these puzzles by exploring yet another, less familiar, source of controversy in the *Appendix*: the problem of the transcendental deduction of ideas. I will begin by explaining what the problem of deduction consists in, then revisit some of the most common responses to it and illustrate why they miss the mark. Then I will turn to an alternative interpretation of the problem of deduction, one that explains Kant's difficulties in light of a tension between two notions of purposiveness: purposiveness as design and purposiveness as normativity.[2] While the latter is shaped by the practical demands of reason, the former relies on an argument about the teleological structure of nature. As I hope to show, although the *Critique of Pure Reason* tries to ground the unity of reason in a notion of purposiveness as normativity, it lacks the resources to do so. The result is a unifying attempt which collapses the demand for unity of reason in a demand for the unity of nature and which grounds the unity of nature on a notion of purposiveness as design. This outcome challenges not only Kant's unifying project, but the success of the entire critical enterprise. Explaining how it unfolds by considering Kant's analysis in the first *Critique*, and in minor writings of the same period, provides the most textually accurate account of the rationale for Kant's oscillations in the *Appendix*, whilst also doing justice to its future developments.

## 2. The deduction of transcendental ideas

One cannot avail oneself of a concept *a priori*", Kant argues, without having completed a "transcendental deduction of it" (*KrV*, A 669-670, B 697-698; 605).[3] Of course, he continues, the kind of deduction worthy of the pure concepts of reason is not going to be the same as that

[2] See for the use of the term purposiveness as normativity (Ginsborg, 2015 and Ginsborg, forthcoming).
[3] Here and in what follows I refer to Kant's works by using an abbreviation followed by the page number of the Prussian Academy edition and the page number of the Cambridge University Press edition.

of the categories of the understanding. However, if ideas "are to have the least objective validity, even if it is only an indeterminate one, and are not to represent merely empty thought-entities *(entia rationis ratiocinantis)*, a deduction of them must definitely be possible" (*KrV*, A 669-670, B 697-698; 605).

Taken in isolation, such remarks are not at all puzzling. Kant's appeal to the concept of deduction, here as elsewhere, has to do less with the application of inferential reasoning from known valid premises to a necessarily valid conclusion, as with the demonstration of the legitimacy of a kind of entitlement, the entitlement of reason to deploy its pure concepts in a particular way.[4] As many commentators have noted, Kant's concept of deduction is indebted to the 18th century legal literature and the tradition of "deduction writings", a body of work whose purpose was to prove the legitimacy of certain, contested, territorial acquisition within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. Such lengthy texts were prepared by jurists in the event of interrogation by imperial courts and faced the task to prove that certain *de facto* rulers of contested land and resources also had a rightful (*de jure*) claim to them.[5] Inspired by this idea, Kant provides the enterprise of the philosopher with a similar justificatory spin. Like the jurist, the philosopher must provide a detailed factual statement of the territorial claims of reason within the boundaries of experience. He must illustrate their function and justify their validity. And like the jurist, the philosopher knows that only after such a procedure has been completed, can the rulers' acquisitions in their respective domains be considered secure from any possible future incursions by enemies.

Kant's use of territorial metaphors to explain the critical activity of pure reason, and to discredit the claims of its adversaries is aligned to this interpretation of deduction. The advocate of reason must prove to both the sceptic and the dogmatic that the pure concepts of reason rule over the field of experience. But they rule legitimately only if they can survive scrutiny of their origin, function and validity. Only then will the sceptic and the dogmatic discover the "impossibility of having a title for their assertions", while the critique compels pure reason to "renounce its exaggerated pretensions" and "draw back within the boundaries of its proper territory" (KrV A 794; B 822; 671).

The attempt to justify by means of a deduction the positive use of the pure concepts of

[4] For an excellent analysis of the background against which we should understand the term deduction in Kant's writings, see (Henrich, 1989). See also the discussion of Henrich's position in (Moller, 2013).
[5] See for a longer discussion of the practice (Henrich, 1989) and (Proops, 2003)

reason should be understood in this light. Having illustrated in the first part of the *Appendix* the function of the ideas of reason in the systematic orientation of the empirical use of the understanding, Kant's goal in the second part is to show how that use could be justified. That deduction, he argues, ensures "the completion of the critical business of pure reason" (*KrV*, A 669-670, B 697-698; 605).

But the issue is not as straightforward. The division between a first, more descriptive account of the positive function of ideas, and a second part, where their claim to validity is further scrutinised within the territory of experience does not follow neatly the deduction writings' model that I have just sketched. In the first part of the *Appendix*, when discussing the hypothetical use of the ideas of reason and their heuristic role in guiding the empirical investigation of nature, Kant rules out a possible deduction of the principles to which a similar way of proceeding leads. This kind of deduction, he insists, "is always impossible in regard to ideas" (KrV A 663; B 692; 602).

