13.1 Kant’s Discussion of the Basic Achilles Inference

Here is what Kant identifies as the Achilles of all dialectical inferences in the pure doctrine of the soul.

Second Paralogism: Of Simplicity

That, the action of which can never be regarded as the concurrence of several things acting, is \textit{simple}.

Now the soul, or the thinking ‘I’, is such a thing.

Therefore, etc. (A351)

Kant does not give the conclusion explicitly. If, however, we take his more explicit rendering of the inference to the claim that the soul is a substance in his treatment of the first paralogism, as our model it would be:

\textit{I, as thinking being (soul), am simple}^1

\footnote{In the 1st paralogism, which is an inference to the substantiality of the self, Kant explicitly gives the conclusion as,

\textit{Therefore I, as thinking being (soul), am substance. (A 348; N. K. S., 333)}

See Section 13.2 below for more on the clear parallel between Kant’s treatment of these two paralogism inferences.}
This yields the following two premise inference.

Premise 1: That, the action of which can never be regarded as the concurrence of several things acting, is simple.
Premise 2: Now the soul, or the thinking ‘I’, is such a thing.
Conclusion: I, as thinking being (soul), am simple.

We shall see that Kant argues that this inference is unsound, even though it is seductively attractive. He tells us that such an inference is a ‘transcendental paralogism,’ a fallacy grounded in the nature of human reason which gives rise to an illusion which cannot be avoided, although it can be rendered harmless.² He renders it harmless, by pointing out the fallacy, which he identifies as an equivocation between the sort of simplicity that would be needed to make the first premise true and the sort of simplicity that makes the second premise so attractive.

Kant opens his critique with the following comment:

This is the Achilles of all dialectical inferences in the pure doctrine of the soul. It is no mere sophistical play, contrived by a dogmatist in order to impart to his assertions a superficial plausibility, but an inference which appears to withstand even the keenest scrutiny and the most scrupulously exact investigation. (A351)

By calling this argument the Achilles of all dialectical inferences in the pure doctrine of the soul, Kant likens it to the great champion of the Greeks in their war with the Trojans. Though he was impressively mighty, Achilles had a fatal flaw. Kant’s second sentence further emphasizes the impressively seductive attractiveness that makes him count this inference as a transcendental paralogism.

Kant goes on to offer a more detailed articulation of this inference, which he has labeled the second paralogism of transcendental psychology.

It is as follows.

Every composite substance is an aggregate of several substances, and the action of a composite, or whatever inheres in it as thus composite, is an aggregate of several actions or accidents, distributed among the plurality of the substances. Now an effect which arises from the concurrence of many acting substances is indeed possible, namely, when this effect is external only (as, for instance, the motion of a body is the combined motion of all its parts). But with thoughts, as internal accidents belonging to a thinking being, it is different. For suppose it be the composite that thinks: then every part of it would be a part of the thought, and only all of them taken together would contain the whole thought. But this cannot consistently be maintained. For representations (for instance, the single words of a verse), distributed among different beings, never make up a whole thought (a verse), and it is therefore impossible that a thought should inhere in what is essentially composite. It is therefore possible only in a single substance, which, not being an aggregate of many, is absolutely simple. (A351–352)

The example, of single words of a verse distributed among different beings never making up a whole thought, is quite striking. Kant uses it to illustrate the plausibility

² See Section 13.3 below for a quotation of Smith’s translation of the relevant passage from Kant’s introduction to the section titled ‘The Paralogisms of Pure Reason’ (A341, B399).