

KANT'S CONCEPT OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT

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Abstract: *It is argued that there is a plausible way to read Kant as consistently repudiating a two-worlds picture and upholding a de-reistic view whereby the transcendental object or thing in itself indicates only a pure concept of the understanding whose role is to govern the synthesis of any unified manifold. This reading of Kant liberates him from the well-known textual and philosophical difficulties of the two-worlds view. Furthermore, I argue that this interpretation leads to a strong idealist position as opposed to the double-aspect view of Allison and Prauss. This idealist position was basically adopted by Fichte in his Introductions to the Science of Knowledge of 1797, wherein the debunking of the thing in itself was a crucial step in his ultimate argument for the unity of theoretical and practical reason.*

Key-words: *Kant; transcendental idealism; transcendental object; thing in itself; Allison; noumena; two-worlds view; double-aspect view; Fichte; dogmatism.*

One of the most perplexing and controversial aspects of Kant's philosophy concerns the role of the transcendental object and how it fits into his "Copernican Revolution" in epistemology. On the one hand, Kant argues that in order to avoid skepticism and dogmatism we must give up the assumption that knowledge consists in a relation between our representations and mind-independent objects. Rather, we must assume that objects "conform to our knowledge" (Bxvi) in which case the very

idea of a mind-independent object seems to be meaningless¹. On the other hand, Kant appears to claim that we need to postulate the existence of transcendental objects that are “distinct from our knowledge” (A104) in order to serve as the ultimate “cause” of our sensible representations². What Kant takes away with one hand, he appears to give back with the other, leading many commentators to sympathize with F.H. Jacobi’s famous claim that “without the thing in itself I cannot enter into the critical philosophy, but with it I cannot remain in it.”³

Many different schools of Kantian interpretation have sprung up in response to this *prima facie* dilemma, but I will focus on the three major ones here. First, the “two-worlds” reading maintains that for Kant there are empirical as well as transcendental objects, and that while we can only have knowledge of the former, we are forced to at least postulate the existence of the latter. Within the two-worlds camp there are those (like P.F. Strawson) who hold that this position of Kant’s is inconsistent with the “critical” part of his critical philosophy (Strawson (1966)); and there are those (like Adickes) who hold that we can liberate Kant from inconsistency by appealing to the theory of “double affection” (Adickes (1924)). Second, there is the “idealist” reading of Kant, which reads him as completely repudiating the very meaningfulness of the transcendental object as a mind-independent cause of appearances. Perhaps the most compelling statement of this interpretation is found in J.S. Fichte’s Introductions to *The Science of Knowledge* of 1797. Finally, in more recent

¹ All parenthetical citations are from *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (St. Martin’s Press, 1965). Where my translation differs from Kemp Smith, this is indicated in the notes.

² I will argue, however, that this passage in the A-edition does not support any kind of reification of the transcendental object. In these introductory remarks I simply want to indicate how Kant’s language may suggest such a reading.

³ F. H. Jacobi (1812) p.304-5; note that Fichte was very familiar with Jacobi’s criticism and offers his own interpretation of Kant as a solution – see in particular his *Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* of 1797 (I,482).

years Henry Allison and Gerold Prauss have proposed a “double aspect” view, whereby Kant is seen as not drawing a distinction between two kinds of object (empirical and transcendental), but rather as distinguishing between two different ways one and the same object can be conceived in transcendental reflection (cf. Allison (1983), and Prauss (1974)). Allison makes it very clear that this interpretation is designed to liberate Kant from the difficulties inherent in both the two-worlds and idealist readings.

It is fair to say that most current Kant scholars accept a version of the first or third interpretations of Kant, while largely rejecting or even ignoring the idealist alternative. In part, I think this can be explained in terms of the current philosophical environment: the two-worlds reading appeals to those scientific-minded philosophers who think that there is something right about the important distinction between things as they really are and things as they appear to the cognitive subject; while the double-aspect view may appeal more to the postmodern thinker who likes to conceive the world in terms of multiple perspectives. However this may be, I believe that both textually and philosophically, the idealist reading merits more attention than it has received. Fichte was essentially correct when he argued that, for Kant, the thing in itself is not meant to signify a mind-independent object causally affecting the mind, but rather the mere *thought* of any possible object of cognition. In this paper, I will try to vindicate this reading of Kant by showing first how it clarifies the apparent inconsistencies regarding Kant's talk of the transcendental object, and second how it rescues Kant from philosophical objections that prove to be fatal to the two-worlds and double-aspect readings.

1. “UNIFYING THE MANIFOLD”

When examining this issue, it is important to keep in mind a distinction between the transcendental object and the *concept* of a transcendental object. Focusing only on Kant's talk of a transcendental object makes it seem as if he believed that in addition to empirical objects

there are such *things* as transcendental objects⁴. Once this is granted, it seems natural to read Kant as supporting a “two-worlds” view: there is the realm of experience and its objects (the phenomenal world), and there is the realm beyond experience with its objects (the noumenal world). This reading is “buttressed” by passages that equate the transcendental object with the thing in itself, and by those passages where the transcendental object is considered a non-sensible “cause” of appearances⁵. The reading is “damaged” however, by those passages where Kant denies, not just the existence of non-sensible objects, but their very possibility⁶. Worse, the two-worlds reading leads to crippling philosophical objections, among them the charge that Kant violated his own principles by positing a realm of objects beyond the bounds of experience⁷. If, however, we concentrate on Kant's usage of the *concept* of a transcendental object, none of these problems ensue. For it is evident that we can employ meaningful concepts that do not apply to anything: the fictitious concepts *Pegasus* and *golden mountain* are obvious examples, but there are others that serve all-important roles in the acquisition of knowledge, such as the concept “one”, and other numbers, which according to Kant and a prevalent view

⁴ Kant's usage is split down the middle: in the A-edition Deduction, he usually speaks of the concept of the transcendental object, in the “Phenomena and Noumena” section, he speaks of both, and later, in those passages where he speaks of the transcendental object as a ground or cause of appearances, he speaks of the transcendental object.

⁵ For the former, see A366 and A380; for the latter, see A393, A494/B522.

⁶ As in A287/B343, where Kant writes that the concept of a non-sensible “intelligible” object is “a representation of a thing of which we can neither say that it is possible nor that it is impossible; for we are acquainted with no kind of intuition but our own sensible kind.” There are at least two other passages where Kant explicitly denies a two-worlds reading: A279/B335, and (subject to a retranslation of Kemp Smith) A249-250.

⁷ Not to mention all the problems with the “double affection” theory that go along with it: for example, that the transcendental object as thing-in-itself cannot “cause” appearances, since causality is a category that has application only to objects of experience. I will return to this issue in the next section.

in the philosophy of mathematics, do not stand for any objects. If the concept of a transcendental object has its own role to play, without entailing the existence of any non-sensible objects, Kant's account can be rescued from many undeserved attacks. And in fact, in the A-edition of the Transcendental Deduction, Kant spends a good deal of time discussing what this role is: it is to serve as a rule regulating the synthesis of the manifold. As background, it is important to understand Kant's novel take on the theory of representations, for this leads directly to the need for synthesis. Like his predecessors, Kant distinguishes between singular representations (intuitions) and general representations (concepts), but unlike his predecessors he divides these again, into "empirical" and "pure" ones⁸. Empirical intuitions are bits of experiential intake, formed immediately in the act of perception; pure intuition refers to the purely formal *a priori* features of an empirical intuition, i.e., its spatio-temporal character⁹. Empirical concepts are formed when we abstract away the differences between various objects of empirical intuition and consider them as part of a common class. Pure concepts, on the other hand, cannot be abstracted from experience, since experience presupposes them; rather, they pre-exist in the understanding, as "forms" of any thought whatsoever. Kant's table of categories (B106/A88) contains a list of these pure concepts: unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, substance, causality, community, possibility,

⁸ Kant's most explicit statement is at A320/B376-7.