Why does Kant first rule out a deduction of ideas, and then proceed to provide it? And what exactly does the deduction add to the analysis of the role of ideas in the systematic organisation of experience that Kant has previously examined? The scholarship here is extremely divided. Until recently, the standard interpretation was to treat Kant's oscillations as symptomatic of the generally confused, even contradictory, character of the treatment of ideas in this part of the *Critique*.[6] Some authors ignore the problem of deduction altogether, and proceed as if only the declarations of its impossibility in the first part of the *Appendix* were authoritative.[7] Among the more charitable readings, we can distinguish between a weaker and a stronger version. On the weaker version, the appearance of a deduction of ideas of reason in the second half of the *Appendix* poses no great interpretative challenges once we understand correctly the role of the postulate of nature's systematicity in orienting the taxonomical activities of observers of the natural world. The reason why, on this weaker explanation, the deduction is no big deal, is that the idea of systematicity of nature only has a heuristic/methodological status with no bearing on the way in which the categories of the understanding are applied to create empirical concepts.[8] The trouble with this interpretation is that it solves the problem of deduction only by denying that there was a problem in the first

[6] The best known interpretation is here that of Norman Kemp Smith (see e.g. Kemp Smith 2003, p. 547) who famously condemned the "extremely self-contradictory" character of these pages. Remarks along similar lines, stressing the "extremely unstable" nature of the ideas also appear in (Bennett, 1974) and (Horstmann, 1989).
[7] See, for example, (Wartenberg, 1992, p. 245).
[8] See for a discussion, (Guyer, 2005, p. 28)

place. If the deduction of ideas posed no special difficulties given Kant's consistent methodological commitment to regulativity, why was he initially so concerned to deny that a deduction might ever be possible? Presumably, so the answer goes, because there is a stronger reading of what Kant was up to when in the second part of the *Appendix*, he insisted that, upon further scrutiny, reason's heuristic/subjective use had to be grounded on a transcendental principle presupposing the conformity to ends of nature itself.

Proponents of this second, stronger interpretation, have recently tried to link these claims to a larger debate about Kant's defence of the unity of reason and the assertion of the supremacy of practical reason.[9] Kant's demand for systematicity in nature, so the argument goes, is grounded on reason's practical demand for systematicity. In the most widespread interpretation, the claim made is one about reason's own dynamic: theoretical reason, just like practical reason, is guided by maxims which presuppose that the content of their prescriptions must also be realisable. The demand for systematicity in nature stems from the nature of our reason and is expressive of its unity. But since the demand also takes the form of a prescription to follow (or a maxim, in the practical sense), reason ought to presuppose the systematicity of nature, if it is to act consistently with itself.[10] As one author puts it, the necessity of the link between the systematicity of reason and the systematicity in nature is due to reason's own dynamic, which demands "both the idea (*the totum realitatis*) and the supposition of its object (*the ens realissimum*), for its own practical purposes"[11].

Such a reading, linking the demand for systematicity to the assertion of the unity of reason, seems to have the advantage of explaining the seemingly contradictory nature of Kant's oscillations between a subjective reading of the role of ideas (limited to the assertion of their heuristic methodological properties) and an objective reading (which demands that the logical use of reason be grounded on a necessarily transcendental principle of purposiveness in nature). Therefore, it has been suggested, just as Kant argues that we must assume a morally purposive unity for the sake of our moral ends, we must also assume natural purposiveness for the sake of advancing the imperative to seek cognitive unity.63

Although resorting to reason's practical function to solve the problem of the transcendental deduction of ideas seems like a promising strategy, the strategy suffers from

[9] See (Neiman, 1994, pp. 89-90), (Grier, 2001 ch.8; Mudd, 2016)
[10] See (Grier, 2001, p. p.286). See also (Mudd, 2016) and (Zuckert, forthcoming)
[11] (Longuenesse, 2005, p. p.234)

several shortcomings. The main one is perhaps that the concept of a categorical imperative or of practical necessity is nowhere present in the first *Critique*. There is of course much talk of practical demands, or needs, or even essential ends, of reason, and there are references to the interests of reason for the sake of which some kind of systematicity of nature must be presupposed. But if practical reason has no autonomous domain of its own and makes no practical laws that it imposes on the world, appealing to the later doctrine of the categorical imperative or of transcendental freedom to solve the tensions present in these pages of the first *Critique* is unlikely to help clear the ambiguous status of ideas. The interpretation presents precisely the kind of artificial/teleological interpretation that, in another context of research, Kant himself would have rejected for placing at the start of a particular process of enquiry, that which must be shown to follow from it. Although I believe that proponents of the practical reading have a point in emphasising that the practical needs of reason are key to understanding the demand for systematicity, a point which is often neglected by those who approach the *Appendix* out of interest for Kant's contribution to the methodology of scientific research, the remedy they offer to explain Kant's apparent oscillations, is perhaps too easy. Firstly, like the weaker readings of the role of ideas mentioned above, the stronger interpretations only solve the problem of the inconsistency concerning the deduction of transcendental ideas, by pretending that there is none. But if Kant intended to resort to reason's practical use to justify the deduction of transcendental ideas, why did he simply not say so? Why did he insist first that a deduction was impossible? The key to the answer, I believe, lies in the ambiguous status that the notion of purposiveness in nature retains throughout the first *Critique*, a question that, for all of Kant's best efforts, this work is unable to solve. Or so I would now like to show.

