

NOUMENON

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, especially Kantian Metaphysics and Epistemology

1. Core Definition

The term **Noumenon**, derived from the Greek word meaning 'that which is thought' or 'understood,' is a foundational concept within the transcendental idealism of German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804). It is defined as the 'thing in itself' (*Ding an sich*)--reality considered independently of human experience, sensibility, and cognitive structuring. The noumenon stands in absolute contrast to the **phenomenon**, which is the object as it appears to us, having been processed and organized by the innate, a priori structures of the human mind, specifically the forms of intuition (Space and Time) and the Categories of Understanding.

In Kant's framework, the noumenon exists as a necessary but inherently unknowable entity. While the noumena are posited as the objective, non-empirical facilitators or grounds of our sensory experience, they can never be experienced directly themselves. This is because they lie outside the necessary conditions imposed by the human faculty of intuition, namely **Space and Time**. Human knowledge is strictly limited to the phenomenal realm--the world of appearance--which is governed by these spatiotemporal constraints. The concept of the noumenon thus serves to establish a critical boundary for human reason, ensuring that theoretical speculation does not overstep the limits of possible experience.

The distinction is crucial for understanding Kantian epistemology. We do not perceive reality as it is, but rather reality as it appears to us once filtered and ordered by our cognitive apparatus. The noumenon represents the objective source of the raw sensory data before this processing occurs. Consequently, any attempt by speculative logic or metaphysical inquiry to describe the internal nature or characteristics of the noumenon is futile, as the very concepts used in such descriptions--such as causality, substance, and quantity--are only valid when applied to objects within the phenomenal world.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the concept of a reality accessible only to the intellect has deep roots in Western philosophy, notably in Plato's distinction between the sensible world and the intelligible world of Forms, Kant dramatically redefined the term in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). For the Platonists, the noumenal realm was the superior, true reality accessible through intellectual insight. For Kant, however, the noumenon became primarily a limiting concept rather than a realm of positive knowledge.

Kant's philosophical project aimed to respond to the skepticism of David Hume, who questioned

the possibility of necessary knowledge, particularly concerning fundamental concepts like causality. Kant agreed with Hume that such concepts could not be derived merely from empirical observation. He concluded that concepts like causality must be inherent structures of the mind (the Categories), imposed upon experience rather than derived from it. This realization necessitated the distinction: the Categories guarantee universal and necessary truth, but only for the world we constitute through experience (phenomena). Therefore, reality outside of this constitution--the **noumenon**--must remain outside the scope of scientific certainty.

Kant initially explored the idea of the noumenon in two senses: the positive sense, suggesting it could potentially be known through a non-sensible intuition (a divine or pure intellect, not human); and the negative sense, defining it merely as that which is not an object of sensible intuition. In the final execution of his Critical Philosophy, the negative sense predominates. The noumenon is acknowledged as a necessary conceptual existence--the idea of a thing that is not an appearance--but any positive knowledge regarding its internal properties is denied to human reason. This move successfully secured scientific knowledge (phenomena) while simultaneously restricting the unfounded claims of traditional metaphysics (noumena).

3. The Relationship to Phenomena (The Central Distinction)

The relationship between the **noumenon** and the phenomenon is dynamic and defines the limits of human cognition. The phenomenon is not an illusion; it is objectively real in the sense that it is universally experienced by all rational beings due to the common organizing structures of the mind. However, it is only a representation of the underlying reality. The noumenon, conversely, is the reality itself, the ultimate source of the raw material that affects our sensory organs.

This distinction clarifies why the human intellect cannot access the thing-in-itself. When sense data is received, the mind automatically structures it according to the two a priori Forms of Intuition: **Space** and **Time**. Everything we perceive is spatially and temporally situated. The noumena, lying outside of all possible experience, are necessarily outside of these intuitions. Consequently, they cannot be located, measured, or tracked through spatial or temporal means. They are, in essence, non-spatiotemporal realities.

Furthermore, the Categories of Understanding--the concepts used to structure judgments, such as unity, plurality, causality, and substance--are applicable only to objects that have already been ordered spatiotemporally. Since the noumena exist prior to or outside of this ordering process, the application of these categories becomes cognitively meaningless. For instance, to ask what the 'cause' of the noumenon is, or what its 'substance' might be, is to attempt to apply tools designed only for empirical representation to a reality that fundamentally precedes all empirical representation. Kant's philosophy asserts that the human mind can only know things as they appear to us, but not as they are in themselves.

