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What's the Problem with Noumenal Affection?

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What's the Problem with Noumenal Affection?

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

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For Kritika Yegnashankaran and Hari Darmawan

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Note on Abbreviations to Historical Texts

The works of Kant that are cited in this project are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

Kant's works are referred to using the numbering in the Akademie Edition, and the following abbreviations:

<i>A/B</i>	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>
<i>Corr.</i>	<i>Correspondence</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Critique of the Power of Judgement</i>
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
<i>Discovery</i>	<i>On a Discovery whereby any new critique of pure reason is to be made superfluous by an older one</i>
<i>Groundwork</i>	<i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>
<i>JL</i>	<i>Jäsche Logic</i>
<i>Mrongovius</i>	<i>Metaphysik Mrongovius</i>
<i>NM</i>	<i>Negative Magnitudes</i>
<i>Proleg.</i>	<i>A Prolegomena to any future metaphysics that will be able to come forward as science</i>

Texts by other authors are cited with the original date of publication, with the date of the edition used listed in the bibliography.

Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote that “in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable ... we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought” (1921, 3). Writing roughly one hundred and twenty years after Immanuel Kant’s death, Wittgenstein was keenly aware of the theoretical complications involved in the drawing of limits. Perhaps, as he wrote this, Wittgenstein was also keenly aware of the troubled legacy of Kant’s transcendental philosophy. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had embarked on an attempt to draw the very limits of speculative reason—on the knowable—but he found that in order to secure the bounds of the knowable, it was necessary for him to speak of unknowable ‘things in themselves.’ Kant seemed to straddle both sides of the limit: he appears to have been claiming to know what is supposed to be, by his own terms, unknowable. Because of this precarious position, the philosophical theory that stands at the heart of Kant’s philosophy, transcendental idealism, has been problematized since its very inception.

Among the problems surrounding the thing in itself, the attack on transcendental idealism’s doctrine of ‘noumenal affection’ stands out as a decisive objection to Kant’s philosophy. According to transcendental idealism, the subject’s mind is causally affected by things in themselves, producing sensations in the mind which are then synthesized resulting in our experiences of the empirical world (what Kant calls ‘appearances’). Noumenal affection is a crucial part in the explanation of the possibility of our experience, and therefore this doctrine is an indispensable part of transcendental idealism. But this doctrine, as many have rightly observed, seems to be fundamentally incompatible with Kant’s own claim that things in themselves are unknowable by us. This fundamental incompatibility is known as the ‘legendary problem of noumenal affection.’

As one might expect, this legendary problem has also attracted the attention and efforts of those who are sympathetic to Kant. In the past few decades many have leapt to Kant's defense on exactly this problem.¹ But what is interesting is that, while all seem to agree on what the problem is, an agreement on the general direction a solution should take has not likewise emerged. Even more troubling is the fact that each sympathizer seems to have wildly differing conceptions on what the exact details of the theory are, and thus which are the essential parts of the theory that need preserving. The result is a medley of potential solutions to a seemingly monolithic problem, but the solutions, if successful, seem to be hardly generalizable to all concerned parties as they are informed by contentious presuppositions about the theory that is being defended. Thus, solutions that turn on weakening certain commitments of transcendental idealism will surely be unacceptable for those who think such commitments are a crucial part of the theory itself and so should remain untouched.

It is in this context that my project arises. This project is about the legendary problem of noumenal affection, but it is not primarily an attempt to deliver a knockdown solution or argument against the problem, one more among the many that have been produced in the literature. Instead, the approach I take in this project is broadly diagnostic; rather than making a new move on the existing board, my goal is to reexamine the game itself. I will be reevaluating the problem by beginning with figuring out *who* the problem is a problem for. In other words, under what understanding of the theory does the problem metastasize? I then examine the supposedly incompatible components of the theory to reveal the presuppositions that have shaped the problem and consequently have dictated the resources available within Kant's own theoretical framework to resolve it. I argue that the common way scholars have understood the

¹ For example, see: Rescher (1972), Allison (1983; 2004), Langton (1998), Piché (2004), and Hogan (2009a; 2009b).

components of the problem suffers from serious textual and philosophical worries and propose my own account of how they should be understood. In the final analysis of the problem, with the doctrines reconfigured and updated, I show a potential solution out of the problem that Kant has available to him that was unavailable under the previous understanding of the problem.

The Chapters

The three chapters in this project reflects the three components of the legendary problem of noumenal affection: (1) Kant's view, transcendental idealism, (2) the doctrine of noumenal affection, and, (3) its seemingly incompatible counterpart, the doctrine of noumenal ignorance.

In chapter one, I introduce the relevant interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism. The reading I propose is known in the literature as the *metaphysical* interpretation, and I recapitulate the way it understands the fundamental commitments of the theory. With a stable account of the theory in tow we can better appreciate what is at stake but also why the problem has been so incredibly difficult to resolve, and why many believe that the theory inevitably folds under the pressure of the problem. We will see that if we are committed to preserving the integrity of the theory's commitments, a solution will not come easily. In the second part of the chapter, I consider three common criticisms that have been lodged against the metaphysical reading that question its credentials from an interpretive standpoint. I argue that these objections to the metaphysical interpretation are defeasible concerns and conclude that the problem of noumenal affection is still the real credible threat that the theory needs to face.

In chapter two, I argue that the common causal interpretation of noumenal affection suffers from textual and philosophical problems and I present my own alternative account, which I call the grounding interpretation. Under the causal construction, noumenal affection presupposes knowledge of the affecting relation (i.e., causality), but this presupposition conflicts

with the text in which Kant seems to claim that we lack knowledge of the affecting relation. Furthermore, the causal interpretation necessarily finds Kant guilty of applying the categories transphenomenally. Thus, the solutions that adopt this construction of the problem are severely limited and are forced into making moves that seem to undermine or weaken the theory. In contrast, the grounding interpretation that I offer avoids these problems. I argue for this account based on a holistic approach to the text, where I consider as much of the textual evidence for noumenal affection as possible, choosing not to focus only on the causal passages. Under my account, noumenal affection is a generic claim of ontological dependence based on the logical concept of ground and consequence, rather than the transcendental concept of cause and effect. My account will have the twofold benefit of avoiding the textual and philosophical problems of the causal interpretation and of explaining several interpretive questions surrounding the way Kant talks about noumenal affection that have been largely ignored in the literature.

Chapter three completes the diagnostic of the problem by investigating the doctrine of noumenal ignorance to see whether it is ultimately compatible with noumenal affection. Recent developments in Kant scholarship on Kant's account of cognition and its difference from knowledge paves the way for a more rigorous and textually accurate understanding of noumenal ignorance as the denial of our *cognition* of things in themselves. I argue that on the corrected understanding of noumenal ignorance there can be knowledge of things in themselves without cognition of them, and thus revealing, from within Kant's own framework, a potential way out of the stubborn and thorny problem of noumenal affection. I end the project by considering the implications of the proposed account of noumenal ignorance on a longstanding debate in Kant scholarship over the question of whether transcendental idealism is committed to the existence of one or two worlds.

Transcendental Idealism

Introduction

The legendary problem of noumenal affection is a devastating critique to the philosophical theory at the heart of Kant's critical philosophy, transcendental idealism. Kant says that transcendental idealism (henceforth, TI) is the "key" to solving all the problems that have troubled metaphysics, such as skepticism of the external world, causation, and God (A xiii), and in his ethics, Kant appeals to transcendental idealism for the possibility of free will (*Groundwork* 4:448). TI is important for Kant and for understanding his philosophy. To comprehend the challenge the problem of noumenal affection (henceforth, NA) poses, we will first need to have a basic grasp of transcendental idealism, the position that it critiques.

In the literature on TI, there are two opposing interpretations known as the *metaphysical* and *epistemological* readings which interpret the commitments of TI in radically different ways.² Unfortunately, there is no consensus on which interpretation gets the view right. In this chapter, I will present the metaphysical interpretation of TI because it strikes me as the more plausible account that is more consistent with Kant's larger philosophical concerns, and because the problem of noumenal affection was originally conceived under the metaphysical reading of TI.

In the first section of the chapter, I present a metaphysical interpretation of three fundamental commitments of TI. These are: (i) the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves, (ii) the claim that we cannot know things in themselves (noumenal ignorance), and (iii) the claim that we are affected by things in themselves (noumenal

² See Ameriks (1982) for a helpful overview.

affection). In the second section, I consider three common objections that have been posed to the metaphysical interpretation of the theory. They each argue that, under the metaphysical reading, TI is inconsistent and take this inconsistency as evidence for the inadequacy of the metaphysical interpretation. I argue that none of these objections succeed, and I conclude that the problem of noumenal affection is the most credible threat to transcendental idealism.