## 3. Teleology and system

To see why both the weaker and the stronger reading of the deduction of transcendental ideas miss the mark in seeking to settle Kant's oscillations in the *Appendix*, it is important to return to the problem of the deduction as a development of the analysis of the hypothetical use of reason. Reason's hypothetical use, as we know, illustrates the necessity of subsuming under a

unitary idea of reason the manifold of empirical cognitions. Such a unitary idea reflects a problematic universal which cannot be given through experience but must be necessarily presupposed if reason is to conform to its natural destination of seeking the maximal unity of cognitions. Starting from the logical application of the pure concepts of reason to the empirical laws of nature, Kant arrives at the question of the possible foundation of such logical function on a transcendental principle, a principle whose characteristics remains for the time being unspecified but which we are told has an inherent link to the postulate of systematic unity in nature.

Proponents of the weaker reading of the *Appendix* tend to brush off the question of the justification of this transcendental principle by arguing that it merely complements the coherent use of the understanding in the discovery of the empirical laws of nature but has nothing to do with helping the understanding contribute to the production of coherent knowledge in general.[12] But this interpretation misses what is at stake in the claim that a *deduction* of transcendental ideas must, after all, be necessary. The target here is precisely the transition from a merely hypothetical/regulative function of ideas to their transcendental foundation as pre-requisites of coherent experience in general. When Kant argues that the systematic unity of nature must be considered "objectively necessary", we are already beyond the merely problematic status conferred to the idea of systematic unity in the more cautious parts of the *Appendix*. Granted, the demand for systematicity that characterises the application of the pure concepts of reason, is very different from the idea of systematic unity that is required for concepts of the understanding. But if we take seriously Kant's argument about the role of ideas in systematising the knowledge of the understanding, it would seem that the universality and necessity of the categories is itself contingent once we move beyond the forms of knowledge in general, and examine also the content of the empirical laws of nature without a unitary principle. As Kant argues, what is at stake in the transition from a logical principle of systematic unity to a transcendental one, is that in the second case we turn to the idea that "all possible cognitions of the understanding (including the empirical ones) have the unity of reason, and stand under common principles from which they could be derived despite their variety" (KrV A 648/B 676; 593). But if the idea of systematic unity of nature is grounded on a transcendental principle of reason which also appears to be objectively necessary, the role of ideas goes far beyond that of orienting the empirical use of

[12] Some fail to see the presence of a transcendental principle in the *Appendix* altogether, see (Horstmann, 1989) and for a critique (Brandt, 1989). For others, like Paul Guyer, this is precisely what distinguishes the perspective of the *Appendix* and that of the third *Critique*.

the understanding towards an ideal of greater unity. Ideas, in this case have their own distinctive form of universality and necessity, a form of universality of course different from the universal of the understanding and nevertheless indispensable to the very application of its categories to empirical manifestations.

Many commentators have noted that the function that ideas perform in this case is very similar to the role that the transcendental principle of purposiveness performs in the *Critique of Judgment*. But the difference between the two texts is equally revealing. [13] As is well-known, in the third *Critique* the transcendental principle of purposiveness is at the basis of the capacity for reflective judgement and enables the systematisation of the empirical laws of nature "in terms of the sort of unity they would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition, in order to make possible a system of experience in accordance with particular laws of nature" (KU 180; 67-8). But matters seem very different when we compare this account with the analysis of the same problem in the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic*. In the third *Critique*, Kant is far from assigning to the idea of a systematic unity of nature a status that might be considered objectively valid and necessary. Indeed, Kant often warns us that "we cannot ascribe to the products of nature anything like a relation of nature in them to ends, but we can only use this concept in order to reflect on the connection of appearances in nature that are given in accordance with empirical laws" (KU 180, 68). This is a kind of principle that the capacity of judgement adopts as a law for regulating its own use and for reflecting on a particular kind of causality, inspired by the kind of causality reflected in the practical use of reason, a causality in conformity with ends. Kant therefore deploys a notion of purposiveness as normativity, asking what it would be like to judge objects in a certain way and providing a set of criteria grounded on an analogy with the way in which our reason operates in the practical domain. To judge objects as purposive on this account is tantamount to asking what they would be if they had to conform to a certain number of normative properties, to ask how the object is meant to be. Notice that on this account, purposiveness is entirely separate from the idea of design: we do not need the latter to be able to think about the former.[14]