⁹ Pure intuition is a notoriously difficult to make sense of, notwithstanding its importance in Kant's entire transcendental idealist enterprise. There are competing "Platonic", "constructivist", and "structuralist" readings of what it could mean, none of which I need commit myself to for the purposes of this paper (though I prefer the structuralist view). For our purposes, it is enough to think of pure intuition as those *a priori* features of an empirical intuition which confer the required universality upon sensible representations. For example, it is pure intuition that makes possible the necessity of "the shortest distance between two points is a straight line" or " $7+5=12$ ", since empirical intuition could only tell us what we actually perceive, not what we *must* perceive.

existence, and necessity. Now when we are concerned with the major question of the *Critique*, “how is knowledge possible?” Kant’s fundamental claim is that only the interplay of concepts and intuitions provides the answer: as he famously states, “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.” (B75/A51) Even the perception of a material object only amounts to knowledge if this object has been held together in one consciousness according to a synthesizing rule of the understanding. For Kant, such experiential knowledge of the world around us can be put into the judgmental form “I perceive X.” Thus, my seeing of the cat cannot take place without there being a rule according to which the object of intuition (X) before me falls under the concept “cat.” And this synthetic unity (X) that falls under the concept “cat” must have already been unified by means of the pure concepts of the understanding prior to the empirical application of the concept “cat”. For judgments like “ $7+5=12$ ” a “pure” intuition must be added in order to account for their necessity. Objective representations, and by extension judgments with objective content are only possible given these various “syntheses.” Thus one of the major questions of the *Critique* becomes how such a synthesis is possible. The general answer is Kant’s Copernican turn: synthesis is an activity of the understanding, and so “we can only know *a priori* of things what we ourselves put into them.” (Bxviii). The more specific answer entails looking closely at the various ways the understanding employs its concepts in the attempt to organize experience. It is here that we shall find the unique function of the concept of the transcendental object.

Kant assigns to concepts a very specific function in the synthesis: to serve as “rules” which make possible the combination of a manifold of representations. Kant discusses this role of a concept in depth in the A-edition of the Transcendental Deduction. Here, Kant writes that “a concept is always, as regards its form, something universal that serves as a rule.” (A106) The concept of a triangle, for example, serves as a rule that guides and makes possible the combination of three straight lines. Similarly, the concept of a body is a rule that determines the synthesis to

produce the corresponding representations of extension, impenetrability, and shape in a unified manifold. The basic idea is that synthesis or the “holding together” of diverse representations cannot take place blindly: concepts are needed to guide the activity. It is this notion of “concept” that Kant has in mind when he speaks of the concept of a transcendental object at A104-109. While empirical concepts such as that of “body” constrain the synthesis in rather specific ways, there are pure concepts that determine the synthesis in a more general way¹⁰. The concept of an object in general is the rule that serves to impose the unity which any manifold must possess in order to be recognized *as* a manifold¹¹. As Kant writes, the concept of an object in general makes possible “the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of a manifold of representations.” (A105). Any object, in order to be perceived or thought *as* an object, must at the very least be taken up and unified into one consciousness. This unity is only possible, Kant is telling us, if the mind imposes a rule onto the

¹⁰ Indeed, the stated purpose of the Transcendental Deduction is to “deduce” these pure concepts, or categories, by a “transcendental” argument to the effect that synthesis is impossible without them; but synthesis is the only way we could have knowledge, and we do have knowledge; hence the categories must be employed. Obviously not all syntheses are guided by every category: the judgment “all swans are white” makes use of the category of totality, but not plurality. The concept of a transcendental object can be thought of as a meta-category which *every* synthesis must conform to.

¹¹ A good question is why the category of unity cannot do the job, and so economize Kant's account. But Kant explicitly rejects this at B131: “This unity, which precedes *a priori* all concepts of combination, is not the category of unity; for all categories are grounded in logical functions of judgment, and in these functions combination, and therefore unity of given concepts, is already thought. Thus the category already presupposes combination.” This can be taken to mean that the categories, as logical functions of judgment, are only employed at the synthesis involved at the level of judgment, where it is easily seen that the notion of a unified manifold is already presupposed. I.e., in order to judge that “all swans are white”, we must already have the concept of *all swans*, wherein is contained a unity of various representations.

content of experience, a rule that “picks up” the various representations of the object (whatever they may be) and holds them together. This rule is the concept of an object in general, which becomes explicitly identified with the concept of the transcendental object at (A109).

In conjunction with appealing to this role of the concept of the transcendental object, Kant advances what I will call the “presupposition thesis”, viz., that sensible representations must be representations *of* something, i.e., there must be some object to which they correspond. Kant doesn't provide an argument for this claim: he thinks it obvious that the very notion of a representation logically presupposes something that is represented¹². Contrary to the various “psychologistic” readings of Kant, Kant explicitly makes a distinction between private psychic acts of representing an object (*representings*) and the objects being represented (*represented*)¹³. At A45/B63 this becomes clear: when we are speaking

¹² Allison (1968) takes this point very seriously, arguing that Kant's doctrine of the transcendental object is a logical result of his development of the Lockean theory of ideas. That is, Kant separates himself from Locke by his distinction between empirical and transcendental levels of discourse so that on the empirical level, what we experience are objects and not our own psychic representations; and yet, on the transcendental level, since these empirical objects are still representations, we need to posit an object being represented, just as Locke needed to postulate a substance lurking behind the manifold qualities we actually perceive. Thus Locke's *substratum* as “the something I don't know what” becomes Kant's transcendental object as “the something in general = X.” This interpretation ignores (evades?) the obvious fact that Kant's notion of substance is completely different from his notion of the transcendental object; more importantly, I think Kant's theory of representations far more original than Allison suggests, for on my reading, Kant is not committing the same error of Locke merely on a different level, but totally repudiating the Lockean idea by denying the very meaningfulness of an unknowable object. This important topic will be taken up again later in my section on Allison's more recent position (“Distinguishing *infra* my Reading from the Double-Aspect View”), pp. 127-132.

¹³ Alberto Coffa (1991) has argued that Kant's epistemology is crippled by his bad semantics, particularly by his inability to clearly distinguish between the

empirically, we must distinguish between what various individuals might think when thinking of an object, and what belongs to the object itself. Here the distinction is reminiscent of the Fregean one between an individual "idea" of an object and its "content" or *sense*, which can be shared by others. Yet given Kant's thesis as to the transcendental ideality of space and time, we cannot stop at this point; for on the transcendental level, we realize that these objective *representeds* are themselves spatiotemporal appearances, and thus are still representations "in us." Since "appearances are themselves nothing but sensible representations", they cannot "in themselves be taken as objects capable of existing outside our power of representations" (A104), hence we must "postulate" an object to which these representations must conform:

What then, is to be understood when we speak of an object corresponding to, and consequently distinct from, our knowledge? It is easily seen that this object must be thought only as something in general, =X since outside our knowledge we have nothing which we could set over against this knowledge as corresponding to it (A104).