I *The Metaphysical Interpretation of Transcendental Idealism*

One of the most well-known components of transcendental idealism is its distinction between appearances (spatiotemporal objects) and things in themselves. Kant thinks that human experience results from two cognitive faculties that he calls ‘sensitivity’ and ‘understanding’ (A51/B75). The former provides us with the objects to think (through what Kant calls ‘intuitions’), and the latter thinks those objects by applying concepts to them. The sensitivity, as a source of our cognition³, possesses two *a priori* forms of intuition: space and time. These forms are conditions for our experience of objects, they dictate that all objects must be presented to us spatiotemporally. Kant argues in the Aesthetic that space and time are merely subjective conditions of our minds, and not the objective condition of things in general (A39/B56). This means that space and time are unique to creatures like us alone and are not some kind of Newtonian ‘universal substance’ or Leibnizian relation that would, in principle, attach to any possible object. This entails that the whole spatiotemporal world is—in some way—constituted by our minds; thus, Kant’s radical claim that “we ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity in them that we call nature” (A125).

However, Kant does not conclude that the empirical world is just an illusion and that nothing else exists besides it. Rather, he takes the mind-dependency of appearances to indicate

³ Kant later defines ‘experience’ as ‘empirical cognition’ (B147).

that there is some aspect of reality that is inaccessible to creatures like us. Kant refers to this mysterious part of reality as ‘things in themselves’ and says that “nothing whatsoever [can be known] about the things in themselves that may ground [the appearances]” (A49/B66).

Our ignorance of things in themselves is the direct consequence of their inaccessibility to our minds that can only receive objects insofar as the objects are presentable spatiotemporally. However, Kant thinks that the sensibility is a ‘receptive’ faculty that only produces sensible intuitions when the mind is affected in some way, in contrast to the understanding which is a ‘spontaneous’ faculty that “brings forth representations itself” (A51/B75).⁴ This means that the faculty of sensibility provides intuitions (objects to think) *only if* “[the object] affects the mind in a certain way” (A19/B33). But what is this initial object that affects the mind? Contrary to empiricist models of sensibility, this object cannot be the ordinary spatiotemporal objects in our experience (appearances), because, according to Kant’s theory, they are supposed to be the products of the mind. If appearances are the output of the mind’s operation, then it would be absurd if they were also the inputs, for then appearances would need to “bootstrap” their way into existence (Falkenstein 1995, 348). If the affecting objects are not appearances, then they must be the things in themselves.⁵ Therefore, according to TI, things in themselves are indispensable criteria for human experience.⁶

We now have a basic grasp of transcendental idealism as being fundamentally committed to the following three claims: (i) the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is a distinction between two different levels or aspects of reality, (ii) we can have only knowledge

⁴ Kant considers the receptivity of our intuitive faculty to be a hallmark of our cognition, whereas the putative divine cognition of God would operate with an ‘intellectual intuition’ that would bring its objects into being just by representing them, thus not requiring sensibility (B145).

⁵ An exception to this dilemma is Erich Adickes’ idea of there being a double affection (1924). This is an unpopular view and in large part it is due to one of its conjuncts being noumenal affection (Stang 2015, 3).

⁶ See *Discovery* (8:215).

of appearances and not things in themselves (following the literature, we can call this claim noumenal ignorance—‘NI’ for short), and (iii) the claim that affection through supersensible things in themselves is necessary for human experience (NA).

It is important to stress the fact that the metaphysical interpretation commits TI to an *ontological* distinction between appearances and things in themselves. This ontological understanding is the engine that drives the basic understanding of both NA and NI. This feature is what most distinguishes the metaphysical interpretation from the competing epistemological accounts by scholars such as Graham Bird (1962), Gerold Prauss (1974), and Henry Allison (1983; 2004). On their accounts, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves consists in an epistemological distinction between ‘two different ways of considering an object.’ Their shared account understands Kant to be mainly concerned with the conditions of thought (hence epistemological) and as rejecting altogether the procedure of metaphysics as being concerned with ontology (Allison 2004, 120), and so their accounts will read NA and NI differently. While the epistemological account of TI has earned favor in scholarship, it is beyond the scope of my project to consider it here, and thus I set it aside in favor of the metaphysical interpretation.⁷

The main import of the metaphysical reading, then, is that transcendental idealism is understood as being essentially committed to the claim that appearances and things in themselves constitute two ontologically distinct levels or aspects of reality and that we genuinely lack knowledge of the latter.

The metaphysical interpretation is the most historically common and accepted understanding of transcendental idealism. However, among those that agree with the

⁷ Allison (2004) is the most well-known proponent of the epistemological reading.

metaphysical reading on an interpretive level many believe that the resultant account of transcendental idealism is philosophically unviable.⁸ In other words, they accept that this interpretation gets Kant right, but they hold that Kant's view cannot be accepted. This sentiment is supported by objections that transcendental idealism is internally inconsistent. These objections stack the deck against the view, and if they are successful, they would make the problem of noumenal affection superfluous. Therefore, to substantiate the problem of noumenal affection my goal is to argue that none of these objections succeed.

II *Three Objections to the Metaphysical Interpretation*

This section will consider three separate objections against the metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism. Interestingly, each objection is unique and turns on different considerations. The first objection, which is the most historically common one, argues that transcendental idealism is a form of phenomenalism. The second objection is that transcendental idealism is inconsistent with its own commitment to empirical realism. The third objection presents a set of textual evidence from the *Critique* that is often taken to contradict the ontological interpretation of the transcendental distinction. My strategy for these three objections is to prove that they are defeasible concerns, and whenever possible I will refer to some promising solutions that have been offered in the literature by those sympathetic to the metaphysical interpretation.

First Objection: Phenomenalism

This objection centers on understanding transcendental idealism as a form of 'phenomenalism.'⁹ Phenomenalism is the view that objects in space and time are merely mental representations or

⁸ For e.g., Strawson (1966) and Guyer (1987).

⁹ Phenomenalism has come to denote a large variety of views and has gained much attention in recent scholarship. Here I consider phenomenalism largely in the way that the objection was originally described by Kant's

mental entities and has been closely associated with Berkeley's idealism (Sassen 2000, 53). The motivation for reading Kant in this way is due in part to his seeming characterization of appearances as 'mere representations.' For example, in the Aesthetic, he writes that "what we call outer objects are nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility" (A30/B45). Thus, some Kant scholars, such as Strawson, take this to mean that "[the physical world] only appears to exist, [but] is really nothing apart from perceptions" (1966, 238). This objection seems to turn on the assumption that phenomenalism is not a tenable view, and it argues that because transcendental idealism is a form of phenomenalism, we should reject it. While it can be argued whether phenomenalism really is untenable and ought to be dismissed, we can simply grant it for the sake of comprehending this objection's argument.¹⁰

The grief surrounding phenomenalism is due to its understanding of appearances as merely mental entities, which are nothing apart from our perceptions. Phenomenalism presumes that, for Kant physical objects, like tables or chairs, don't actually exist, i.e., they are nothing over and above our representations of them. To the proponents of phenomenalism, this is supposed to represent a highly unappealing theory of what external objects are, metaphysically speaking. Indeed, we should grant that it is a highly unappealing theory because Kant himself was adamantly opposed to this sort of radical idealism, and he was incensed that his own transcendental idealism was compared with Berkeley's immaterialism which he calls "dogmatic idealism" (B274).

Two points suffice to show that phenomenalism is a defeasible objection for the metaphysical reading. First, it relies heavily on the interpretation that an appearance being a mere

contemporaries in the Feder-Garve review, and which seems to have remained in the works of Strawson (1966, 236-7) and Guyer (1987, 334-5).

¹⁰ It was under this assumption that key figures in German philosophy during and after Kant's time (e.g., Mendelssohn, Fichte, and Schelling) thought that Kant's philosophy needed to be 'overcome' (Stang 2016b, 11)

representation means that it is nothing other than the representation in our mind. But this ignores how Kant holds objects to exist even when they are unperceived by us (A493/B521).

Furthermore, Kant often talks about the scope of empirical reality in terms of our ‘possible experience,’ and this seems incompatible with the phenomenologists’ claim that objects are only real in our perceptions. Thus, Kant says that we must admit there may be inhabitants of the moon “even though no human being has ever perceived them ... [because] in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them” (Ibid). This demonstrates that phenomenism is an uncharitable reading of the text.¹¹ Moreover, that Kant revises the *Critique* in response to phenomenist interpretations and dedicates certain places in the *Prolegomena* to address the it explicitly shows that he disavowed this inaccurate understanding of his view and sought to prevent readers from misinterpreting his ideas in this vein.¹²

The second point that calls into question the phenomenist interpretation is that there are more compelling alternative metaphysical accounts, and which are often highly critical of phenomenism.¹³ Where phenomenism understands appearances to be merely mental entities which are nothing apart from our perceptions, other metaphysical readings cash out appearances in a different way. For example, Rae Langton argues that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves actually refers to two different kinds of properties, extrinsic (relational) properties, and intrinsic (non-relational) properties (1998, 13). Alternatively, Lucy Allais (2015) argues that this distinction is analogous to the difference between secondary and primary qualities. In either account, an appearance is not understood as an ontologically separate entity

¹¹ Christian Garve, one of the reviewers of the Feder-Garve review, admitted this in a personal letter to Kant. He cites his ‘incapacity’ and that he made the wrong decision to review a work that “was too difficult” for him (*Corr.* 10:329).