4. Key Characteristics and Constraints

Unknowability and Limitation: The primary characteristic of the noumenon is its fundamental inaccessibility to human knowledge. It serves as a necessary **limiting concept** (*Grenzbegriff*), marking the boundary beyond which empirical science and theoretical philosophy cannot pass. Any claim to knowledge about the thing-in-itself results in unavoidable contradictions (antinomies) of pure reason.

Transcendence of Space and Time: The noumenon exists independently of the pure Forms of Intuition--Space and Time--which are conditions imposed by the human mind. Because they are not subject to these organizational structures, noumena cannot be grasped through sensibility, which is tied inextricably to spatiotemporal relations.

Immunity to Categorical Logic: The twelve **Categories of Understanding** (which include concepts of quantity, quality, relation, and modality) are rules for combining sensory input into coherent experience. Since these categories presuppose the conditions of sensibility, they are irrelevant and invalid when applied to the noumenal realm, which lacks sensible input.

Objective Grounding of Experience: Despite its unknowability, the noumenon is posited as the objective, external reality that necessitates or grounds the appearance of phenomena. It is the necessary 'something' that affects our senses, even though we can only ever know the resultant effect, not the cause in its original nature.

5. Significance in Critical Philosophy

The distinction between **phenomena** and **noumena** is perhaps the most significant structural achievement of Kant's philosophical system. By restricting knowledge to the phenomenal realm, Kant successfully resolved the epistemological crisis inherited from the early modern period. He established that universal, necessary truths--such as the laws of mathematics and Newtonian physics--are indeed possible because they are founded upon the necessary structures of the mind (the a priori intuitions and categories) that organize experience. Scientific certainty is thus secured, but its dominion is limited strictly to the world of appearance.

Crucially, the noumenon provides the necessary conceptual space for the postulates of practical reason, which forms the basis of Kant's moral philosophy. Concepts essential for morality--such as human **freedom**, the existence of **God**, and the **immortality of the soul**--cannot be proven or disproven empirically (they are noumenal entities). By positioning the moral agent (the self) as belonging to the noumenal world insofar as they are free and moral, Kant exempts moral action from the strict causal determinism that governs the phenomenal world of objects.

Without the noumenal distinction, reason would be forced to conclude that everything is merely determined by empirical laws, thereby obliterating the possibility of genuine moral choice and responsibility. Thus, the noumenon functions as an indispensable concept that simultaneously

limits theoretical knowledge and preserves the necessary conditions for moral belief and rational faith.

6. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of the noumenon has been the source of intense criticism and scholarly debate since its inception. The most persistent challenge centers on the coherence of the 'positive' aspect of the thing-in-itself, specifically the claim that the **noumenon** is the cause of the affection of our senses, which subsequently produces the phenomenon.

Critics, including early post-Kantian idealists such as Fichte and Schopenhauer, argue that the moment Kant posits the noumenon as an external cause affecting the mind, he violates his own foundational principle. If the category of **causality** is strictly applicable only within the phenomenal world (as a tool for connecting appearances), then it is an illegitimate contradiction to use causality to describe the relationship between the unknowable noumenon and the phenomenon. To avoid this internal contradiction, many idealist philosophers rejected the existence of the thing-in-itself entirely, collapsing all reality into the phenomenal world structured by consciousness.

Furthermore, the ambiguity of the term has fueled ongoing interpretive disputes: is the noumenon simply the idea of something that cannot be sensed (the negative conception), or is it a fully existing, though inaccessible, metaphysical entity (the positive conception)? If it is strictly negative, the coherence of the phenomenal world having an 'objective ground' becomes shaky. If it is positive, Kant arguably fails to maintain the strict limitation on knowledge he sought to impose, introducing an unwarranted metaphysical postulate.

7. Further Reading

[Noumenon \(Wikipedia Entry\)](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Kant's Metaphysics \(Phenomena and Noumena\)](#)

[Kant, I. \(1781\). Critique of Pure Reason.](#)