[13] The difference between the role of ideas in the *Appendix* and the principle of purposiveness in the third *Critique* is often missed by interpreters. Philip Kitcher, for example, argues that "a fundamental part of Kant's ideas about the methodology of science […] his conception of empirical laws, is unaffected by these architectonic adjustments". See (Kitcher, 1994, p. 255) Paul Guyer, on the other hand, focuses on the disanalogies but mainly in an attempt to highlight the turn to a different analysis of the functioning of the understanding in connection to reflective judgment in the third *Critique*, (Guyer, 2005, ch.1)

[14] For an excellent analysis of normativity as purposiveness, see (Ginsborg, 2015, chs.10 and 15)

Now, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, although Kant hints at the same principle, the principle of purposiveness, to explain the possibility of reflecting on systematic unity for the purpose of rational systematisation, Kant never mentions this principle explicitly. He also does not provide a separate deduction of the use of such a principle as a principle necessary to reflect on the relation between particular objects of experience. Rather, his analysis is limited to an account of the role of the unitary idea of the system at the basis of the hypothetical use of reason and linked to the transcendental deduction of the latter. Although ideas also refer to a notion of causality in conformity to ends, in their case, unlike the case of judgment, the relation to the concept of design is much more difficult to explain.

## 4. The rights and needs of reason

Discussing the necessity of systematic unity, it might be useful to read the *Appendix* in connection to Kant's remarks on the rights and needs of reason in his shorter essay on *What is orientation in thinking* written in 1786. There is, he claims here, something like "*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" (*WhDO*, 137; 10). Such a curious right, warrants reasons' advancement in the "immeasurable space of the supersensible which for us is filled with dark night" and is grounded on a need "not only to pose the *concept* of the unlimited as the ground of the concepts of all limited beings" but also "goes as far as the presupposition of its *existence*" (*WhDo* 137-138; 11). Without this, reason would not be able provide satisfactory ground "for the contingency of the existence of things in the world, let alone for the purposiveness and order which is encountered everywhere in such a wondrous degree" (*WhDO* 138; 11).

It is important to reflect on several features of this account. Reason's right to postulate the concept of the unlimited as the ground of all concepts of limited beings is based on its unavoidable tendency to reflect on the first causes of things, including all that which is contingent. In particular, the order of ends "which is actually present in the world" leads us to postulate the existence of such a purposive world, on the basis of a theoretical need to judge about the causes of everything contingent (*WhDO* 139; 12).

Interestingly, Kant's argument here is very similar to the one that is presented in the first *Critique*. In the latter, Kant also argues that we must abstract from all limiting conditions

of the idea of the whole so as to make possible the systematic unity of the manifold. It is only through this idea of unity that the greatest possible empirical use of reason is guaranteed and all combinations are seen "as if they were ordained by a highest reason of which our reason is only a weak copy" (*KrV*, A 678, B 706; 609). When we refer to such a being, Kant clarifies, we refer to nothing else but "the rational concept of God" (*KrV*, A 685, B 713; 613).

It is again worth noting that here Kant's theoretical effort is very different from that which we find in the third *Critique*. Instead of explaining how reason can autonomously conceive of the purposive connection of all things given its own standard of how things ought to be (purposiveness as normativity), Kant helps himself to the transcendental deduction of ideas to strengthen the link between conformity to ends and the idea of a supreme reason that is at their basis (purposiveness as design). As Kant argues in the Appendix, if "one cannot presuppose purposiveness in nature *a priori*, i.e., as belonging to the essence of nature (*zum Wesen derselben gehörig*), then how can one be assigned to seek it out following the ladder of purposiveness, to approach the highest perfection an author of nature as a perfection which is absolutely necessary, hence cognizable *a priori*? The principle of conformity to ends demands here that the "systematic unity be presupposed absolutely as a unity of nature" that is recognized "as following from the essence of things" (*als aus dem Wesen der Dinge folgend*) (*KrV*, A 693, B 721; 617).

Now, when the *Critique of Judgment* turns to the topic of the unity of reason and its demand for systematicity, it provides an argument that is radically different from the one we have just analysed. We cannot "ascribe to the products of nature anything like a relation of nature in them to ends". We can only "use this concept in order to reflect on the connection of appearances in accordance with empirical laws", Kant argues (*KU*, 181; 68). The rationale for the link is given by the analogy between human understanding and reason's practical capacity to pose ends in the world, and it is this capacity for posing normative ends that links, as a next step, to the idea of supreme intelligence as the ground and cause of the universe. And yet, Kant cautions us that "even if we were capable of having an empirical overview of the whole system as long as it concerns mere nature", this could never "elevate us beyond nature to the end of its existence itself, and thereby to the determinate concept of that higher intelligence" (KU, 438; 305).

