Phenomena and Noumenon--Review

(The two editions are largely the same, except for 7 paragraphs in the first that are replaced with 4 in the second. There are some other sentences or entire paragraphs eliminated prior to this replacement, but I can’t discern any clear reason why these passages might have been deemed “unacceptable.”)

The main force of this section of the *Critique* is review. It argues against improper “extensions” of what we have already established, and it rejects improper interpretations of how we are to understand what it all means.

We have been concerned from the start with the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Kant has argued that we do have some such knowledge, but that it is strictly limited. “Metaphysics,” in the traditional sense, seemed to have as its subject matter nothing else. So, Kant’s saying that some such knowledge is possible, despite Hume’s criticisms, might lead the unwary to suspect that perhaps we can have more of it--i.e., that we can continue with at least some of the tasks of traditional metaphysics. Kant is arguing that we cannot. He is agreeing with Hume that metaphysics, as it was traditionally done, cannot be justified. We cannot know by reasoning alone anything substantive about the nature of the reality that exists independently of our experience of it.

Specifically, we have been concerned in the Analytic with the Categories of the Understanding. These categories constitute our most general concept of what it is to be an object. They are the sorts of principles typically used by metaphysicians to infer things about the nature of reality. But, Kant reminds us, these have been justified (“deduced”) solely as principles for synthesizing the data of intuition (which, for us at least, is sensible). Without intuition to synthesize, they have no use (“for cognition”). They cannot, to be specific, be extended to justify claims about things in general, i.e., things considered independently of how we experience them. We cannot apply the categories to things in themselves.
I think the above captures the main focus of the section. Yet, the section is entitled “Phenomena and Noumena,” and we haven’t yet mentioned those terms.

As I said in class last time, I think it is significant that Kant does not use these terms in developing his own positive position. They are mentioned from time to time, but generally parenthetically, and not as part of the passages that directly explain or defend his position.

I think this section appears in the Critique because the distinction itself (between Phenomena and Noumena) was one his readers would have been familiar with, and one that would seem to be clearly applicable to Kant’s view. So I think Kant’s purpose (in those paragraphs when he finally discusses these terms directly) is simply to fend off a possible misinterpretation of his view.

(In this light, the noticeable absence of these terms in Kant’s direct explanation of his position suggests that he avoided using these terms--terms that would have seemed as natural to him as they did to his readers, precisely to avoid the kind of misinterpretation that he here explicitly rejects.)

Phenomena and Noumena, as those terms were used, refer to the “the sensible” and “the intelligible.” Kant has, in the Aesthetic, claimed that cognition requires intuition, which for us, is sensible. So he has said that knowledge is, at least for us, necessarily “sensible.” Consequently, it would seem natural to one familiar with the “Phenomena/Noumena” distinction to express Kant’s position as saying that knowledge is necessarily (but merely) phenomenal. One might even express it as the view that we know only phenomena. Again, Kant does not use this terminology is his own direct explanation of his views. But the terminology is out there, and it seems clearly related to what Kant is saying.

But Phenomena and Noumena are understood as complementary terms. If we know merely the phenomenal, then this implies something about the noumenal. Kant’s goal here is to reject one way of understanding this distinction. One might think of Phenomena and Noumena as referring to a “sensible world” and an “intelligible world.” And so it might seem that Kant’s transcendental idealism is a claim that we know merely the sensible world, as opposed to some other “intelligible world.” An intelligible world would be one that could only be known in some non-sensible manner. For Kant, that would mean by way “intellectual intuition.” So, by saying
that we know only phenomena, is Kant implying a contrast to some other “intelligible world” that could only be known “intellectually,” one that we don’t know because we only know phenomena?

No.

This may seem a natural way of expressing Kant’s transcendental idealism in terms of a distinction between phenomena and noumena. But it would be the wrong way of doing so. Rejecting this understanding of transcendental idealism seems to be the explicit point of this part of the text.

Now, Kant notes, there is no contradiction in the idea of a non-sensuous intuition, and so there is no contradiction is the notion of a world that could only be known by such an intuition. But logical possibility, Kant claims, is not same as “real” possibility. For us, intuition is sensible, and so we have no positive understanding of what such a non-sensible intuition could be like. So, when Kant says that we know only phenomena, this should not be understood as contrasting the objects we know through sensations with objects that might be known in some other way. This distinction has no meaning for us.

In other words, noumena should not be understood as a distinct world of determinate, but unknowable objects. This would be “noumena in the positive sense.” If this is the contrast you have in mind when you say that Kant’s view is that we know only phenomena but not noumena, then you are misinterpreting him. The fact that this passage so clearly rejects this “positive account” of noumena seems to me clear evidence against the “two object” interpretation of transcendental idealism. He is not claiming that we know only sensible objects and not intelligible objects. He is not claiming something, in other words, that involves making a distinction between objects that we can know versus objects that we can’t know. The whole point here seems precisely to reject such an interpretation of his position.

Rather, he says, the doctrine of the Aesthetic, i.e., that all knowledge of objects requires (as one of two distinct necessary components) sensation, has already established a commitment to “noumena in the negative sense.” To consider an object “only insofar as” it appears to us through sensation is already to form a concept of that object independently of “insofar as” it appear to us. “Insofar as” is a limitation (or “boundary”). Saying that we know only how objects
appear to us (through sensation) already involves a concept of the object that we know only through experience. So, if you want to express Kant’s view as the claim that we know only phenomena but not noumena, this should be understood as the claim that we know objects only as they appear to us through sensation, and not as they are independently of they appear to us through sensation.

So, to conclude, recall that Kant does not use this terminology in his own positive description of his views. His goal here seems to be to prevent a natural misinterpretation of his views that might arise from expressing Kant’s transcendental idealism in terms of a contrast between phenomena and noumena. Kant characterizes the mistaken interpretation, which contrasts phenomena with “noumena in the positive sense,” and replaces it with a proper interpretation, which contrasts phenomena with “noumena in the negative sense.”

This passage seems clearly to explicitly reject what we have been calling the “two object” interpretation of transcendental idealism, and to explicitly endorse what I have called the “adverbial interpretation.” Kant says that we know appearances (i.e., phenomena) and not things in themselves (noumena.) But he is here denying that he means this as a claim about which objects we perceive (phenomena rather than noumena), but insisting that it is a claim about how we know objects (as they appear to us through the senses rather than as they are in themselves considered apart from how they appear to us through the senses).