Here Kant points out that when we think of an object "corresponding to" a sensible representation, we can only conceive of a "something in general, =X." That is, only the appearance that is presented in space and time has

psychic act of judgment from the content of what is judged; a confusion which was not corrected until the Bolzano-Frege semantic tradition. Actually, Coffa himself provides evidence that Kant *did* make the distinction, though not consistently (see pp. 12-13). Nevertheless, Kant is not guilty of this confusion, for he constantly makes a distinction between "subjective" representations that depend only on inner sense (and that can include dreams, hallucinations and other psychological phenomena), and "objective" ones of outer sense (representations of real things in space). This is essential to Kant's entire argument in the "Refutation of Idealism", where he argues that subjective representations themselves presuppose objective ones. See Gerold Prauss (1971), especially pp. 81-101 for a nice discussion of this distinction and its importance for Kant's entire project.

any determinate characteristics; when we perform the mental operation of conceiving of a “something that appears” we arrive at only the concept of a completely indeterminate object. Kant slides from a discussion of the *object* corresponding to an appearance to our *concept* of an object. On my reading, this is because, strictly speaking, we are not entitled to reify the “object” corresponding to an appearance. We are rather forced, by considering a representation, to *think* of something underlying this representation, in accordance with the presupposition thesis. But since we cannot think of any determinate features of such an object, it remains the mere *thought* of an object, a thought “broad enough” to encompass any possible object of judgment (hence the concept of an object *in general*). The shift is away from the *metaphysical* question of objectivity, which concerns the status of our objects, to the *epistemic* one of conceivability, which concerns the status of our concepts. Thus, Kant's discussion here of a “something” corresponding to an appearance does not entail the positing of non-sensible objects, as is commonly supposed. It merely shows that we need to employ the concept of an object in general when we think of the object of a sensible representation.

After Kant identifies that concept of a transcendental object with the concept of an object in general at A109, he goes on to claim that the concept of a transcendental object provides for the objective grounding of all our knowledge-claims. As he writes:

The pure concept of this transcendental object, which in reality throughout all our knowledge is one and the same, is what can alone confer upon our empirical concepts in general a relation to an object, that is, objective reality.

The concept of a transcendental object is “one and the same” throughout all our knowledge in the sense that it must always apply to any possible object of experience. In this sense, any object of experience must be “identical” with the unitary transcendental object, since any object of experience must display the unity of the transcendental object. Only in this

way could our empirical concepts have objective reality, for only in this way could they serve as rules capable of uniting the manifold of representations given in sensible intuition. For example, in employing the empirical concept “dog” various kinds of dogs fall in its extension; but this is only possible if they are all taken up and “held together” in one thought. The rule that makes this possible is the concept of a transcendental object. In this way, it is best to think of the concept of a transcendental object as a higher-order function which takes representations and produces unities; and indeed, at A68/B93, Kant writes that concepts rest on functions, where “by function I mean the unity of bringing various representations under one common representation.” Empirical concepts are capable of such a function, but only because they themselves are informed by the higher-order concept of the transcendental object.

In the next passage Kant sums up, and makes it clear that the concept of the transcendental object is to be applied only to objects of experience, and *not* to non-sensible objects:

This concept (of the transcendental object) cannot contain any determinate intuition, and therefore refers only to that unity which must be met with in any manifold of knowledge which stands in relation to an object. This relation is nothing but the necessary unity of consciousness, and therefore also of the synthesis of the manifold, through a common function of the mind, which combines it in one representation. (A109)

So far from postulating non-sensible objects, then, Kant's whole discussion revolves around showing how the concept of a transcendental object refers only to manifolds of *knowledge*. The concept has no legitimate application beyond objects of knowledge, objects that are (to us at any rate) only those of sensible intuition. As such, Kant's discussion of the transcendental object in the A-Deduction is perfectly consistent with his claim in the “Phenomena/Noumena” section that “the critique of this pure understanding, accordingly, does not permit us to create a new field of objects beyond those which may be presented to it as appearances, and so stray into intelligible worlds” (A289/B345).

2. THE NOUMENON AND THE THING-IN-ITSELF

No discussion of the transcendental object can be complete without examining the relationship between it and the related notions of the thing in itself and the *noumenon*. Often when Kant speaks of things in themselves, he does so within the context of the presupposition thesis. For example, at Bxxvi, Kant writes that we must be in the position to “at least think things in themselves, otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.” This is basically the same point Kant made about the concept of the transcendental object at A104, where he writes that the very notion of a representation entails the notion of something the representation is *of*. The connection between the thing in itself and the transcendental object is made even stronger when Kant explicitly identifies them at A366; furthermore, Kant's distinction between a thing in itself and an appearance in the Fourth Paralogism at A373 is mirrored at A380 in the distinction between the transcendental object and its appearance.

Some of the more careful commentators, however, have argued that we cannot simply identify the thing in itself with the transcendental object.¹⁴ They acknowledge that there is no other way to interpret the transcendental object in the A-Deduction rather than as a concept that provides for unity in the synthesis of the manifold; but they argue that the

¹⁴ I think especially of Adickes (1924), Paton (1936), and Allison (1968). That we should be suspicious of their interpretation follows from the fact that in the passage analyzed above (A104-109), they have to take Kant as employing two different senses of a transcendental object: first as a correlate of appearance (thing in itself), and second as the concept of synthetic unity in a manifold (see especially Paton, (1936) pp. 444-7). It seems very implausible to take Kant as speaking about two different notions in one and the same discussion. Insofar as we are not tempted by a “patchwork” theory, we should try to find a way to harmonize Kant's account by showing that in this passage he is employing only one concept of a transcendental object. This is precisely what my reading attempts.

thing in itself never performs this function, and thus must differ from the transcendental object. They go on to conclude that talk of a transcendental object is ambiguous, since it is sometimes taken to refer to the concept of an object in general, at other times to a non-sensible cause of appearances¹⁵. Of course this reading of Kant presupposes a two-worlds view, insofar as it is granted that the “thing in itself”, as well as “the transcendental object” as cause of appearances, must be taken to refer to a non-sensible object. What is needed, then, is to show that Kant's talk of the thing in itself (as well as his talk of the transcendental object as a cause of appearances) does not entail a two-worlds reading, that in these cases as well Kant is concerned only with the meaningful employment of the *concept* of a thing in itself, not with a reistic positing of things in themselves.

In fact, the very passages where Kant seems to be positing the *existence* of things in themselves show that what he has in mind is only the *meaningfulness* of the concept of a thing in itself. In the passage from the Preface quoted above, Kant remarks that we must be in the position to *think* things-in-themselves, where by this he can plausibly be taken to mean that we have the bare *concept* of a thing in itself but are not entitled to claim whether or not there is anything in its extension. And in the “Phenomena and Noumena” section Kant uses the presupposition thesis to explicitly *reject* a realistic interpretation of the thing in itself. For here he writes that while “one might think the concept of appearances ... justifies the division of objects into *phenomena* and *noumena*”, nevertheless “the categories represent no special object given to the understanding alone, but only serve to determine the transcendental object, which is the concept of something in general, through that which is given in sensibility,

¹⁵ In his early article (1968), Allison equivocates on this point, sometimes supporting a two-worlds reading (as in p.170-172), at other times giving hints of a “double-aspect” view (p.179) Of course, in his *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Allison gives a rigorous defense of the double-aspect view, which I criticize below (in section 5).

in order thereby to know appearances empirically under concepts of objects. (A250-51)¹⁶ This passage is strong evidence for my reading, for here the thing in itself is equated with the transcendental object, and Kant relates the transcendental object back to the *concept* of something in general, which as we have seen, is not an object at all but a rule that guides the employment of empirical concepts in conferring the necessary unity among a manifold of representations.