¹² See the “Refutation of Idealism” added in the B edition (B274-9), and Kant’s remarks in note III of the *Prolegomena* (4:290-4).

¹³ E.g., Langton (1998), Allais (2015).

that exists only in my perception, but rather as an ontologically distinct level or aspect of reality. This demonstrates that we can reject the phenomenalist interpretation of TI without necessarily rejecting or abandoning the metaphysical interpretation. However, we needn't here commit ourselves to any particular metaphysical account; rather it is enough for our purposes to show that the metaphysical interpretation in general is well equipped to deal with the problems associated with phenomenism.

Second Objection: Empirical Realism

The objection from empirical realism turns on the claim that a metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism is incompatible with a robust commitment to empirical realism. Since empirical realism is one of transcendental idealism's commitments (A371), this objection argues that the metaphysical reading must be incorrect because it is incompatible with one of the fundamental commitments of the very position it is trying to understand.

Specifically, this objection assumes that an understanding of the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves as metaphysically distinct entities is fundamentally incompatible with a robust account of empirical realism. We can see how this objection works by recalling the phenomenists' reading which takes appearances to be merely mental entities. For, surely, a view which holds that empirical objects are merely perceptions in our minds cannot be consistent with empirical realism. Allison puts the objection this way: "once statements about things considered as they are in themselves are taken as claims about how they *really are*, it becomes difficult to avoid taking statements about appearances as claims about how they merely *seem to us* to be. And this, in turn, is hard to reconcile with any robust form of empirical realism" (2004, 46). To Allison, the ontological interpretation of the transcendental

distinction reduces appearances to ‘how things merely seem to us to be,’ and this is fundamentally incompatible with empirical realism.

However, this objection seems to work primarily against the phenomenalist interpretation, which we already saw reasons for rejecting. In fact, Allison directs this criticism towards phenomenalism and he makes the stronger claim that Kant has no way of preserving empirical realism “save somehow deontologizing the transcendental distinction” (2004, 46-7). But deontologizing the transcendental distinction means abandoning the metaphysical interpretation, which for the purposes of this project, we do not want to do. Instead, we can look to more recent developments of metaphysical accounts that reject the phenomenalist interpretation altogether.

Lucy Allais’s account provides a good example. She understands appearances to be what she calls the “essentially manifest features” of objects (2015, 125). To Allais, appearances refer to an aspect of an object, i.e., their extrinsic or relational properties. And these properties are, in turn, grounded on the intrinsic and non-relational properties of the object which we cannot cognize (144). In Allais’s account, appearances and things in themselves are ontologically distinct in the sense that they are metaphysically separate features or aspects of a single object, in contrast to the phenomenalist account which takes them to be ontologically distinct entities. By offering an alternative metaphysical account that doesn’t rely on (and expressly rejects) the phenomenalist reading, Allais thus undermines the objection that the metaphysical interpretation of TI is incompatible with a robust account of empirical realism.

Third Objection: Deflationary Evidence

Another common objection against the metaphysical reading is that there is a set of textual evidence which seem to suggest that Kant does not consider the transcendental distinction to

refer to two ontologically distinct levels or aspects of reality, thereby challenging the way metaphysical interpretations want us to understand the distinction.¹⁴ If it turns out that Kant does not think appearances are somehow ontologically distinct from things in themselves, then the metaphysical reading must be incorrect. On the contrary, I argue that this objection is defeasible by showing how metaphysical interpretations can accommodate these passages.

We saw in the previous section that Kant thinks human experience begins by affection through supersensible things in themselves (noumenal affection). This is evidence that Kant considers things in themselves to be ontologically separate from appearances, for otherwise it would make no sense to say they are the causes appearances. However, scholars point to a conflicting set of textual evidence that seem to suggest things in themselves and appearances are actually ontologically identical. These are passages in the *Critique* where Kant talks about the transcendental distinction as a distinction between two different ways of considering an object. For example, consider the two following passages, (a) and (b):

- (a) [T]he same objects can be considered from two different sides, **on the one side** as objects of the senses and the understanding for experience, and **on the other side** as objects that are merely thought at most for isolated reason striving beyond the bounds of experience. (B xviii-xix)¹⁵
- (b) But they [other philosophers] did not consider that both [inner and outer sense], without their reality of representations being disputed, nevertheless belong only to appearances, which always has two sides, one where the object is considered in itself (without regard to the way in which it is to be intuited), the other where the form of the intuition of this object is considered. (A38/B55)

In (a) Kant talks about how objects can be considered from two different sides, one side is when we consider them within the limitations of experience (the conditions imposed upon us by our faculties), and the other side is when we consider them beyond the limitation of experience. In

¹⁴ This set of textual evidence is commonly taken as motivation for the epistemological interpretation I briefly mentioned above.

¹⁵ All emphases in block quotes are in the original, except when they are underlined.

(b) he essentially makes the same point, where the two different ‘considerations’ of the object essentially involves regarding or disregarding the conditions of experience. And as indicated in (b), the ‘two sides’ are referring to appearances and things in themselves respectively.

These two different ways of considering that lead us to appearances and things in themselves seems to suggest that there is nothing metaphysical or ontological going on. If an appearance is just the consideration of an object in accordance with the conditions of experience¹⁶ (i.e., space, time, and the categories), then it is not necessary to think of appearances as capturing some more ontologically fundamental aspect or level of reality. Instead, if the distinction just captures two ways of considering an object, then there is only the one single object that is being considered in two separate ways. Thus, these passages are meant to undermine the metaphysical interpretation by challenging its ontological interpretation of the transcendental distinction.

However, it is possible to read these passages in a way that is compatible with the metaphysical reading. I argue that Kant’s concerns surrounding dialectical illusion explains his usage of this more epistemological type distinction and is not meant to conflict with the other passages that suggests the ontological distinction. But because dialectical illusion only comes to the forefront much later in the *Critique*, we will need to take a brief detour through the “Transcendental Dialectic” where Kant talks about dialectical illusion.

In the Dialectic, Kant shifts his focus to our third and final cognitive faculty, reason.¹⁷ Kant says that reason is the judging faculty and Kant he defines ‘dialectic’ as the ‘logic of

¹⁶ Supposing that there are conditions for experience, these conditions might not be ontological conditions. On Allison’s reading, he proposes to understand them as epistemic conditions, which he distinguishes from ontological and psychological conditions (2004, 11).

¹⁷ “All our cognition starts from the senses, goes from there to the understanding, and ends with reason, beyond which there is nothing higher to be found in us.” (A298/B355)

illusion' (A293/B249). 'Dialectical illusions' are errors of judgement which Kant thinks arises from the very nature of reason itself (A339/B397). He demonstrates in the Paralogisms and in the Antinomies that dialectical illusion consists of an erroneous judgement about things in themselves and/or appearances. For instance, in the "Fourth Paralogism" Kant argues that the Cartesian skeptic's argument—that we can only be certain of our inner thoughts—rests on a dialectical illusion. The skeptic argues that we cannot be certain about the external world because we only indirectly perceive it through its effects on our faculties. Kant's move against the skeptic is to undermine her idea that inner thoughts are anymore immediately perceived than our perceptions of the external world because *both* are just appearances. As appearance, the perception of inner thoughts (what Kant calls inner sense) is no more privileged representations than outer sense, because *qua* appearance they are both "mere modifications of our sensibility" (A491/B519). As Kant puts it, the mind "intuits itself not as it would immediately self-actively represent itself, but in accordance with the way in which it is affected from within, consequently as it appears to itself, but not as it is" (B68-9). This serves as a case of dialectical illusion because it involves the failure to correctly judge whether our representations are appearances or things in themselves.

The passages involving the transcendental distinction as two different ways of considering an object is Kant's warning of dialectical illusion. He is not saying that appearances and things in themselves are *merely* two different ways of considering an object; rather he is saying that an object can always be considered by reason either *as* an appearance, or *as* a thing in itself. This is crucial because reason is responsible for dialectical illusion, and dialectical illusion is essentially an error of *judgement*, whereas "in the senses there is no judgement at all" (A294/B350). In the Aesthetic, Kant tells us that appearances are the products of sensibility, i.e.,

empirical intuitions (A20/B34), so in this context it is not how I merely consider an object that makes it an appearance; it is an appearance *in virtue of* being the output of sensibility. The role of reason and its power to judge introduces a new element which makes it possible to confuse appearances and things in themselves. This explains what Kant means when he says that the transcendental realist “makes these modifications of our sensibility [appearances] into things subsisting in themselves, and hence makes mere representations into things in themselves” (A491/B519). This analysis makes it possible that Kant employs two different and compatible usages of the transcendental distinction. One, based on the role of sensibility, is ontological, and the other, based on the role of reason, is merely epistemological.