On the other hand, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the concept of purposiveness does not precede but rather follow the postulate of an idea of reason as the fundamental ground of

the purposiveness of nature. The deduction of its validity is therefore completely inverted. Here too Kant argues that "the greatest systematic unity" and therefore also "purposive unity" is "the school and even the ground of the possibility of the greatest use of human reason". And here too he suggests that since this idea of systematic unity is "inseparably bound up with the essence of our reason" it is also "legislative for us", and thus "it is very natural to assume a corresponding legislative reason (*intellectus archetypus*) from which all systematic unity of nature, as the object of our reason, is to be derived" (*KrV*, A 695, B 723; 618). But what is the evidence for these claims? One would be tempted to argue on the basis of the practical legislation of reason which gives us ends that we ought to pursue. But how would that be further justified? In the first *Critique* there is nothing to suggest that practical reason is normative, in the sense that is required to come up with a concept of purposiveness as normativity distinguished by purposiveness and design. And it is precisely the absence of such concept which opens a gap in Kant's reasoning, a gap that can only be fully exposed if we continue to explore the discontinuities between the perspective of the first and the third *Critique* when it comes to the assumption of systematic unity in nature and its relation to the rational idea of God.

In the third *Critique*, the apparent purposiveness of all things natural, however far we seek to extend it, can never ground a physicotheology: "we will seek in vain to find anything that justifies us in the principles of the theoretical use of reason, which always demands that no properties be assumed in the explanation of an object of experience that are not to be found among the empirical data for its possibility" (KU 438; 305). What we find rather is that "there actually lies in us *a priori* an idea of a highest being, resting on a very different use of reason (its practical use), which drives us to amplify physical teleology's defective representation of the original ground of the ends of nature into the concept of a deity" (KU 438; 305). In the first *Critique*, instead, Kant argues that if we ask "whether there is anything different from the world which contains the ground of the world order and its connection according to universal laws, then the answer is: Without a doubt" *KrV*, A 696, B 724; 619). Of course, here too Kant insists that the concept of this being cannot be given by applying categories of the understanding to given intuitions but can only be arrived at only "in accordance with the analogy with an intelligence", in a way similar to Aquinas and Leibniz. The concept of an *analogia entis* enables reason to conceive of God as an object in the idea and therefore as "a substratum, unknown to us, of the systematic and purposiveness of the world's arrangement, which reason has to make into a regulative principle of its investigation

of nature" (*KrV*, A 696-697, B 724-725; 619).

Kant of course attempts several clarifications of how to understand all this. The idea of the highest intelligence, he argues, does not refer to "a being different from the world" but rather to the "regulative principle of the world's systematic unity, but only by means of a schema of that unity, namely of a supreme intelligence that is its author through wise intentions". But if we wonder whether we can nevertheless "assume a unique wise and all-powerful world author" the answer is: "Without any doubt". Not just that "but we must presuppose such a being". "But wouldn't this bring us to expand our cognitions beyond possible experience?" The answer is: "By no means" (*KrV*, A 697, B 725; 619).

It is not difficult to see how these pages are fraught with tension, a tension that brings Kant to constantly oscillate between the imperative to avoid all arbitrariness on the part of reason and to keep a firm link with the categories of the understanding and the other, equally strong, imperative to pursue its autonomous drive to recognise the validity of its own ideas, without which all systematic presupposition would collapse. But this leads us straight to reasons' unavoidable tendency to always seek that which overcomes its limits. Reason can recognise its own limit and in doing so it can recognise the drive to step beyond such limit. But what is the price of doing so? Kant is very concerned by this problem, the problem of avoiding both a kind of fatalistic determinism and the position of a God ruler of the world that, in being known by free humans, would end up paralysing their ends. And yet the systematic presupposition of systematicity contains also an umediated passage to the necessity of positing a ground for its cause. Kant's reasoning is *ad absurdum*: the order and harmony of thought must reflect the order and harmony of the universe. How else could we explain the perception of structures that display a conformity to ends for us but have no end as such? The coherence of reason demands a coherent structure of the universe and we can only make sense of this coherent structure with reference to the idea of an intelligent being at the source of it. As Kant puts it, all this can only ultimately be explained with reference to the idea of a being as "self-sufficient reason which is the cause of the world-whole through ideas of the greatest harmony and unity" (*KrV*, A 678, B 706; 609).

At points, Kant seeks to resolve this tension by distinguishing between having satisfactory reason for assuming something relatively *(suppositio relativa)* and being warranted in assuming it absolutely *(suppositio absoluta)*, arguing that the former does not necessarily lead to the latter (*KrV*, A 676, B 704; 608). But such a solution makes him

collapse into each other two separate arguments. One is an argument that nature as such has a purpose. The other is an argument that God has ordered nature in a purposeful way. The conclusion then is that it must be the same whether someone argues that "the divine has ordered everything to its supreme ends, or the idea of the highest wisdom is a regulative one in the investigation of nature and a principle of the systematic and purposive unity thereof in accordance with universal laws, even where we are not aware of it". Relatedly, it must be the same to argue, on the face of apparent purposive unity "God has wisely willed it so" or "Nature has wisely so ordered it." (*KrV*, A 699, B 727; 620).