One of the major criticisms of Kant's doctrine of the thing in itself is that it violates his own principles, since only objects of experience can have meaning¹⁷. In one sense this is tautologically true, if "meaning" is taken in a strict sense to refer only to those objects capable of being represented in intuition.¹⁸ But in another sense it is misleading insofar as the *concept* of a non-sensible object is not only perfectly meaningful, but as we have seen, necessary to the very objective reality of any knowledge whatsoever. Kant makes this clear when he connects his theory of modality with a certain thesis about meaning (*Sinn*), in the "Phenomena and Noumena" section. First, Kant points out that only those concepts that refer to objects of possible experience have *content* (A298/A239) and by "objects of possible experience" he means objects of *real* possibility (A444/B303). Nevertheless, concepts of objects that do not refer to

¹⁶ In one of his worst translation blunders, Kemp Smith translates the German "*Nun sollte man denken...*" as "Now we must bear in mind...", making it seem as if Kant is *endorsing* what follows, and hence committed to a two-worlds view, when in fact it should be translated as "One might think..." which makes it clear that Kant is *rejecting* what follows and the two-worlds view along with it. Here is just one of the passages where we find Kemp Smith reading his own two-worlds interpretation into the text.

¹⁷ Hence Strawson's claim that Kant violated his own "principle of significance", viz. that concepts have meaning only insofar as they are capable of some kind of empirical verification. As I shall argue, this reading depends on taking "meaning" or "significance" in a narrow sense, certainly not in the sense that Kant intended.

¹⁸ This is the sense of "meaning" (*Sinn*) that Kant has in mind at B298/A239-40.

objects of real possibility can be meaningful insofar as they are *logically* possible, i.e., insofar as the concepts are not self-contradictory. Kant calls this kind of meaning “transcendental meaning” (A248/B305) and goes on to claim that concepts with transcendental meaning “cannot be applied to any ostensible object. They are the pure form of the employment of the understanding in respect of objects in general, that is, of thought; but since they are merely its form, through them no object can be thought or determined.” Thus the concepts of a thing in itself or a transcendental object have meaning, though not when applied to “ostensible” objects¹⁹. These concepts have meaning only insofar as they contribute to the activity of the understanding, which serves as a “mere form” of thought. The concept of a transcendental object, for example, does not serve to establish the *content* of any empirical concept, for this is the province of intuition: but it does serve to impart the required unity (form) onto the manifold of intuition so that it can be thought in one consciousness. Thus, the “Phenomena and Noumena” section corroborates my reading of A104-109; for at one and the same time, Kant argues against a two-worlds view while maintaining the meaningfulness of the concepts of non-sensible objects as constituting a necessary part of the “pure form of the understanding.”

At this point, however, some unclarity has to be attributed to Kant's A-edition, when we consider the requisite connection between a thing in itself, a transcendental object, and a *noumenon*. For on the one hand, Kant sometimes seems to identify all three (as in A286/B343ff.); yet in other places, Kant explicitly states that the transcendental object cannot be equated with the *noumenon* (A253). This can be clarified as follows: when Kant speaks of “non-sensible” objects, he can mean one of two things: (1) the concept of a non-sensible object, which we must *think* in

¹⁹ I will argue later that the notion of a transcendental object, i.e., a totally mind-independent object is meaningless for Kant; even those objects of an “intellectual intuition” would be mind-dependent insofar as they are produced by the understanding.

considering appearances, or (2) the object of an intellectual intuition, which is impossible for us humans. It is because Kant uses *noumenon* in the A-edition to sometimes refer to (2) and not to (1) that he writes that the notion of a transcendental object is different from that of a *noumenon*. In the B-edition this confusion is removed when Kant distinguishes between negative and positive *noumena*. Positive *noumena* would be objects intuited by an understanding without the mediation of the sensibility; for spatio-temporal creatures like us, such *noumena* are “inadmissible” (A255/B311). However, if we take the notion of a *noumenon* in the negative sense, meaning only the concept of something that has no sensible features, it is “not only admissible, but as setting the limits to sensibility, is likewise indispensable.” (A256/B311). The concept of a negative noumenon is a “limiting” concept which “curbs the pretensions of sensibility” by drawing attention to the fact that, without the pure forms of the understanding to which such a general and content-less concept belongs, there could be no content-full thought or experience whatsoever, for without such a concept there would be nothing in the mind capable of unifying the data given to the senses²⁰. Thus Kant concludes the “Phenomena and Noumena” section by drawing attention once again to the important interplay of the understanding and the sensibility: “Understanding and sensibility, with us, can determine objects only when they are employed in conjunction. When we separate them, we have intuitions without concepts, or concepts without intuitions – in both cases, representations which we are not in a position to apply to any determinate object.” (A258/B314).

²⁰ This raises the problem, of course, of what is “given” to the senses to be unified by the pure concepts of the understanding, and then, more determinately, by empirical concepts. This is a very important problem to address, insofar as commentators believe that the only solution available to Kant is to postulate transcendental objects outside the mind that “affect” the mind. I will argue later that there are other solutions available to Kant and that textual and philosophical considerations show that he was not a proponent of any “double affection” theory.

On my reading, then, the concept of a thing in itself, the concept of a transcendental object, and the concept of a negative noumenon are all identical²¹. One and the same concept can serve as the correlate of appearance, the rule that guides the synthesis of the manifold, and as a limiting concept to the sensibility. When we consider the notion of an appearance, we are led to posit the concept of something underlying the appearance. But when we carefully consider what this concept is, we find that it is nothing but the formal unity which makes possible the synthesis of a manifold of representations into one unified appearance. And the fact that this concept constrains the synthesis in such a way leads to the idea that it serves as a “limit” to the sensibility; what is received by the sensibility must be organized according to the rules of the understanding, at the most general level by the concept of a transcendental object (or thing in itself, or negative noumenon). Such concepts are not to be taken realistically, as referring to real objects (the only objects are *empirical* objects, sticks and stones, bricks and bones); each concept, as a mere form of the understanding, is devoid of content and has nothing in its extension. Thus Kant writes, “we cannot, therefore, positively extend the sphere of the objects of our thought beyond the conditions of our sensibility, and assume besides the appearances that there are objects of pure thought, *noumena*, since such objects have no assignable positive meaning.” (B343/A287). And once again: “the critique of this pure understanding, accordingly, does not permit us to create a new field of

²¹ Erik Stenius (1962) argues that the transcendental object cannot be identified with the *noumenon*, since the *noumenon* as a thing in itself is determined to some degree, whereas the transcendental object as a “thing in no way” is completely indeterminate. Once again this fails to observe the concept/object distinction; once we do so, we see that the concept of a *noumenon*, negatively construed, is indeterminate, since no objects fall in its extension. The concept of a positive noumenon does have determinate content, since it purports to refer to non-sensible objects; yet Kant makes it clear that this concept is “inadmissible” for those beings like ourselves who do not have an intellectual intuition.

objects beyond those which may be presented to it as appearances, and so to stray into intelligible worlds.” (A289/B345). Such passages make it very difficult to support the view that Kant asserted the existence of such objects as transcendental objects or things in themselves.

3. THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT AS “CAUSE” OF APPEARANCES

I believe the textual evidence I have accumulated so far is devastating to any kind of two-worlds reading of Kant – devastating, that is, until we consider the role of the transcendental object as a “cause” or “ground” of appearances. There are indeed many passages where Kant assigns to the transcendental object the role of causing appearances, in the sense of “affecting” the mind to produce such appearances. For example, in the Paralogisms he says that the transcendental object “underlies outer appearances, and so affects our sense that it obtains representations.” (A358) In the “Concepts of Reflection”, Kant writes that the transcendental object is “the cause of appearance and therefore not itself appearance.” (A288/B344) At (A494/B522) Kant writes that the transcendental object is “given in itself prior to all experience”, which appears to suggest that it is an object outside the mind, existing in its own right prior to its being “given” to the senses. At other times, Kant describes the transcendental object more guardedly as “the ground” of appearances”, as in (A277/B333) and (A380) where he writes that the transcendental object is that which “underlies outer appearances . . . and is a ground (to us unknown) of the appearances.” The two-worlds advocates will argue that there is no other way to read these passages except as an explicit and unequivocal positing of non-sensible things. “Look, Kant was just too much of an eighteenth century ontologist to deny outright that there are such non-sensible objects that cause appearances”, one can hear them add, appealing to the historical context Kant was a product of. The problem here is not only textual and historical, but philosophical: given Kant’s thesis as to the transcendental ideality of space and time, there

doesn't seem to be any way of accounting for what is "received" in the sensibility without positing mind-independent objects as the ultimate source or "cause" of the data of experience. Thus Paton's metaphor of the human mind with its blue spectacles on: we can only see the world in terms of blue, but the bluish things that we see through our lenses must be caused by things outside those lenses²².

However, most of the two-worlds advocates would also admit that if Kant commits himself to a non-sensible cause of appearances, he becomes guilty of violating his own doctrine as to the "unknowability" of things in themselves, and his injunction that the categories (most notably, the category of causality) can be applied legitimately only to sensible objects. This problem was first raised by F.H. Jacobi, as we have seen, and it has been a challenge to Kant scholars ever since. More recently, P.F. Strawson's interpretation of Kant basically assumes a two-worlds reading of Kant, and on this basis he criticizes Kant for advancing a doctrine that violates his own "principle of significance", according to which there can be no meaningful employment of concepts that do not relate to the empirical conditions of their application. Thus Strawson's objection:

For the resultant transposition of the terminology of objects "affecting" the constitution of subjects takes that terminology altogether out of the range of its intelligible employment, viz., the spatiotemporal range...the original model, the governing analogy, is perverted or transposed into a form which violates any acceptable requirement of intelligibility, including Kant's own principle of significance (Strawson (1966), pp. 41-2).

While Strawson believes that the "transcendental" side to Kant's philosophy is a ghostly relic better pruned off than salvaged, some two-worlds enthusiasts have sought to rescue Kant by appealing to a "double affection" whereby the transcendental object "affects" the transcendental

²² See Paton (1936), p.166. Paton argues that there is no other way we could distinguish between various shades of color unless there was a difference "in" the object itself causing such differences.

ego, producing a world of empirical objects, which then “affects” the senses to produce appearances of those objects²³. Apparently, this interpretation frees Kant from contradiction, since there can be a “noumenal causality” that holds between the thing in itself and the transcendental ego, whereas the standard “empirical causality” applies only to the relation between appearances and empirical objects, as Kant demands. Aside from being objectionable from a philosophical point of view, a major problem with the notion of double affection is that nowhere does Kant hold that the category of causality is admissible as a relation between the thing in itself and the transcendental ego²⁴. In fact, he says the opposite time and time again: e.g., “From all this it undeniably follows that the pure concepts of understanding can never admit of transcendental but always only of empirical employment, and that the principles of pure understanding can apply only to objects of the senses under the universal conditions of possible experience.” (B303). Kant does indeed have a

²³ This theory was, to my knowledge, first put forward by Adickes (1920), and finds a spirited exposition and defense in Wolff (1963). See also Kemp Smith (1962), p.282.

²⁴ Regarding the philosophical problems involved in the double-affection theory, Vaihinger writes “Or one accepts a double affection, a transcendent through things in themselves, and an empirical through objects in space. In this case, however, one falls into the contradiction that a representation for the transcendental ego should afterwards serve as a thing in itself for the empirical ego, the affection of which produces in the ego, above and beyond that transcendental representation of the object, an empirical representation of the very same object.” (quoted in Allison (1984), p.248). I think Vaihinger overstates his case here, for there is no contradiction if we distinguish between empirical and transcendental levels of representation. Nevertheless, by postulating two different senses of “thing in itself” and “appearance”, the theory faces the onerous task of accounting for noumenal causality, empirical causality, and the relations between the empirical and noumenal realms of existences... it is as if we are stepping away from the “critical” philosophy back to Plato’s division of worlds into the intelligible and the sensible where all the problems concerning the nature of the relationship between these two heterogeneous realms await.

concept of “noumenal causality”, but it is clear that in the passages where he makes use of this concept, he is referring to the moral self and its freedom to determine “i.e., cause” itself by making choices that conform to the moral law. At the very least, one cannot without further argument use this sense of “noumenal causality” to support the idea of a noumenon as the non-sensible cause of appearances.

While I admit that Kant does not express himself well on this issue, I do not think that the passages concerning the non-sensible “cause” of appearances necessitates a two-worlds reading of Kant. For one, if we look at these passages in their broader context, we find that the point Kant is making is similar to the point that he made in A-Deduction concerning employing the concept of a transcendental object as the “correlate” of appearances. For example, take the entire passage where Kant writes that the transcendental object is “the intelligible cause of appearances... given in itself prior to all experience.” (A494/B522):

We may, however, entitle the purely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object, but merely in order to have something corresponding to sensibility as receptivity. To this transcendental object we can ascribe the whole extent of possible perceptions, and can say that it is given in itself prior to all experience.

There can be little doubt that the “merely” here is carefully inserted by Kant to warn the reader *against* misinterpreting his words as advocating a two-worlds division of objects. Furthermore, the point that Kant is making here is the very same point he made in A104-109 concerning the presupposition thesis: something has to “correspond” to sensibility in the sense that the notion of a sensible appearance logically entails the notion of something that appears. But as I have argued already, this notion of a something in general refers to a concept, not an object. Why then does Kant introduce the “causal” terminology? Well, we can say that the concept of a transcendental object “causes” appearances in the sense that it is a necessary condition for something being an appearance that it be

informed by the unity the concept imposes on the synthesis of the manifold (in this sense the concept of a transcendental object is a causally necessary condition for the possibility of experience)²⁵. Additionally, the concept of a transcendental object, as a mere “form” of the understanding, enables us to conceive of appearances as they are in abstraction from the forms of sensibility. As such, it plays an absolutely essential methodological role, in providing for a contrast between objects as they are experienced, and *possible* objects of experience. As Kant writes, “something has to correspond to sensibility as receptivity.” While the sensibility accounts for the empirical characteristics of particular objects, the understanding accounts for those general characteristics which any object must possess to be a possible object of experience.