Let me show how this analysis could apply to the problematic passages. Take another look at the second passage:

- (b) But they [other philosophers] did not consider that both [inner and outer sense], without their reality of representations being disputed, nevertheless belong only to appearances, which always has two sides, one where the object is considered in itself (without regard to the way in which it is to be intuited), the other where the form of the intuition of this object is considered.
(A38/B55)

Kant begins by saying that ‘other philosophers’ failed to realize appearances always have ‘two sides,’ depending on how they are considered. By invoking the ‘other philosophers’ and their failure to realize the two-sidedness of appearances *owing* to the way we consider them, Kant is hinting at dialectical illusion. But dialectical illusion, along with the two-sidedness of appearances, only reflects the possibility for reason to judge incorrectly. It is correct that nothing ontological is involved in the case of mistakenly considering the properties or the ontological status of an object (for example, if I mistakenly consider dolphins to be a species of fish). However, if these passages are tethered to the concerns of the Dialectic, then this distinction between two ways of considering is both necessary for Kant’s purposes *and* compatible with an

ontological distinction of appearances and things in themselves. Therefore, I conclude that the metaphysical interpretation has a way of accommodating these passages by reading them in light of the Transcendental Dialectic's concern with dialectical illusions.¹⁸

III *A (Not so Defeasible) Fourth Objection: The Problem of Noumenal Affection*

Having considered the three common objections and the possible responses the metaphysical interpretation has available to it, we can now shift our attention to the legendary problem of noumenal affection.

We have seen that the metaphysical interpretation takes TI to be committed to the doctrine of noumenal affection, which states that human experience begins by the mind being affected by supersensible things in themselves. In addition, it is also committed to the doctrine of noumenal ignorance, which states that we cannot have any knowledge of things in themselves. The problem of noumenal affection is the seeming incoherence that results from the conjunction of these two claims. For by *what right* does TI assert that things in themselves affect us, if it also categorically denies that we can have knowledge of them? This is the legendary problem of noumenal affection; it is supposed to show that Kant's transcendental idealism is fundamentally incoherent.

Had it turned out that the previous objections were successful, there may not be anything especially interesting about this problem. After all, it would simply amount to another way of beating a dead horse. But there is a reason why the problem of noumenal affection has retained

¹⁸ There is another set of passages which have also been taken as evidence for a deflationary reading of things in themselves that I did not have the space to discuss here. These are passages that explicitly have to do with transcendental freedom, e.g., in the B Preface (B xxvii) where Kant talks about taking the object in a "twofold meaning." The general analysis here will apply to those passages as well. The context in which that distinction occurs involves Kant's explicit admission that transcendental freedom is a "problematic concept" and a "noumenon" (A541/B569). Thus, we should carefully analyze those passages in relation to the considerations Kant makes about transcendental freedom in the Antinomies.

its significance since the very publication of the *Critique* and remains the subject of scholarly attention.¹⁹ The problem is not just a formidable one, but also because, in contrast to the previous objections, it captures an innate tension within transcendental idealism. In attempting to draw the very boundaries of experience and human knowledge, Kant finds it necessary to refer to something beyond these bounds, the things in themselves. As such, this is not a problem that simply disappears by looking for alternative metaphysical accounts, as was the case in the first two objections, or by attending to textual concerns alone, as it was in the third objection. Regardless of where one stands within the interpretive metaphysical landscape, the problem of noumenal affection will be waiting. This is the real substantive problem for metaphysical interpretations. The rest of this project is dedicated to understanding it, and then, once reexamined, to explore a potential solution.

¹⁹ For more recent work on the problem, see: Piché (2004), and Hogan (2009a; 2009b). Allison (2004) provides an extensive treatment of the problem in the third chapter of his book. Kitcher (2011) also offers an account in the twelfth chapter of her book.

2

Noumenal Affection

Introduction

In Chapter 1, we saw that transcendental idealism is a metaphysical position which is committed to these three claims:

- (1) **The transcendental distinction:** Appearances and things in themselves are ontologically distinct levels or aspects of reality.
- (2) **The doctrine of noumenal affection:** Appearances are the result of supersensible things in themselves affecting our minds.
- (3) **The doctrine of noumenal ignorance:** We can have no knowledge of things in themselves, which constitute for us an unknowable part of reality.

Many scholars agree that these three claims are core commitments of the theory, but few believe that the theory itself, understood in this way, can represent a viable philosophical position. One significant reason is because of the deeply uncomfortable tension that lies in the conjunction of the last two claims. The problem is that it seems incoherent for Kant to simultaneously claim that we cannot know anything about things in themselves *and* that they affect us. If we cannot know anything about things in themselves, by what right does Kant claim they affect us? This is a problem that has haunted and continues to haunt transcendental idealism.

The aim of this chapter is to understand the first conjunct in the problem, noumenal affection. We will examine the doctrine to determine exactly what sort of claim it is, and in chapter three we will see if the claim is compatible with its counterpart, the doctrine of noumenal ignorance. The main work of this chapter seeks to show how the problem of noumenal affection presents itself differently depending on how we understand the affecting claim, and how this

consequently determines the resources Kant has available within his own framework to resolve the problem.

In the first section, I begin with the *causal* interpretation of NA, which offers the most influential understanding of the doctrine in the literature.²⁰ The causal interpretation presents the distinctive challenge as one of consistency, where it threatens to contradict Kant's views on causality in the Second Analogy. We will see how some scholars have responded to the challenge by proposing the notion of an 'unschematized' causality.

In the second section, I offer an alternative interpretation of noumenal affection based on a more holistic approach to the text, which I call the *grounding* interpretation. I argue that the grounding interpretation can both avoid the pitfalls of the causal interpretation and better accommodate the textual evidence for the causal interpretation. In contrast to the causal account, reading NA as a grounding claim will allow Kant to plead ignorance of the relation between appearances and things in themselves.

I end the chapter by discussing the minimal knowledge of things in themselves afforded to us by the grounding interpretation, and therefore set the stage for the final chapter where we examine noumenal ignorance to determine whether it is fundamentally compatible with NA.

I *The Causal Interpretation of Noumenal Affection*

The problem of noumenal affection is essentially the seeming incoherence in the conjunction of the doctrines of noumenal ignorance and noumenal affection. F.H. Jacobi, in response to this seeming incoherence wrote his famous dictum: "without the presupposition [of the thing in itself] I cannot enter the [transcendental] system, and with that presupposition I cannot remain in

²⁰ Most scholars subscribe to the causal interpretation: Jacobi (1812), Vaihinger (1881), Strawson (1966), Adams (1997), Langton (1998), Piché (2004), Hogan (2009a; 2009b), Stang (2015). In the taxonomy I draw below, those who propose a deflationary reading of the causal interpretation also count as proponents of this interpretation: Rescher (1972), Allison (1983; 2004).

it” (1812, 304). To enter the transcendental system, one must accept the doctrine that experience begins with the mind being affected by things in themselves; but, having accepted this, one is faced with another doctrine that claims we cannot have any knowledge of the things in themselves. Thus, Jacobi concluded, we ‘cannot remain’ in the transcendental system by the very same presupposition that we had to make to ‘enter’ the system, and so Kant’s system is fundamentally incoherent.

Before we address the causal interpretation, I would like to consider a more general potential inconsistency in the way that Kant speaks about things in themselves. It is quite well known to those even mildly familiar with Kant that he admonishes us against speaking about the things in themselves, let alone the more specific instance of them affecting us. If it turns out that there is supposed to be a silence policy surrounding things in themselves, it would undercut the seriousness of the problem of noumenal affection.

We can motivate this worry by asking by what right, to begin with, does Kant speak of things in themselves? After all, he himself regularly says in the *Critique* that things in themselves, which are uncognizable by us, are “never asked after in experience” (A30/B45), and that the categories “have significance only in relation to the unity of intuitions in space and time” (B308). These passages seem to suggest some form of general prohibition surrounding talk of things in themselves. If noumenal affection is in violation of this prohibition, then the problem is not with NA per se, but rather with talking about things in themselves in the first place.

What could this general prohibition be? The best place to look textually is the specific restriction Kant places on the categories, the idea that the categories lack ‘significance’ when taken beyond the limits of experience (transphenomenally). The categories are the *a priori* pure (underived from experience) concepts that ground the possibility of experience, and, as such,

they apply to all the possible objects of experience (A79/B105). Among the categories are concepts such as <substance>, <causality>, and <existence>.²¹ Kant tells us that these concepts, although *undervived* from experience, nonetheless have “no other use for the cognition of things except insofar as these are taken as objects of possible experience” (B147-8).²² Kant blocks the possibility that these concepts could legitimately be used beyond the bounds of experience even though they are, in some sense, free from experience.²³

One reading of the claim that the categories lack significance when applied beyond experience is that they would lack semantic meaning. Thus, propositions such as: “the soul is a simple substance,” or “God is the prime cause of the universe” are literally meaningless because they are devoid of any semantic content. Under this interpretation, which anticipates the logical positivists, the categories lacking significance would be equivalent to Chomsky’s famous sentence: “colorless green ideas sleep furiously” (1957, 15).