Therefore, even with these cautious statements, *the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic* does little other than embedding physical teleology and physical theology within the same systematic project. The greatest systematic and purposive unity, on which all investigation of nature rests, is grounded on "the idea of a highest intelligence" as "a schema of the regulative principle" and "however much purposiveness you encounter in the world in accordance with that principle, so much confirmation do you have for the rightness of your idea" (*KrV*, A 699, B 727; 620). The prohibition only concerns the ability to conceive of the conformity to ends as contingent and hyperphysical in its origin, thus contradicting the fundamental laws of nature.

## 5. The advantages and limitations of physical theology

Kant does not explain in great detail what drives reason to want to find a point of transition from physical teleology to physical theology, from the purposiveness of nature to the idea of God. It is clearly difficult to affirm a positive link between the two but it seems equally hard to deny the possibility of this transition. Kant struggles to find a stable perspective from which to develop a coherent answer to this problem. The reasons for this difficulty are several. Firstly, there is the problem of the obscure dual status of ideas, a status that is not merely theoretical but not yet clearly practical. Secondly, there is the problem of having failed to develop a proper deduction of an autonomous transcendental principle of purposiveness, anchoring its justification to the transcendental deduction of ideas. Finally, there is the problem of the demand for architectonic unity which requires a schema of the idea of a highest understanding and will. Yet how such a schema is supposed to operate within the structure of human faculties has never been clarified.

The difficulty appears even greater if we reflect about what the deduction of ideas in the *Appendix* tries to accomplish in the light of the dialectic of human reason. From a merely speculative perspective, the final aim of the natural dialectic of human reason consists in directing all of its cognitions toward a systematic unitary point, conceived of as a unity that is oriented to ends and for whose understanding it is crucial to make reference to a supreme understanding, conceived as the author of order and systematic coherence in the world. Kant ascribes to the idea of this being, or the rational concept of God, a necessarily regulative status, required to ground the hypothetical use of reason (which is in turn necessary to the heuristic role played by its ideas).[15] Reason however is not authorised to infer from the subjective presupposition of this concept, an objective proof of its existence. And yet, this is precisely what the physico-theological proof of God's existence seeks to accomplish. The proof tries to see "whether a determinate experience, of the things in the present their constitution and order, yields a ground of proof that would help us to acquire a certain conviction of the existence of the highest being" (*KrV*, A 620, B 648; 578)[16].

Kant never concealed his preference for this argument compared to the other arguments in favour of the existence of God. According to him, the argument is accessible even to the most common human reason, it rests on empirical grounds and has the virtue of being "popular and appealing" where the ontological and cosmological proof are "dry and abstract". (*PR*, 25; 36). In a similar way, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that "the world discloses to us such an immeasurable showplace of manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty", a chain of "effects and causes, of ends and means, regularity in coming to be and in perishing" that "the entire whole would have to sink into abyss if one did not assume something subsisting for itself and independently outside this infinite contingency, which supports it and at the same time, as the cause of its existence, secures its continuation" (*KrV*, A 622, B 650; 579).

But even though Kant emphatically argues that the physico-theological proof always "deserves to be named with respect" (*KrV*, A 623, B 651, 395), when the *Critique* turns to the question of whether the argument is a valid one, his approval seems to waver. This is because even if the proof follows the path of experience for most of the argumentative process, it then tends to abandon it in favour of the notion of a necessary being. Recall that the analysis starts by assuming the existence of such a being only hypothetically, and as a way of strengthening

[15] For more on the relevance of the idea of God in Kant's theoretical philosophy, see (Andersen, 1983).
[16] For similar definitions of physical theology see also (*Bew.*, 118; 161-162) (*PR*, 13; 109, 18; 113, 25; 118, 136;194), (*KU* 436;559).

our analysis of contingent manifestations of experiences. And yet the proof eventually claims to achieve more than that, it seeks to justify the concept of absolute necessity of a first cause. In this way, the physico-theological proof ends up providing a definition of the predicates of what was supposed to remain abstract and indeterminate from a theoretical perspective. Reason ventures itself into the field of what cannot be exhibited and seeks to overcome the limits of experience. The physico-theological proof, Kant explains, could at most prove the existence of a "highest architect of the world" but hardly that of its "creator" (*KrV*, A 627/B 655; 581). If we try to extend the predicates of the highest being to the whole of creation and we seek to determine the supreme cause of the world, then we would also need to invoke the cosmological and ontological proofs thereby appealing to what we initially sought to avoid.