I propose that Kant expunged all references to the transcendental object in the B-edition precisely because he wanted to eliminate any misleading impression that there are such *things* as transcendental objects. Instead of using the potentially misleading language of the transcendental object, Kant introduced the distinction between positive and negative *noumena*, to make it obvious that the only admissible sense of *noumenon* or thing in itself is a “negative” one, i.e., one that makes no positive claims concerning a mind-independent reality at all. Kant did not abandon mention of the transcendental object because it was a “pre-Critical” survival, as Kemp Smith thinks. He abandoned it precisely because it could potentially mislead interpreters like Kemp Smith into thinking that he was an advocate of a two-worlds view.

Nevertheless, it is still fair to ask how, given this interpretation, Kant’s philosophy can avoid spiraling into a totalizing idealism if there is nothing outside the mind-dependent forms of sensibility to provide the raw “matter” for the sensibility’s receptivity. The answer to this question

²⁵ As additional support for this reading, elsewhere Kant writes that we must distinguish different senses of “cause” just to account for the sense in which the thing in itself is a cause (A206/B252).

turns out to be rather complex: I will argue in the last section of this paper that Kant's philosophy in fact *does* end up spiraling into a totalizing idealism, much in line with Fichte's interpretation of Kant. However, for now it is only necessary to point out that Kant took himself to be initiating a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy. The reigning assumption before this Copernican turn was that knowledge consisted in some kind of correspondence between representations and mind-independent objects. On this assumption, the door to skepticism was thrown open, for there does not seem to be an Archimedean point from which we can tell how or whether our representations "hook up" with an external reality²⁶. As Kant put it, "if we treat outer objects as things in themselves, it is quite impossible to understand how we could arrive at a knowledge of their reality outside us, since we have to rely merely on the representation which is in us." (A378). The only way out of this skeptical morass is to take the Copernican turn and assume, contrary to commonsense, that objects conform to our representations. Once this move is made, however, the question of classical representationalism (how do we know whether our representations correspond to a mind-independent reality?) no longer has any philosophical significance. For the central philosophical problem now becomes: given that objects *do* conform to our representations (that is, given that we *do* have knowledge of the world around us), how is this possible? Kant's repudiation of a mind-independent reality amounts in effect to a rejection of classical representationalism, while his continued use of the language of the transcendental object reflects part of his answer to this new and legitimate question of philosophy given the Copernican turn.

²⁶ In this connection, Richard Rorty's argument (1979) that Kant was a mere continuation of the bad idea that the mind is a mirror of nature is therefore completely off the mark. In fact, I think Kant's arguments against the Archimedean urge to "anchor" knowledge in some mind-independent reality are far more philosophically penetrating than Rorty's.

In connection with this point, it is interesting to note Kant's distinction between the meaninglessness of a transcendent object, and the useful employment of the concept of a transcendental object²⁷. Kant defines the difference between the transcendent and the transcendental at A296/B352:

Thus transcendental and transcendent are not interchangeable terms. The principles of pure understanding which we have set out above, allow only of empirical and not of transcendental employment, that is, employment extending beyond the limits of experience. A principle, on the other hand, which takes away these limits, or even commands us to actually transgress them, is called transcendent.

The “transcendental” employment of the pure concepts of the understanding is meaningful only when applied to possible objects of experience; but a “transcendent” employment of concepts to refer to objects independently of sensibility is meaningless. Kant calls this transcendent urge to go beyond the limits of experience an “illusion”, which he characterizes as taking “the subjective necessity of a connection of our concepts, which is to the advantage of the understanding, for an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves.” (A297/B354) This can be fully understood in light of what has been said so far: we are led, by our analysis of the concept of a sensible representation, to posit the concept of a transcendental object: this establishes a “subjective necessity of our concepts, which is to the advantage of the understanding.” But we mistake this *subjective* necessity for an *objective* one by supposing that there are actually such things as non-sensible objects corresponding to our representations. In a word, we “project” onto things what are only subjective determinations within ourselves. This can only lead to illusion, where reason runs free to

²⁷ This crucial distinction is obscured by the Kemp Smith translation, where “transcendental” is sometimes used where “transcendent” should be, as in A257/B313.

proclaim all kinds of illegitimate knowledge. In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant attempts to diagnose this illusion, and this is where we find the Antinomies as well as his critique of natural theology. But for our purposes it is enough to observe that the postulation of any kind of real “objectivity” to things in themselves is as much a transcendental illusion as the postulation of a “first cause” in Nature.

4. DISTINGUISHING MY READING FROM THE DOUBLE-ASPECT VIEW

In recent years, Gerold Prauss and Henry Allison have put forward an alternative reading of Kant that challenges the two-worlds view, what has come to be known as the “double-aspect” view. Since I have repudiated the two-worlds reading, and have argued against viewing the transcendental object or thing in itself as constituting a separate class of entity, it may seem that my position is consonant with the double-aspect position. This impression however would be mistaken, for I find the double-aspect theory textually weak and philosophically problematic.

According to the double-aspect view, the distinction between things in themselves and appearances should not be construed as a distinction between two kinds of objects, but rather as one between two different ways of considering one and the same object. We can consider an object as it appears in space and time, in which case we treat it as an empirical object: at this level, all objects are “representations” or “appearances.” But we can also consider the very same object as it is independently of how it appears in space and time: at this level, the object can be viewed as a “thing in itself” or alternatively, as a “thing that appears.” This interpretation is intended to deliver Kant not only from the objections made against the two-worlds view, but also from the charge that his “transcendental idealism” in the end amounts to no more than a Berkeleyan subjective idealism. Against the two-worlds view, it holds that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is not

ontological (concerning two separate realms of objects) but methodological, concerning how we can come to conceive of a single class of objects. And against Berkeleyan idealism, it holds that there is an important distinction between things as appearances (the empirical story) and things that appear (the transcendental story), in which case Kant cannot be accused of holding that objects are *merely* phenomenal objects.

I think it is true that many passages in the *Critique* indicate *something like* the double-aspect view, insofar as Kant does say that we must distinguish “between things as objects of experience and those same things as things in themselves” (Bxxvii). Allison finds further support for it in Kant’s distinction between the empirical and transcendental stories of appearances (at B63/A46, for example), and in Kant’s discussion of “transcendental reflection” at A261/B316. However, in light of my reading of the transcendental object so far, I think it is possible to interpret these passages differently. Kant makes it clear throughout the *Critique* that when we speak of “objects of knowledge” the *only* way to consider an object is empirically. On the transcendental level, we are only in the position to *think* of an object as it is in itself, we are not entitled to say that there *is* such an object. Many of Allison’s own remarks appear to support this point, e.g., when he argues that we are entitled only to the *concept* of a thing in itself, and not to any existing things in themselves²⁸. But then the contrast between viewing “one and the same object” empirically or transcendently is misleading. For when we abstract away all the empirical characteristics of an object, we are left with the concept of something in general, which is a *concept* and not an object. As we have

²⁸ Thus Allison writes, “Any reference to an object (in the transcendental context) as the cause or ground of our representations must, therefore, involve the thought (although certainly not the knowledge) of the object as it is in itself...But this does not commit us to the illegitimate postulation of any superempirical, unknowable entities. On the contrary, there is in this entire account of affection no reference to any entities other than those which are describable in spatiotemporal terms.” (1983, p.250)

seen, the concept of something in general is a concept that applies to all empirical objects, and so it is numerically “one and the same throughout all our knowledge” (A109). Allison’s double-aspect talk, on the other hand, suggests misleadingly that every object is both an empirical and a transcendental object, insofar as it can be viewed from the empirical and transcendental perspectives (just as the type-identity theorist holds that a pain is both mental and physical insofar as it can be identified as either as a sensible quality or a neuro-physiological state). But if so, then there would be at least as many transcendental objects as there are empirical objects (that is, for every appearance there would be a *something* that appears). Clearly this is not what Allison intends, since he doesn’t want to say that there *are* any transcendental objects – there is only the *concept* of a transcendental object we must think when abstracting away everything empirical from an object. In fact, the double-aspect view appears to retain a key feature of the discredited two-worlds picture, viz., that we can quantify over as many transcendental objects as we can empirical objects.