However, there are textual and philosophical evidence that suggests the logical positivistic interpretation is too strong. For instance, Kant frequently talks about the requirement to ‘think’ things in themselves even if we cannot cognize them (B xxvi); and he also frequently makes statements to the effect that, by accepting the transcendental concept of an appearance, we are forced to admit the things in themselves which underlie them (A251-2, B307, *Proleg.* 3:14). These don’t quite add up under the positivistic interpretation, for otherwise Kant would be saying that we are required to think or admit propositions which are literally meaningless. This would, of course, entail that noumenal affection is one such meaningless proposition.

²¹ For the full table, see A80/B106.

²² See also A247/B303.

²³ Kant argues for this conclusion in the “Transcendental Deduction.”

A better alternative interpretation of the meaning behind the lack of significance of the categories is that they would not have what Kant calls ‘objective validity.’ Kant thinks that concepts lack objective validity if there is no guarantee that a possible object corresponds to the concept, in other words, that they have a non-empty extension (B302-3n). If our concepts remain within the bounds of possible experience they can still count as objectively valid even if they refer to presently non-existent, but really possible, objects. By ensuring that concepts have non-empty extensions, the criterion of objective validity allows us to distinguish concepts from mere representations or the ‘mere play of the understanding’ (A239/B298). So, if by significance Kant means objective validity, then not all claims about things in themselves are automatically going to be a problem for Kant.

Thus far, we have understood noumenal affection to be the claim that things in themselves affect the mind. ‘Affection’ refers to a relation between our minds and things in themselves, and so we can think about noumenal affection broadly as the claim that there is a relation—an affecting relation—which holds between our minds and things in themselves. Let’s see how this plays out in the text:

The representation of a body in intuition, on the contrary, contains nothing at all that could pertain to an object in itself, but merely the appearance of something and the way in which we are affected by it. (A44/B61)

In this passage, we have the familiar story that intuitions do not present to us things in themselves. Instead, what intuitions present are appearances which result from our minds being affected. So far, it is not clear whether Kant is saying anything beyond the assertion that intuitions are the result of sensibility being affected.

But, in other passages Kant employs causal language to describe affection:

The sensible faculty of intuition is really only a receptivity for being affected in a certain way with representations, whose relation to one another is a pure intuition of space and time ... which insofar as they are connected and determinable in

these relations (in space and time) according to the laws of the unity of experience, are called **objects**. The non-sensible cause of these representations is entirely unknown to us, and therefore we cannot intuit it as an object; for such an object would have to be represented neither in space nor in time. (A494/B522)

The first half of this quote basically repeats the passage above, but in the second half, Kant mentions the ‘non-sensible cause’ of empirical intuitions. Here, Kant begins with affection and moves to causes. This, and other similar passages in the *Critique*, suggests that noumenal affection is a causal relation. Therefore, what it means for things in themselves to *affect* the mind is that they *cause* appearances.²⁴

One advantage of the causal interpretation is that it intuitively brings the problem to light. It seems the claim that things in themselves are the causes of appearances must surely be inconsistent with the doctrine of noumenal ignorance, which denies us of any knowledge of things in themselves. The primary conflict lies in the usage of the concept of causality to describe noumenal affection. This is because causality as one of the categories entails that we have causal knowledge (B143-6).²⁵ Kant’s back is against the wall here: He seems to hold the incoherent claim ‘*p*, but I do not know that *p*.’

In the “Second Analogy” Kant gives a detailed treatment of causality. He defines it as a “principle of temporal sequence” of appearances (A189/B232). In brief, Kant’s argument for causality begins from the premise that, in experience, some objects possess a necessary sequence of their states in time. For instance, an oak tree always has a preceding state in time, an acorn, which necessarily came before its present state. Kant’s claim is that this temporal order *in the object* (as opposed to the order in which we perceive, or ‘apprehend,’ the object) is made possible “only because we subject the sequence of the appearances and thus all alteration to the

²⁴ Other passages where Kant describes noumenal affection causally include: A288/B344, A393, and A496/B524.

²⁵ To be more specific, causality is one of the pure concepts that stands under the category of relation. For our current purposes, this does not make a difference.

law of causality” (A189/B234). Kant’s argument is that without the category of cause and effect there would be no experience of objects with determinate temporal sequences, e.g., the experience of acorns always prior in time to oak trees, scaffolds to complete houses, fire before burning, etc. This transcendental treatment (reasoning to the conditions of possibility) of causality in the Analogy responds to Hume’s skepticism by underwriting the possibility for necessary connections in general between events in time. It is sufficient for Kant to justify causal knowledge from the proof of the general principle that events have causes, for then the causal knowledge that natural science discovers through empirical observation, e.g., that events of type *A* have causes of type *B*, have a prior source of justification which is not derived inductively.

However, Kant’s argument which relies on the necessary *temporal* order of an object entails that causality cannot be extended beyond experience (space and time). Kant simultaneously responds to Hume’s skeptical attack and curbs the possibility for using the categories transphenomenally, or beyond experience, to construct a systematic metaphysics of things in general (A247/B304).

The causal reading is in danger of making transcendental idealism incoherent because it is inconsistent with Kant’s own argument that we do have knowledge of causality. The natural response to this problem is to look for a way to distinguish the ‘cause’ of things in themselves from the cause of the Second Analogy. But, can this be done without resorting to an essentially ad-hoc maneuver? Fortunately, the answer seems to be *yes*. Notice that the cause of the Second Analogy exclusively deals with causality *between and among* appearances; however, the causality of noumenal affection is not a relation between appearances, but rather between appearances and things in themselves. If there is evidence that Kant employs distinct usages of

causality roughly according to these two lines, then we will have a principled basis to separate the empirical causality of the Second Analogy with the transcendental causality of NA.

In the passage above, Kant qualifies the transcendental cause as a ‘non-sensible’ cause (A494/B522). Since Kant defines empirical causality as being essentially temporal, this is evidence that Kant is employing a distinct usage of causality in the case of NA, for otherwise a ‘non-sensible cause’ would be an oxymoron on his terms. This move leads us to the introduction of the notion of an ‘unschematized’ concept of causality. The ‘transcendental schematas’ are representations that mediate the pure (non-empirical) concepts of the understanding and sensible intuitions allowing the categories to be applied to sensible intuitions (A138/B177).²⁶ The idea of an unschematized concept of causality is simply the category unmediated by transcendental schemata.

But now, under our present understanding of noumenal affection as being unschematized causality, what exactly are we dealing with here? The main purpose of unschematizing causality was to distinguish it from empirical causality; but as a consequence of this move, all we now know is that unschematized causality is something entirely different from empirical causality, and thus that it would be wrong to try to understand NA through empirical causality. The initial appeal of the causal interpretation was that it initially provided us with an intuitive and clear grasp of what noumenal affection is supposed to be. But it turns out that NA is not causality, instead unschematized causality. However, the notion of an unschematized causality seems to *just be as* mysterious as the affection passages which we began with, and so we are, in effect, in no better place to understand what sort of claim noumenal affection is supposed to be!

²⁶ Kant thinks mediating schematas are necessary because it is a precondition that objects and concepts must share something in common for the latter to contain (‘subsume’) the former under it (A137/B176).

Some scholars have argued this implies that noumenal affection is merely an epistemological relation. On their accounts, noumenal affection just refers to the way *we are forced to think* about appearances. In other words, the concept of a thing in itself causing appearances is just a necessary byproduct of Kant's transcendental theory of affection. Thus, Allison, a proponent of this view, writes that "[noumenal affection] merely stipulate[s] how the affecting object *must* be conceived of" (2004, 72). Similarly, according to Rescher, noumenal affection is not to be understood "in terms of the ontology of nature, but rather in terms of the ontology of mind" (1972, 467). However, both of their solutions are dependent upon their understanding that Kant is not committed to the existence of things in themselves as ontologically distinct levels or aspects of reality.²⁷

An alternative account that tries to fill in the content of unschematized causality is Robert Adams' proposal that we should understand noumenal affection in terms of what Kant calls a "problematic concept." Kant defines problematic concepts as those "the objective reality of which can in no way be cognized" (A254/B310). The most famous case of a problematic concept is transcendental freedom (the idea that our noumenal selves are free). Adams proposes that if it can be shown that the "notion of a problematic concept is philosophically sound" (1997, 821) then we can justify noumenal affection along the same justificatory grounds which apply to transcendental freedom. Unlike the previous accounts, Adams allows us to remain somewhat committed to the ontological reality of things in themselves, but his proposal still necessarily

²⁷ Epistemological interpretations maintain that things in themselves are not literally real for Kant. Therefore, they reject the idea of noumenal affection in any ontological guise and are happy to accept empirical affection as the starting point of experience. See: Allison (2004), Rescher (1972, 1981).

weakens that commitment by reducing them to something whose “objective reality” must be doubted.²⁸

An additional problem for Adams’ proposal is that Kant explicitly states that transcendental freedom is going to be justified in an orthogonal way, “from a practical standpoint” (B xxi) and not on theoretical grounds. This should make us skeptical of conflating any kind of treatment between noumenal affection and transcendental freedom.²⁹

A further problem for the causal interpretation is that it presupposes Kant is guilty of violating his own general prohibition that the categories should not be taken beyond experience. If it was not clear from his ethics, Kant, of all people, probably does not take his principles lightly. When he says the categories should not be used beyond experience, he means it: “the pure concepts of the understanding [the categories] can *never* be of transcendental, but only of empirical use” (A246/B303).³⁰ Although Kant may escape the charge of inconsistency by unschematizing causality, he necessarily violates the constraint he places on the categories because to unschematize causality *is just* to apply it beyond experience.