There is also another reason for why Kant warns us of the danger of taking as constitutive the principle grounding the systematic unity a nature, a reason that contrasts with the ones already mentioned and that is linked to the way in which reason seeks to achieve its "destination" from a theoretical perspective. On the one hand, the idea of reason that reflects the maximal unity of natural products, as a unity arranged according to highest ends, has a certain objective, although indeterminate value. The idea of this unity is an absolutely necessary heuristic concept, needed to guide the understanding in the field of contingent experience and explore the constitution and connection of objects in it (*KrV*, A 671, B 699; 422). On the other hand, if reason neglects the regulative value of this principle and gives it content independently from experience, reason not only derives no benefits for its enquiry but, as a matter of fact, betrays itself. It presupposes hypostatically, and as a cause, that which it must establish as a result of its empirical investigations and only by way of approximation. The rational concept of God takes the form of a highest intelligence which is determined "anthropomorphically". In so doing reason "imposes ends on nature forcibly and dictatorially, instead of seeking for them reasonably on the path of physical investigation". Notice, that the problem posed here by anthropomorphism is not so much that a concept of the highest intelligence is unthinkable. It is rather than what ought to be shown on the basis of empirical evidence is established in advance and limited in its reach. Therefore "teleology which ought to serve only to supplement the unity of nature in accordance with universal laws, not only works to do away with it, but even deprives reason of its end" (*KrV*, A 693/B 720; 617).

Does that mean that the deduction of transcendental ideas is ultimately bound to fail? It is worth insisting that the problem we have highlighted is not so much that Kant entirely abandons the attempt to reflect on the existence of God in connection with the enquiry of the

empirical laws of nature. It is rather that a kind of purposiveness understood as external conformity to ends would condemn physico-theology to a complete failure, bringing reason to abuse its own heuristic principles. Instead of explaining the causes of beings that show themselves as ends of nature on the basis of "universal laws of the mechanism of matter", one appeals here to "the inscrutable decree of the highest wisdom" regarding the "toil of wisdom as completed". Reason is dispensed without a guarantee of its systematic use, "a use which finds its guiding thread nowhere unless it is provided to us the order of nature and the series of alterations according to their internal and more general laws" (*KrV*, A 691, B 719; 616).

This version of purposiveness attacked by Kant (and later Hegel), and which admires the ends of nature wherever they appear with some (no matter how much) plausibility, was celebrated by many contemporaries of Kant, inspired by the Wolffian interpretation of Leibniz's theodicy. As Ernst Cassirer has acutely observed, by the time of Kant's writing, the identification of the idea of purposefulness with that of usefulness had reduced the important metaphysical idea of theodicy to a pedantic and trivial academic exercise which tried to identify in every aspect of the cosmic order the benefit to humans and thus the wisdom and goodness of the creator. Although Kant was attracted to the physico-theological proof of the existence of God from early on, contrary to many of his contemporaries, he was also aware of its limitations. Already in an early 1763 essay on *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God,* his position appears to be relatively independent. Kant constantly warns against those theorists that tend to invoke teleological foundations and the will of the creator every time there is a gap in their knowledge. Indeed, he invites his contemporaries to avoid incurring into Voltaire's legitimate mockery when he asks: "Why do we have noses'? And then replies: 'No doubt so that we can wear spectacles'" (*Bew.*, 131; 172).

Although in this text Kant does not distinguish clearly between universal and particular laws of experience, the rules of the method prescribed by physical theology bear a striking resemblance to some of the solutions outlined in the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic* of the first *Critique*. In this earlier text too, Kant suggests that it is more prudent to abstain from considering every benefit that nature offers as the product of a wise architect of the world, prioritising instead the study of its mechanical laws. He further argues that although attention to the benefits and harmony of nature may contain the spirit of true philosophy, it should not hinder the search for universal and necessary laws, it should pay special attention to preserving their unity and it should avoid multiplying their causes unnecessarily (*Bew*., 136-137; 177). Thus, although the physico-theological method should

be commended for linking the idea of a benevolent legislator to the observation of purposiveness in nature, it is not immune from problems. Even if natural causes harmonise with a wise choice, it does not follow that "it has been especially instituted by an artificial provision" (*Bew*., 121-122; 163). The harm done to the proof is in this case greater than the benefits that are brought to it. This is because every harmony that was once considered contingent and is subsequently linked to the universal laws of experience exposes physico-theology to dangerous objections, rendering its validity ever more restricted. Therefore, if we infer a supreme cause of nature from the mere observation of harmony in it:

> Humiliated reason distances itself from any further investigation, for it regards such investigation here as prying curiosity. And the prejudice is all the more dangerous for furnishing the lazy with the advantage over the tireless enquirer; it does so under the pretext of piety and of just subjection to the great Author, in knowledge of whom all wisdom must be united. (*Bew*., 119; 161).

We can already find here the question emphasised in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in relation to the idea of ascribing constitutive validity to the idea of a supreme being. It is the problem of what Cicero used to refer to by the term of *ignava ratio* and which, as Kant emphasises, brings reason to neglect all ends internal to life, considering its search already concluded when traces of such intelligent design claim to have been identified. Lazy reason, Kant argues also in the lectures on the philosophy of religion, is the one that prefers to be exonerated from the investigation of whether natural effects might be produced by natural causes (*PR*, 138; 207).