There is yet another problem for the double-aspect view. Suppose there is a cup in front of me, and I am viewing it from the empirical perspective. Then I can say it has certain properties – it is hollow, white, serves as a container for liquids and other materials, etc. Now let us view the very same object from the transcendental perspective. What properties can I now ascribe to it? Well, Allison tells us that we are to abstract away all the empirical properties of the object, i.e., all the properties that give the cup the character of an appearance in space and time. What are we left with? Certainly not the *cup*, unless we want to say with Descartes that the cup is a certain “substance” that lies behind all its sensible properties. But that is clearly *not* the intention of the double-aspect view: the point is not to reify the transcendental object as a substance lying behind the appearance (there we are back to the two-worlds view), the point was to de-reify the transcendental object by viewing it adverbially as a “way of conceiving” of the empirical object. But if we are barred from viewing the object as a substance lying behind the appearance, we are barred from

viewing it *as* an object at all. What we arrive at when we perform the abstraction is not a “something that appears” but rather the bare *concept* of a something in general, i.e., we are left with the concept of a completely indeterminate object. Once again the emphasis shifts away from the ontological question concerning the status of the object, and towards the epistemic question concerning the status of our concepts.

Another conclusion we can draw is that the double-aspect view does not diffuse the charge that Kant’s philosophy spirals into a Berkeleyan idealism. Recall that the double-aspect view sought to accomplish this by appealing to the distinction between the appearance or representation (the empirical story) and the something which appears, or that which the representation is *of* (the transcendental story). But from the transcendental perspective, I am *not* entitled to postulate the *existence* of a something lying behind the appearance. I am only entitled to the employment of my concept of an object in general as the formal unity any object must possess to be an object at all. We *can* consider an object as it is independently of the sensibility, but what we arrive at is not an object “viewed transcendently”, but rather the mere *form* of an object, i.e., the concept or rule that provides for synthetic unity in a manifold. Now as I mentioned, there are many passages in Allison which suggest that this is in fact what he intends. But not only is the double-aspect talk misleading, he is mistaken when he maintains that this interpretation of the transcendental object delivers Kant from the charge of idealism. For so long as the transcendental object is viewed as a mere form of the understanding and not as an object lying behind the empirical (phenomenal) object, there is no argument against the view that the mind itself creates the object (or rather, that the object is constituted *entirely* by mental acts of some kind²⁹).

²⁹ I admit, however that Kant, in his effort to distance himself from Berkeley’s position, at times expresses himself poorly on this issue, particularly in the *Prolegomena*, where he contrasts his transcendental idealism with Berkeley’s “visionary” idealism. There he does write as if we need to postulate the existence

I agree with Allison and the double-aspect view that there is an important distinction between the empirical and transcendental perspectives, a distinction that Kant himself often draws attention to in order to distinguish himself from previous thinkers, including Berkeley. The point of the contrast is to draw attention to the different contributions that the sensibility and the understanding make in the acquisition of knowledge. On the empirical level, appearances are part of an “objective world” not of our own making, one that is constrained by the forms of space and time and the schematized categories, including that of substance and causality. However, given the presupposition thesis, we can always raise the question as to what “lies behind the appearance”, that is, what appearances would be like when stripped of their spatio-temporal characteristics. We are led to consider the role of the understanding in constituting the object, completely independent of the forms of sensible intuition, space and time. When we attend to this, we arrive at the concept of a transcendental object, the concept of an object that contains only those formal features that any object of possible knowledge must possess to be an object. In any act of cognition, which can be expressed by the judgment “I think X”, there must be a unified X that one thinks about. This concept of a “something in general, = X” (A 104) is a purely formal concept (as the variable “X” signifies), one which the understanding employs in the anticipation of particular empirical objects that fall under it. As such, it is not quite correct to say that, for Kant, the empirical object as appearance is merely a “phenomenal object”, the view commonly

of things in themselves, in order to rebut the charge that he is a Berkeleyan (see especially Part One, Remark II). It should be kept in mind, however, that Kant often stresses that the *Prolegomena* is meant as an introduction to students unfamiliar with the complexity of his system. The two-worlds view which appears in that passage can be seen as a preliminary and not final indication of his considered position. Clearly all traces of such a two-worlds perspective are obliterated in the much more nuanced, de-reistic “Phenomena and Noumena” section in the B-edition of the First *Critique*.

attributed to Berkeley. For the object that appears before us is not just a “bundle” of sensible characteristics, but is rather a *unified manifold* of sensible characteristics. The concept of a transcendental object provides for the unity of this manifold, a unity that we could not get just by listing all of the empirical characteristics of the object. Kant’s innovation here lies in accounting for the unity of the object by appealing to a formal rule of the understanding, rather than to some mind-independent “substance” or bare *substratum* that underlies the empirical object. However, while this appeal to the distinct role of the understanding helps to differentiate Kant from Berkeley, it should be clear that it does not make Kant any less of an idealist. For after all, the empirical object remains constituted entirely by the cooperation of the understanding and the sensibility, the two faculties that make up the *mind* or cognition in general.

5. THE FICHTEAN READING OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT

In the Introductions to the *Science of Knowledge* of 1797, J.S. Fichte presents himself as the true heir to Kant, the only interpreter who has seen clearly the radical nature of Kant’s philosophy as involving the complete rejection of the thing in itself as a non-sensible cause of appearances. He derides all those so-called Kantians of his day such as Reinhold, Schulz, and Eberhard who retain a vestigial commitment to the existence of the thing in itself or transcendental object. These commentators cannot see that when Kant invokes the thing in itself, he invokes only the “mere thought” of the thing in itself, which has no reference at all and is entirely a creature of the understanding. He ridicules the notion that the thing in itself is a cause of appearances, when it is clear that it can only be a mere abstraction from appearances. To quote him in full:

This thought of a thing in itself is grounded upon sensation, and sensation they again wish to have grounded upon the thought of the thing in itself. Their earth reposes on a mighty elephant, and the mighty

elephant – repose on their earth. Their thing in itself, which is a mere thought, is supposed to operate upon the self! Have they again forgotten what they first said; and is their thing in itself, which a moment ago was a mere thought, now something other than that? Or do they wish in all earnest to attribute to a mere thought the exclusive predicate of reality, that of efficacy?³⁰

As Fichte incisively observes, if we attribute “existence” to the thing in itself, then we have to attribute the qualities of “efficacy” and thus “causality” to it, which violates Kant’s claim that the categories of existence and causality cannot be applied to anything other than appearances. However, if we attend to the philosophical activity whereby the thing in itself is first posited, we realize that it is constructed by the mind as a result of thinking about the nature of an appearance. This is basically the “presupposition thesis” we have already discussed: the notion of an appearance logically requires the notion of something that appears. But as we have seen, this does not require us to posit the existence of a non-sensible object; it rather calls attention to the concept of an object in general as that higher-order concept presupposed in any act of cognition. Indeed, Fichte’s case could have been made stronger if he had attended to the role of the concept of the transcendental object in the A-Deduction, to provide that formal unity required for the synthesis of a manifold of representations. But Fichte’s general point, which is that the transcendental object refers only to a mere form of the understanding and not to anything outside the mind, is basically correct.