However, proponents of the causal interpretation are aware of this, and they have prepared answers in their accounts to respond precisely to this problem. In the accounts of Allison and Rescher, by presenting noumenal affection as an unavoidable claim of transcendental philosophy (Allison), or of reason (Rescher), they have already created an exception for Kant. It is true that he violates the constraint, but he does so *involuntarily*. Perhaps, due to this, he is not blameworthy the way his predecessors were. Whereas on Adams’ account,

²⁸ This is a little better than Van Cleve’s “self-enfeebling” solution, in which Kant merely holds noumenal affection as a personal conviction because it is not incoherent to hold “*p*, but I do not know that *p*” (1999, 135).

²⁹ Desmond Hogan’s (2009b) solution relies on treating Kant’s claims about the causality of noumenal freedom equally with his claims about noumenal affection.

³⁰ Emphasis is mine.

Kant flags the violation of his constraint by considering noumenal affection as a problematic concept. If it turns out that problematic concepts are good enough to shield transcendental freedom from theoretical concerns, then why not noumenal affection?

This is a peculiar situation. The causal interpretation that has brought us here seems to only lead us to deeper confusion and disagreement about what noumenal affection is and what an appropriate solution to the problem would look like. Furthermore, the causal interpretation demands not only that a solution demonstrates the compatibility between NA and NI but also provide a justification for Kant's violation of the constraint he places on the categories. But, this, it seems, only takes us further away from the problem of noumenal affection. It is at this point that it becomes difficult to not begin feeling that these are desperate moves in a tight corner and will only become more so as the moves within the causal framework are exhausted. For this reason, instead of trying to offer a better move on the board I would like to rethink the problem entirely, beginning with reconfiguring our understanding of noumenal affection by taking a different methodological approach to reading the passages of NA.

II *Rethinking Noumenal Affection: The Grounding Interpretation*

Kant does not only describe noumenal affection causally. However, if we focus our attention on those passages alone, then it becomes natural to think that noumenal affection must be a causal relation. We have seen what sorts of problems are present under that interpretation. In contrast, I would like to suggest a different interpretation of noumenal affection that is based on a more holistic approach to the text. This approach consists of (i) considering noumenal affection in light of the many different formulations that Kant provides, (ii) to regard explaining the unity of the various formulations as an important interpretive concern, and (iii) to account for why Kant might have resorted to different formulations of a single claim.

An advantage of this holistic approach is that it will deal with the causal language that motivates the causal interpretation, so proponents of the causal interpretation need not worry that the textual motivation for their view is being neglected. The purpose of this reconfiguration is to open new possibilities for both understanding the problem of noumenal affection and the resources transcendental idealism has available to it against this problem.

Earlier, we saw that the causal interpretation takes as evidence passages where Kant employs causal language to describe noumenal affection. For instance, in (A494/B522) he describes things in themselves as being the ‘non-sensible cause’ of appearances. However, there are other passages in the *Critique* in which Kant does not describe noumenal affection causally. For example, in A30/B45, he says that the thing in itself is the ‘true correlate’ of sensibility. In other places, he talks about them ‘grounding’ appearances (A49/B66, A380; *Discovery* 8:215). Beyond the *Critique*, he describes them as ‘underlying’ appearances (*Proleg.* 5:314-15, *Mrongovius* 29:857) or as their ‘supersensible substratum’ (*CJ* 5:196). It is important to recognize that all of these are formulations of noumenal affection because they all equally describe the relation between the affecting object and the mind. Perhaps partly due to the influential grip of the causal interpretation, not much attention has been devoted to understanding why Kant employs these different formulations and how they are supposed to be formulations of one and the same claim.³¹

To begin, we should consider which formulation has the likeliest potential for explaining all the others. Plausibly, we might think that the causal formulation is still the one we want. This is surely a rejoinder that the proponent of the causal interpretation has available to her. We could potentially observe that all these different languages of things in themselves ‘underlying’ the

³¹ The situation here resembles Kant’s multiple formulations of the categorical imperative in his ethics.

appearances or being their ‘supersensible substratum’ are just looser ways of saying things in themselves are the causes of appearances. Perhaps, what’s implied in this response is that: What else, besides a causal relation, could Kant possibly mean? We might think as Piché does that “Kant cannot help but describe this influence of the thing in itself over sensibility in terms of *causality*” (2004, 176). However, I am going to argue that the formulation we really want involves the concept of *grounding*. Besides the causal and the grounding formulations, the others seem to be less intelligible due to them not containing any recognizable philosophical concept that may help explicate noumenal affection. Furthermore, from a textual standpoint, much like the causal formulation, Kant employs the grounding formulation in the *Critique* more frequently.³² To examine Kant’s understanding of grounds, we need to take a brief detour through his pre-critical works and his later lectures.

In his pre-critical essay, the *New Elucidations* (1755), Kant defines ‘ground’ as “that which determines a subject in respect of any of its predicates” (1:392). As noted by Stang, it was standard then to distinguish between grounds that were explanatory and those that were epistemic (this is Stang’s terminology, substituting for the more cumbersome terms used by the philosophers at the time), where the relevant sense of explanation is non-epistemic, i.e., does not deal with conferring justification (2016a, 83). For our purposes, the relevant sense of ground are explanatory grounds, and so I will simply use ground to mean explanatory grounds.

Kant thinks that there are various types of grounds, including logical, real, formal, causal, and essential grounds.³³ Within the subset of explanatory grounds, Kant makes an important distinction between a *logical* and a *real* ground. Logical grounds explain why, for e.g., all bachelors are unmarried through the logical relation (the principle of identity) between the

³² See: A49/B66, A379-80, and also *Discovery* 8:215.

³³ Stang (2016a, 84), Caygill (1995, 217).

subject and the predicate. In this example, the predicate of being unmarried is already contained within the subject of being a bachelor. On the contrary, real grounds involve a relation between actualities or realities, rather than a logical relation of conceptual containment. In the case of fire being the real ground of smoke, fire is an actual instantiation in the world which then causes smoke, another actuality that owes its instantiation to fire. An additional difference is that Kant thinks we have fundamentally divergent insights into these relations. In the case of the former, he thinks we can understand completely “how a consequence is posited by a ground in accordance with the rule of identity: analysis of the concepts shows that the consequence is contained in the ground” (*NM* 2:202). But in the case of real grounds he asks, “How am I to understand the fact that, because something is, something else is?” (*Ibid*). Kant’s point is that in the case of logical grounds we can understand how they posit their consequences, but with real grounds we only know (*a posteriori*) that *they do* posit their consequences. Yet, how they do so is inconceivable to reason (*Mrongovius* 29:809).³⁴

Kant understands causality to be one kind, or species, of real grounds.³⁵ In the *Mrongovius* lectures Kant defines the criterion of a real ground as that which “something follows according to general rules” (29:809). Recall that Kant defines causality in the Second Analogy as a “principle of temporal sequence” of appearances (A189/B232), whereby the cause always precedes the effect in time. This qualifies causality as a species of real grounds because causality determines a relation between a ground and a consequence according a general rule (time). Empirical causality specifies that *A* follows from *B* in time.

³⁴ Kant expresses a similar point in *NM* (2:203-4), which suggests that his position on the mystery of real grounds unchanged through the critical philosophy.

³⁵ Thus, he says, “the concept of cause ... presuppose[s] the concept of ground” (*Mrongovius* 29:809) and not vice versa.

