

## **Kant on the Necessity of the Empirical Laws of Nature**

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**Review of: Seide, Ansgar, *Die Notwendigkeit empirischer Naturgesetze bei Kant*, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter, 2020, pp. 417. ISBN: 978-3-11-069713-1.**

Immanuel Kant's philosophy continuously provides us with schemes for later philosophical reflections. Nowadays, confrontation with Kant is unescapable in any field of knowledge. Epistemology is with no doubt one of the fields where the bounds with the transcendental thought are stronger; especially so, given the great interest towards epistemology in the contemporary philosophy. Even though, on the one hand, this attention by contemporary thinkers promotes the study of the epistemological questions arisen by Kant's thought, on the other hand, there are many works reading Kant's texts under the light of prejudicial theoretical structures. With these reasons in mind, and with the explicit goal to understand and reconstruct "welche Position Kant tatsächlich vertreten hat" (p. 17), Ansgar Seide focuses on the *status* of the empirical laws of nature. In particular, one contemplated question is the predication of necessity to some laws that, by definition, cannot be inferred a priori. The works selected by the author are to be found in the period between the publication of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), because it is in this phase that Kant's position on the empirical laws proves to stay consistent. Nonetheless, the choice to exclude the so-called pre-critical period and the *Opus Postumum* from this analysis is bound to generate some degree of perplexity. The *Opus Postumum* deals with a new range of problems, namely the theory of those a priori knowledge that are not pure, under the management of

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the faculty of judgement rather than of the understanding. The author chose to exclude the *Opus Postumum* precisely because, in spite of this, its fragmented nature presents several interpretative problems, deserving a separate specific analysis (p. 18).

In this effort to reconstruct the status of the empirical laws, Seide is in contrast with other interpreters, e.g. Kitcher (1994: p. 270): “[I offer] a reading of Kant that links him far more closely with contemporary naturalism and rejects the aprioristic concern [...]. The advantage of my interpretation is that it produces a Kant who can speak directly to twentieth century epistemological problems. Its disadvantage is that it may seem to many not to produce *Kant* at all. I shall leave it to devotees of the a priori to find ways of connecting the themes I slight with those I make prominent”. Kitcher had to exclude the *Metaphysical Foundations* – in which the systematicity of experience is not enough to establish the necessity of the empirical laws, which is guaranteed by the principles of the understanding instead – because of the clash that would arise with the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the second *Introduction* grounds the necessity of the empirical laws on the systematizing function of the faculty of judgement. On the other hand, Seide pursues a reading of Kant’s doctrine as organic as possible, trying to keep together the contents of the *Metaphysical Foundations* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously claims that the understanding prescribes the laws to nature. This thesis is reinforced in the *Prolegomena*, further investigating the distinction between “pure or universal laws” and empirical laws, which “always presuppose particular perceptions” (*Prol*, AA 4: 320). The understanding, while prescribing the transcendental laws to nature, cannot though complete the process of determination of the empirical laws, which do require the content of perceptions. Nevertheless, the empirical laws of nature “carry with them an expression of necessity” (*KrV*, A 159 / B 198; see also *KU*, *Einleitung*, § IV).

Seide underlines precisely and clearly how, at first sight, it might seem that the epistemological account of the first *Critique* denies any attribution of necessity to the empirical laws of nature. A proposition is universally valid only if it is valid a priori; though, the validity of the empirical laws of nature is not verifiable a priori: hence, these propositions appear to be unsuitable to be formulated as laws and to be declared universal and necessary. In spite of this, Kant clearly seeks to avoid such skeptical conclusions. One first insight of this complex effort can be found in the first *Critique*, where Kant seems to allow for deriving the empirical laws on the transcendental laws: «Particular laws, because they concern empirically determined appearances, cannot be completely derived from the categories, although they all stand under them» (*KrV*, B 165).

The relevant literature appears to be deeply undecided about the interpretation of Kant’s solution to this problem. On the one hand, Michael Friedman, starting right from the abovementioned passage of the *B-Deduction* and from a close analysis of the *Metaphysical Foundations*, claimed that not only the necessity of categories but also the necessity of the

empirical laws is secured by the understanding. On the other hand, scholars such as Gerd Buchdahl, Philip Kitcher, Henry Allison, and Paul Guyer, mostly relying on the Introductions of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, claimed that the necessity of the empirical laws does not depend on their relation with the transcendental laws of the understanding, but rather on their reciprocal correlation in the context of the system of knowledge that is ruled by the faculty of judgement and its principle of finality. Moving from this state of the art, Seide tries to walk on a middle road, showing how “die Rollen des Verstandes auf der einen und der Vernunft beziehungsweise der Urteilskraft auf der anderen Seite in einer sehr komplexen Weise miteinander verwoben sind” (p. 5).

Since the conception of the empirical laws is strongly linked to the problem of causality, the first part of this work (pp. 21-104) explores the relationship between Kant and Hume. Seide hereby contrasts Gary Hatfield, who denies the key importance of the confrontation with Hume for the development of the critical philosophy. On the contrary, according to Seide, Kant views the Scottish philosopher as an ally at war with the dogmatic metaphysics, despite the skeptical consequences of his positions.