Notice however, that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* this very mistake is avoided by suggesting to consider from the point of view of purposes not merely a few parts of nature but the universal link between the systematic unity of nature and the idea of a highest intelligence (*KrV*, A 691, B 719; 616). This means that purposiveness in accordance with the universal laws of nature can become "the ground, from which no particular arrangement is excepted, but arrangements are designated only in a way that is more or less discernible by us". Then, Kant argues, we will have "a regulative principle of the systematic unity of a teleological connection (*teleologischen Verknüpfung*)". But it is a principle which we do not determine beforehand, but may only expect while pursuing the physical-mechanical connection according to universal laws" (*KrV*, A 691-692, B 719-720; 616). From the regulative use of the ideas of reason we are taken to the transcendental principle of systematicity in nature, and from the transcendental principle of systematicity in nature to a critical version of Leibnizean theodicy.

## Conclusion

Kant's oscillations concerning the transcendental deduction of ideas reflect a complex relation between the logical and transcendental principle for the systematic unity of nature, a link that the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic* continuously problematizes without ever being able to solve. The source of the problem remains the relation between teleology and physico-theology, between natural purposiveness and intelligent design. Although Kant's thoughts on this matter significantly evolved from the time of his pre-critical writings, the evolution is not as stark as one might be initially inclined to think. The reasons for the difficulty lie in the ambiguous status of transcendental ideas, a status which seems to continue oscillating between the mere hypothetical acceptance of their validity, which requires some kind of faith in an unspecified being schematised through the ideas of reason, and the necessity of such faith coupled with the need to recognise it as more than a mere a being in thought. This, as we saw in the previous pages, is what reason demands and needs. The nature of the need is grounded in an interest of reason which is difficult to reduce to an interest of a speculative-theoretical nature, and has also an important practical dimension. But how the realm of the practical is supposed to work in the *Appendix* is not at all clear, nor is it easy to infer on the basis of what Kant says anywhere in the *Doctrine of Elements*. We have not really solved the question, but at least we have clarified the stakes in why Kant himself was unable to address it.

I began this article with a puzzle about the transcendental deduction of ideas and with an attempt to question some of the most common interpretations of these pages. Without siding completely with authors who rest content with a declaration of the self-contradictory nature of Kant's argument, I also sought to illustrate the weakness of those readings who try to explain away the problem by emphasising either the purely hypothetical character of ideas, or the practical nature of the enterprise. My interpretation is grounded on an effort to show the relevance of transcendental theology for Kant's attempts to defend the unity of reason. The demand for unity is both theoretical and practical but to complete the transition from one domain to the other Kant needs a transcendental principle of purposiveness whose status in the first *Critique* is very difficult to disentangle from an analysis of purposiveness as design. To deliver on his promise of a deduction, Kant needs to link natural purposiveness to physico-theology. But to admit the fundamental relevance of the latter to the unifying project

of reason is to endanger the whole critical enterprise. Although Kant does not mention physico-theology directly in the pages of the *Appendix*, if we connect his remarks here with his lectures on the philosophy of religion and other relevant essays before and after the so-called critical turn, we can easily see how the issue of physico-theology is constantly in the background of the relation between the systematic unity of nature and the idea of a supreme intelligence of the universe.[17] It is here as a reminder that the only conception of purposiveness that is available to Kant at this point of his writings is that of purposiveness as design. This is also one of the most important, and most often neglected elements marking a difference between the concept of purposiveness that we find in the first *Critique* and that which we find in the third. The third *Critique* has a much clearer conception of purposiveness as normativity because it is clearly rooted to a conception of practical reason where the constitutive practical nature of ideas is unambiguous, and where the practical use of reason is much more sharply distinguished from the speculative use of reason. Although the first *Critique* gives some vague indications concerning the practical demands and needs of reason, it does not show us a clear path on how to respond to such needs. The failed attempt to provide a persuasive transcendental deduction of ideas deserves much more scrutiny than we have been prepared to give it. It is one of the most interesting angles from which to explore the paths not taken in the first *Critique*, and to shed light on what needs to be there for the unifying teleological project of reason to succeed. But it is far from being an unproblematic attempt, or one that we can brush off by prematurely invoking Kant's practical turn.

**Abbreviations of Kant's works**:

Bew *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*, Ak 2 (1763), translated as *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God*

KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 1787), translated as *Critique of Pure Reason*

KU *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Ak 5 (1790) translated as *Critique of the Power of Judgement*

WhDO Was heisst: sich im Denken orientieren? Ak 8 (1786) translated as *What does it mean*

[17] It is interesting to see how even those few authors who are aware of the centrality of the idea of god in the *Appendix* miss the connection with the problem of physico-theology, see for one example (McLaughlin, 2014).

*to orient oneself in thinking*?

PR Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre, Ak. 28 translated as Lectures on Philosophical Theology, trans. by Allen Wood and Gertrude Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978)

All other translations follow those in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press 1992-)

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