Having now sketched Kant's basic conception of grounds and the genus to species relationship between grounding and causality, we are now in a position to consider their differences, and how it may affect the problem of NA. Essentially, the difference between cause and ground will amount to the difference between a reference to the *relation* and the things involved within it, the *relata*. To illustrate this, let us have a look at the following passage:

The **transcendental object** that grounds both outer appearance and inner intuition is neither matter nor a thinking being in itself, but rather an unknown ground of those appearances that supply us with our empirical concepts of the former as well as the latter. (A380)

In this passage, Kant says that the thing in itself (transcendental object) that is the ground of both outer appearances (objects in space), and inner intuition is neither matter, taken as a mind-independent object, nor some kind of Cartesian substance that is referred to by the 'I.' Instead, the thing in itself is an 'unknown ground' of both inner and outer appearances.

Let us now read this passage in turn, first assuming that by ground Kant means cause. Substituting grounds for causes, Kant's claim is then: The transcendental object (thing in itself) that grounds appearances is an unknown *cause* that supplies us with our empirical concepts, etc. This reading has us interpret noumenal affection as the claim that things in themselves are the unknown or unknowable causes of appearances. This is where understanding Kant's conception of grounds becomes important, because an unknown cause is *not* equivalent to an unknown ground; the two are not substitutable *salva veritate*.

If things in themselves are the unknown causes of empirical phenomena, then it follows that we would lack knowledge of them in the same way we lack knowledge of many kinds of empirical phenomena whose causes are still unknown. For instance, the causes of Alzheimer's are still poorly understood by medical science, and in physics we still do not know the cause of the accelerating expansion of the universe. In these cases of unknown causes, we know that the

cause must be another empirical phenomenon because causality is an empirical relation that determines the sequence of appearances in time. But when Kant says that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves, he means that there is an ontologically more fundamental aspect or level of reality which we do not cognize. Unknown causes are saying too much about things in themselves because they presuppose the knowledge of the relation (the general rule) that mediates things in themselves with appearances.

If we read the passage again in terms of grounds, as it is originally expressed, we get a more plausible result. If the thing in itself is an unknown *ground*, then we lack knowledge of the *real relation* that obtains between the things in themselves and appearances. That is, we do not know what ‘general rule’ holds between the ground (things in themselves) and the consequence (appearances). A crucial difference between an unknown cause and an unknown ground is that, in the prior case, we were ignorant of a relata (the cause) within a relation (causality). However, in the present case we are altogether ignorant of the relation (the real ground) and all we know instead is something much more generic. These are two significantly different claims: Unknown grounds represent more substantive lack of knowledge than unknown causes. For this reason, unknown grounds are a better fit with Kant’s commitments.

That said, there are two further ways of reading what Kant means by an unknown ground. Kant can either mean the weaker claim that we have not yet discovered what, or which, type of ground it is (e.g., whether it is formal, essential, or causal). Or, he means the stronger claim that, in addition to not knowing what kind of ground it is, we *do* know that it is none of these other grounds we are familiar with. It is clear from the text that Kant is committed to the stronger claim.³⁶

³⁶ This follows from his claim of the non-spatiotemporality of things in themselves in the Aesthetic.

The problem with the causal interpretation is that we typically consider knowledge of relations to count as some knowledge of the things involved in them. Hence, it would be incoherent for Ollie to claim that he lacks any knowledge of Shelo if he also happens to know that she has a sister, Estel, for then he would possess knowledge that they are biologically related. Even if we suppose that Ollie knows nothing else about Shelo, we still consider him to know something about Shelo, and something that is certainly enough for him to retract his claim regarding complete ignorance of Shelo on pain of incoherence. Scholars are aware of this problem, and hence some solutions involve reducing things in themselves to a piece of philosophical fiction (Schaper 1966) or merely a necessary concept that we must think (Allison 2004). In other words, if things in themselves are fictional, then claims about them aren't to be taken literally. But these seemingly extreme measures are unnecessary if we don't take NA as a causal relation.

The passage I selected above helps illustrate my point, but it is by no means idiosyncratic. There are other passages where Kant clearly expresses lacking knowledge of the *relation* between appearances and things in themselves. He even describes this lack of knowledge when he talks about NA causally. For example:

How is outer intuition – namely, that of space (the filling of it by shape and motion – possible at all in a thinking subject? But it is not possible for any human being to an answer to this question ... but rather only indicate it, by ascribing outer appearances to a transcendental object that is the cause of this species of representations, with which cause, however, we have no acquaintance at all, nor will we ever get a concept of it. (A393)

Kant says that the cause of outer appearances is unexplainable by us, and that the best we can do is posit that they are caused by a transcendental object (the thing in itself). But he does not stop here. He does not just say that things in themselves cause appearances, he goes on to say that this

cause is something we have no ‘acquaintance’ with at all and we will ‘never get a concept of this cause.’ This is denial that we know the relation between appearances and things in themselves.

Some may rightly worry that I am only drawing these passages from the A edition, which Kant subsequently revised, so let us look at a passage present in the B edition:

The cause of the empirical conditions of this progress, the cause, therefore, of which members of it I might encounter, and also the extent to which I may encounter them in the regress, is transcendental, and hence necessarily unknown to me. We, however, have nothing to do with that, but only with the rule of the progress of experience, in which objects, namely appearances, are given.
(A496/B524)

Kant says here that even in the representation of the totality of empirical objects we still do not encounter the transcendental cause within their regress (because the cause, thing in itself, is not given to us in the empirical regress). Thus, he says, the cause is still unknown to us in this case, and he is quick to assuage this worry since things in themselves are never asked for in experience anyway. Again, in this passage Kant expresses ignorance of the cause, that is, the relation of noumenal affection.

These passages show us that Kant thinks noumenal affection involves ignorance of the affecting relation. In two of the passages analyzed, Kant employs causal language, but our analysis demonstrates that they *do not* support the causal interpretation; rather, they work against it. If Kant considered NA to be a causal claim, then it must be unintelligible for Kant to deny, as he does in these passages, that we lack a concept of the relation between the things in themselves and appearances because causality *is* a specified relation. At this point, the only way out for the proponent of the causal interpretation is to appeal to the notion of unschematized causality, but we have already considered the pitfalls of this move.

Instead, the grounding interpretation can help us make sense of these passages better. Kant qualifies the cause in these two passages by indicating that they are transcendental. Rather

than assume that Kant is applying <causality> beyond experience, as he profusely says we should never do, consider what causality stripped from its sensible condition amounts to?³⁷ It simply becomes the idea that one thing follows from another ontologically, but without the general rule that this occurs temporally. This just reduces to the concept of a *real ground*. Again: if causality is species of a real ground in which something follows from another thing *in time*, then stripped from its temporal condition it defaults into the claim that one thing (the consequence) follows from another thing (the ground), and this is just a real ground. Therefore, in these passages, the language of causes neither expresses causality nor an unschematized version of causality, rather it expresses a generic relation of real grounding. Under our interpretation, Kant does not fall on the wrong side of his constraint on the categories because he is not using the pure concept of causality, but rather the logical concept of a real ground, which has nothing to do with the transcendental concepts of the categories (*Mrongovius* 29:809). Thus, it is false that Kant has no other way to express noumenal affection except through the categories.

I promised that this holistic approach to the grounding interpretation would explain the unity of the various formulations of NA, and why Kant thought to employ them. I am now ready to make good on that promise. Recall that Kant has said things in themselves are:

- i. The causes of appearances (A288/B344, A393, A494/B522, A496/B524)
- ii. The ‘true correlate’ of appearances (A30/B45)
- iii. The supersensible ground (*Discovery* 8:215), or simply ground of appearances (A49/B66, A380)
- iv. The things which underlie the appearances (*Proleg.* 5:314-15, *Mrongovius* 29:857)
- v. The supersensible substratum of appearances (*CJ* 5:196)

³⁷ He makes an explicit exception in the case of transcendental freedom and talks about the possibility of a “practical cognition” of them.

All these formulations are explainable in terms of standing under the generic principle of grounding. A real ground just expresses a relation of ontological dependence: the ground must come (ontologically speaking) before the consequence. If we look carefully we can see that the feature all these formulations have in common is their expressions of ontological dependence. This is true even for the obscure terms like ‘supersensible substratum’ or ‘true correlate’ because, typically, substratas and true correlates imply that they are ontologically prior to whatever they are the substrata or correlates of. Understanding noumenal affection as a generic principle of ground accounts for the essential unity of all these different formulations. Causality, on the other hand, as a species of ground lacks the conceptual generality to accomplish this task.

Our second question asks why Kant resorts to different formulations of NA. I suspect that Kant does so because it is a natural way of demonstrating the lack of knowledge we have of things in themselves. By avoiding the consistent use of a technical language, Kant is actually remaining consistent on a deeper level because it emphasizes that we really do not know what things in themselves are, and even the way they affect us.

III *Some (Analytic) Knowledge of Things in Themselves*

In anticipation of the third and final chapter, we can now investigate what noumenal affection, according to the grounding interpretation, tells us about things in themselves. The answer: not very much. However, we should not despair because for Kant’s purposes less is more! The procedure to determine what noumenal affection can tell us about things in themselves is through the conceptual analysis of the concept a real ground. But this will only provide for us analytic knowledge.