The analysis of Kant’s texts about the empirical laws takes place in the second part of this work. The third chapter (pp. 107-187) deals with the Second Analogy of Experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, many interpreters, and first of all them Gerd Buchdahl, claimed how Kant, in the Second Analogy, does not aim to prove the necessary character of the empirical laws, as, for this purpose, one must take into account also a finalistic and systematic conception of nature. On the other hand, Friedman saw the Second Analogy as evidence for the existence of necessary empirical laws. Seide, while he leaves some space to Friedman’s reading and partly agrees with it, holds that Kant does not wish to prove the necessity of empirical laws, but rather aims at explaining how the laws of nature are necessarily valid and how we can know them, in the context of his overall doctrine. Moreover, “selbst wenn Kant in der Lage sein sollte, den Nachweis zu erbringen, dass notwendige empirische Naturgesetze *existieren*, bleibt in der zweiten Analogie der Erfahrung jedoch offen, wie wir diese erkennen können” (p. 109). So, in the Second Analogy Kant would have merely claimed that, in order for us to report our perception of objects, and hence to impose an objective temporal structure to our experience, it is necessary to analyze and to organize the hypothetical formulations of the empirical laws. The deduction of the particular empirical laws in the *Analytic of Principles* would take second place, as this passage solely deals with the necessity that some empirical laws be given.

The *Metaphysical Foundations* is analyzed in the fourth chapter (pp. 188-291). This work indeed represents a fundamental frame of reference to understand how Kant grounds the necessity of physical laws: his goal is precisely to seek an a priori foundation for physics as an empirical science, in order to secure the necessity of the physical laws. This is possible only thanks to the creation of a link between the realm of the pure understanding and that

of physics: this link is constituted by the metaphysical foundations of the natural sciences, which are in their turns the result of the application of the transcendental laws of the understanding to the empirical concept of matter.

In the fifth chapter (pp. 292-325), Seide briefly goes back to the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in particular to the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic*, because it is in these pages that Kant anticipates some key themes of the Introductions of the *Critique of Power of Judgment* and tackles the problem of the necessity of the empirical laws of nature. The task to systematize our empirical knowledge is attributed to the faculty of reason. Kant finds himself nevertheless to face the problem of the justification of this attribution, whose question remains open in the first *Critique*. This is because, while on the one hand the systemic organization of the empirical knowledge is fundamental for the knowing subject, on the other hand this organization looks indeed very problematic unless it directly derives by the empirical world. The presupposition that the laws of nature are formed in a finalistic form requires some justification. Seide though highlights how this justification is missing from the first *Critique*, and, moreover, it is impossible within the conceptual frame of the work. How Chignell found as well, the question on the objective reality of a concept is strictly linked with the question on the real possibility of that concept's object: so, "legt Kant sich zumindest indirekt darauf fest, dass das Objekt der Idee der Systematizität real unmöglich ist" (p. 314). Kant in fact observes how "In fact it cannot even be seen how there could be a logical principle of rational unity among rules unless a transcendental principle is presupposed, through which such a systematic unity, as pertaining to the object itself, is assumed a priori as necessary" (*KrV*, A 650-651/B 678-679). Though, like Kant himself admits right away, the object of this idea is impossible, and for this reason the idea of the systematicity of nature must be intended as a *maximum* (cfr. *KrV*, A 665/B 693). Then, the regulative principle of the systematic unity of knowledge, as a logical principle, presupposes a transcendental principle, according to which the systematicity pertains to the object itself; this being said, the idea of systematicity is a maximum and its object is actually impossible.

The last chapter of this work (pp. 326-401) deals with the Introductions of the *Critique of Power of Judgment*, where Kant dismisses reason as the agent of the systematization of knowledge, as suggested in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, attributing this task on the reflective faculty of judgement. According to Seide, the transcendental deduction of the principle of the systematic constitution of nature can be realized thanks to the new context of the third *Critique*. In the *Critique of Power of Judgment*, the principle of systematicity is supported also by the symbolic relation with the experience of natural beauty. "The self-sufficient beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system" (*KU*, AA 5: 246). The topic of natural beauty and of the conformity to one's goals is an evergreen subject of enquiry in numerous studies; Seide (who limits itself to mentioning Rueger-Evren and Chignell) highlights the connection between the deduction of the principle of finality and beauty. The foundation of the principle of finality, in the third *Critique*, is epistemologically weaker, as opposed to that

of the pure concepts of the understanding in the first *Critique*. In spite of this, Kant considers this explanation correct. With regard to the attribution of the systematicity of knowledge from the understanding to the faculty of judgment, Seide substantially accepts Friedman's proposal, though the author underlines with more force the importance of the power of judgment, as implied also in the foundation of physics (pp. 367-396). "The *Metaphysical Foundations* provides an a priori foundation for the most general empirical concept (the empirical concept of matter) and the most general empirical law (the law of universal gravitation), which characterize and govern all matter as such – regardless of the specific differences of various distinct types of matter. Reflective judgment, by contrast, proceeds from the most specific empirical concepts and law, and attempts always to unify and consolidate these under more and more general empirical concepts and laws" (Friedman, 1992: pp. 255-256).

To conclude, I judge positively Seide's work. In a simple and original way, he reconstructs with precision one of Kant's most important theoretical routes, enjoying a living and growing attention in the contemporary scenario. Thanks to the exploration of several texts in which this path takes place, and to the constant relationship with the secondary literature, Seide indeed puts forth a work of strong interest and relevance.

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