Fichte also criticizes the two-worlds theorist’s supposition that we *have* to postulate a mind-independent object as the ultimate cause of our sensations³¹. While our sensations are indeed “given” to us independently

³⁰ In *Second Introduction to Science of Knowledge* (1982), p. 55 (I,483)

³¹ See *Second Introduction to Science of Knowledge* (1982), p. 61 (I, 490), where Fichte writes: “The wish to explain this original feeling further, by attributing it to the efficacy of a *somewhat*, is the dogmatism of the Kantians, which I have just been pointing out, and which they would be happy to impose upon Kant. This somewhat of theirs is necessarily the ill-starred thing in itself.”

of our will, we cannot validly infer that this independent constraint is due to a cause outside the mind. For it is at least possible that the ego projects the world prior to consciousness, and that consciousness awakes to find itself in the world, not aware that it projected the world to begin with. If we reject the idea of a non-sensible cause of appearances, Fichte suggests, we are driven to the idealist conclusion that the cause of appearances must lie within the mind itself. Again, this need not commit us to Berkeley's brand of idealism, since it is possible that the "I" of apperception through its noetic acts projects the world, while empirical consciousness (as an object of psychological investigation) is itself part of this projected world. Thus we can make a distinction between empirical objects as appearing to consciousness, and appearances as creations or projections of the absolute ego, in this way accounting for how there can be an objective world "not of our own making" (that is, an objective world which exists independently of *empirical* consciousness)³². Based on Kantian principles, then, we are driven to a "Science of Knowledge" which retraces the steps whereby the absolute ego posits the non-ego, and where the subject/object distinction emerges out of the primordial activity of this absolute ego.

There is yet another, all-important reason why Fichte seeks to de-ify the transcendental object. While Fichte declared himself a disciple of Kant, he did criticize Kant for failing to fully work out the unity of theoretical and practical reason³³. The problem centers on whether the "I" of apperception that applies to all judgments of the understanding is the same "I" of practical reason that applies to our moral consciousness.

³² Although it would be off the topic to argue for here, it seems to me that this methodology is nearly identical to the one that Husserl utilized to formulate his own transcendental idealism in his *Ideas*. As far as I can glean, Husserl, gives no indication of being aware of the relevance of Fichte's philosophy to his own concerns.

³³ My comments here owe a lot to Frederick Neuhouser's careful analysis, in his *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* (1990).

Often Kant, out of fear that apperception would be interpreted as a Cartesian substance, claims that the “I” of apperception is merely a formal annexation to judgment (as he says, it must be at least possible to add the “I think” to every judgment). At other times, he suggests that apperception is not merely a formal requirement but involves an actual consciousness of the unifying acts of the understanding³⁴. Fichte resolves this ambiguity by consistently interpreting Kant in the latter way, arguing that apperception does involve an actual awareness of myself as subject. To alleviate Kant’s fears, Fichte makes it clear that this intuition of the self as subject of awareness is not an intuition of the self as substance or object of consciousness, since then we would have a representation of the “self” as object, which would in turn require or *presuppose* the subject “having” that representation of itself³⁵. Once it is seen that apperception is a reflexive, nonrepresentational activity that constitutes the existence of the “I” we have the key to unifying theoretical and practical reason. For then we can say that the self-positing of the subject as apperception in theoretical reason is the very same activity that occurs when the self

³⁴ An interesting passage where Kant appears to make both of these claims at once occurs in the *Prolegomena*, section 46, where he first indicates that we do indeed have an intuition of the self, but then retreats to the non-Cartesian claim that in fact this intuition is not really an intuition (rather, as he says, the “absolute subject” is “only the reference of inner phenomenon to a single subject”).

³⁵ Thus Fichte writes: “Insofar as you are conscious of some object, for example, the wall in front of you, you are conscious of your thinking of this wall, and a consciousness of the wall is possible only insofar as you are conscious of your thinking. But in order to be conscious of your thinking, you must be conscious of yourself . . . Thus, no object comes to consciousness except under the condition that I am also conscious of myself, the conscious subject. This principle is incontrovertible. But if it is claimed that in this self-consciousness I am an object to myself, then what was true of the subject in the previous case (i.e., the consciousness of the wall) must also hold for the subject here (i.e., in self-consciousness). It too becomes an object and requires a new subject, and so on *ad infinitum*.” (from “Attempt at a New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”, pp.526-7)

chooses its regulative maxims in practical reason. In both cases, the self constitutes itself – in the former case, by determining its existence as differentiated from objects of consciousness, in the latter case by determining its identity by choosing the kind of self it wants to be.

The significance of all this for our discussion of the transcendental object is as follows. If there were a transcendental object outside the mind that “affected” it, there could be no hope of reconciling theoretical and practical reason. For then theoretical reason would be in part determined by something outside itself, whereas practical reason would be “free” to create its own objects through a kind of noumenal causality. Fichte needs to argue, then, that theoretical reason creates *its* own objects by the very same activity whereby the moral self creates its objects when determining its own regulative maxims. Thus the objects of consciousness are not given to the mind transcendently; rather, they become the means by which the self constitutes itself, by entering into a distinctively subjective “self-relation” that differs from the relations the subject has to any object of consciousness. In short, the unity of pure reason requires that the spontaneity of practical reason be extended to theoretical reason as well, in which case in neither its theoretical nor its practical use can reason be determined by any objects that lie outside itself.

Obviously a lot more needs to be said here about the relationship between the transcendental subject and the objects of cognition: in particular, the whole issue of noumenal causality re-arises, since such objects are said to be “produced” out of the pure spontaneity of reason itself. Without going deep into these issues, it is enough to say that the noumenal causality invoked here does not violate Kant’s critical claim that the principle of causality not be extended beyond the bounds of experience. For after all, the pure spontaneity of reason does not produce a realm of things in themselves: it produces a realm of nature, consisting of objects that appear to us in space and time. It is true that the causality whereby reason produces the realm of nature is not the same causality whereby empirical objects affect each other or affect the empirical self,

which is why Kant himself sometimes uses the phrase “noumenal causality” to refer to the former kind of causality. But it should be clear that this kind of noumenal causality is not to be conflated with the illegitimate kind of noumenal causality that the two-worlds theorist is forced to attribute to Kant in order to account for the manner in which things in themselves affect the mind to produce a realm of appearances.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that there is a plausible way to read Kant as consistently rejecting a two-worlds picture and upholding instead a de-reistic view whereby the transcendental object or thing in itself indicates only a pure concept of the understanding whose role is to govern the synthesis of any unified manifold (“object of experience”). This reading of Kant liberates him from the well-known textual and philosophical difficulties of the two-worlds view. Furthermore, I have argued that this interpretation leads to a strong idealist position as opposed to the double-aspect view of Allison and Prauss. This idealist position was essentially spelled out by Fichte, who had the sagacity to not only debunk the two-worlds reading of Kant, but show how such a reading would render impossible the unity of theoretical and practical reason that Kant sought but never quite achieved. While Fichte may not be the final word on this matter, I hope to have demonstrated that his alternative reading of Kant should at the very least be reconsidered by contemporary philosophers working in this area.

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