Before that, I’d like to clarify why, in the first place, Kant holds that appearances are grounded on things in themselves. Basically, the question is: why posit things in themselves at

all? The answer lies in the fact that sensibility only provides the objects of experience when it is affected “in a certain way” (A19/B33).³⁸ Appearances cannot be all there is because they cannot just ‘pop’ into existence all on their own, and neither can they exist independently of our minds. From this, Kant infers the actuality of the things in themselves that ground them.³⁹

The concept of a real ground involves a relationship between two actualities, and so we can know that if things in themselves are really the ground of appearances, then they must exist. Another feature of grounding is that it is an asymmetrical relation: the ground is not dependent upon the consequence (x grounds y , but y does not reciprocally ground x). This asymmetry tells us that appearances are not the grounds of things in themselves. However, we cannot know if there are things in themselves which exist that do not ground appearances. For to determine this we would need to have more specified knowledge about things in themselves. But in our situation, we can’t even begin to determine the most basic aspects of them, such as whether there are one, or many things in themselves, let alone their more specified features.⁴⁰

We have now determined noumenal affection as a generic grounding claim which states the ontological dependence of appearances on things in themselves. This has provided us with minimal knowledge about things in themselves. However, our task is not yet finished because it is not clear that even this minimal knowledge afforded to us is enough to defuse the legendary problem of noumenal affection. Thus, we now move on to investigate the third and final component in the problem of noumenal affection: noumenal ignorance.

³⁸ See: A490-1/B519-20.

³⁹ He expresses this most clearly in *Mrongovius* (29:857): “But are not these sums of appearances things in themselves? No. For the sensible world lies merely in my senses. These, however, show us only the manner in which they are affected by the things, but not the latter themselves. They show us merely the appearances of the things. But these are not the things in themselves. *They indeed underlie the appearances, and I can therefore surely infer the actuality of the things from the appearances, but not the properties of the things themselves from the properties of the appearances.*” (My emphasis.)

⁴⁰ Kant regularly switches between the singular ‘thing in itself’ and the plural ‘things in themselves’ which demonstrates that the plurality or singularity is merely grammatical.

3

Noumenal Ignorance

Introduction

A central doctrine of transcendental idealism, noumenal ignorance, claims that we are ignorant of things in themselves. The problem of noumenal affection lies in the seeming incompatibility between NI and NA. In the previous chapter, I argued that NA should be understood as a generic grounding claim of ontological dependence. This interpretation helps us specify the content of noumenal affection while avoiding a lot of the problems present in the causal account. The grounding interpretation states that we have minimal analytic knowledge about things in themselves. Can this be compatible with the doctrine of noumenal ignorance?

Noumenal ignorance is a constraint on our knowledge or cognition of things in themselves. A rich philosophical account of NI has been primarily hindered by the lack of understanding of what Kant means by cognition [*Erkenntnis*] in the first *Critique*. Though cognition is a technical term, it has often been misidentified and mistranslated as knowledge [*Wissen*].⁴¹ There is an emerging consensus in Kant scholarship that the two cannot be equated together, especially if knowledge [*Wissen*] is understood as propositional knowledge.⁴²

Kant's primary concern in the *Critique* is with cognition. In his famous analogy to Copernicus, he talks about experimenting with the assumption that objects conform to our *cognition* for it "would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori cognition* of them (B xvi).⁴³ In comparison, Kant only treats knowledge sparingly in the final parts of the

⁴¹ Even the celebrated translation of the first *Critique* by Norman Kemp Smith elides the distinction and translates both as knowledge.

⁴² Chignell (2014), Gomes and Stephenson (2016), Watkins and Willascheck (2017), Tolley (2017), and Schafer (forthcoming).

⁴³ My emphasis.

Critique in the third section of the “Canon of Pure Reason” (A820-31/B848-59). Likewise, in the passages where Kant says we are ignorant of things in themselves he overwhelmingly says we cannot have *cognition* of them, not knowledge. Thus, the key to understanding noumenal ignorance is to investigate Kant’s notion of cognition and what their conditions are.

The first section deals with the narrow sense of cognition Kant employs in the *Critique*, where it is understood as a mental state involving the faculties of sensibility and understanding. This notion of cognition will entail two conditions: an intuitive condition and a thought condition. We will see that Kant holds that things in themselves are uncognizable by us because they fail the intuitive condition. In the second section, I clarify the difference between cognition and knowledge. The most important point of this analysis is that, for Kant, knowledge is a judgement that necessarily involves acts of ‘holding to be true’ [*Fürwahrhalten*] or assent. This distinction opens the possibility for having knowledge of things in themselves without cognition of them. The third section combines the work of the third and second chapters to revisit the legendary problem of noumenal affection. I attempt to show that the reconfigured and updated doctrines reveal a potential way out of the problem. The fifth, and final section of this project, considers the implications of noumenal ignorance on a longstanding debate over whether transcendental idealism is committed to the existence of one or two worlds.

I *Cognition and Things in Themselves*

Kant categorically denies that we can have cognition of things in themselves (B xx, A30/B45, A43/B60, B66, B164, A190/B235). Within the broader context of his theoretical philosophy it is not exactly clear what Kant means by cognition. For example, in the *Jäsche Logic* he details seven degrees of cognition (*JL* 65), and in his works he consistently makes a distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* cognition (B ix-x, A633/B661, *CPR* 5:120, *JL* 86-7). The interesting

question involving the interrelated meanings of cognition across Kant's works is not something I will deal with here. Instead, I use cognition only in the narrow identifiable sense of it that Kant employs in the *Critique*.

In the introduction to the "Transcendental Logic" Kant tells us that cognition is a mental state involving the faculties of sensibility and understanding:

It comes along with our nature that **intuition** can never be other than **sensible** ... The faculty for **thinking** of objects of sensible intuition, on the contrary, is the **understanding**. Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind ... Only from their unification can cognition arise. (A51-2/B75-6)

This passage helpfully highlights for us several crucial features of the faculties responsible for cognition. The role of sensibility in cognition is to 'give' objects and it does this through 'intuitions.' When Kant says that it "comes along with our nature" that intuitions are sensible, he is referring to space and time as the necessary conditions for our representations. Intuitions necessarily provide us objects in space and time. On the other hand, he calls the understanding the "faculty for thinking objects" that are given in intuitions. Cognition arises when an object is given to the mind (sensibility) and then thought through concepts (understanding).

Both faculties are necessary for cognition. Kant makes this doubly clear when he says that "neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other" and, in the famous dictum that follows, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." Thus, the faculties each impose a necessary condition on cognition. We can call the condition set by sensibility the *intuitive condition*.

Kant believes that we cannot cognize things in themselves in part because they fail to meet the intuitive condition. To illustrate this point, consider his reasoning in the Aesthetic for why things in themselves are not cognizable through space and time. Kant says that even if "we

could bring this intuition of ours to the highest degree of distinctness we would not ... come any closer to the constitution of objects in themselves” (A43/B60). What would an intuition with the “highest degree of distinctness” look like? We can imagine an idealized version of natural science for this exercise. Suppose that scientists had discovered a fundamental ‘theory of everything’ that could perfectly explain all natural phenomena and their various levels of analyses, chemical, biological, psychological, etc. Let’s say that this grand theory of everything postulated that, at the fundamental level, everything is constituted by vibrating strings. These strings would serve as examples of “the most enlightened cognition” of appearances (Ibid).

Now, the question is whether these strings are things in themselves? If they are, then there is a way we have cognized things in themselves (strings) from appearances (bodies). But it’s not possible for these vibrating strings to be things in themselves, because they are still within the bounds of space and time. Therefore, even perfect cognition of appearances would not amount to cognition of things in themselves because “we would still completely cognize only our own way of intuiting” objects (A43/B60). Since the nature of our intuition is sensible we can only cognize things in themselves if they are presentable to us spatiotemporally. But, Kant argues that things in themselves, as the mind independent grounds of appearances, are *nonsensible*, and thus they fail to meet the intuitive condition.⁴⁴

Kant says that experience—the awareness of a spatiotemporal law governed world—is empirical cognition (B147). In other words, cognition is what allows us to experience the world in the specific way we do. We live with an awareness of the world more than just being filled with discrete spatiotemporal objects. Our experience is such that we are conscious of the

⁴⁴ He argues this in the Aesthetic. For the most famous criticism of his argument, see the “Neglected Alternative.”

connections among objects, their persistence through time, and the general features that they share with similar objects.⁴⁵

II *Knowledge versus Cognition*

Cognition is a mental state involving the faculties of sensibility and understanding. Kant thinks that cognitions are constitutive of our experience. Knowledge is another kind of mental state that has been closely associated with cognition. In this section, we want to understand how Kant conceives of knowledge and how it relates to cognition.

Clinton Tolley (2017) has insightfully pointed out that Kant places cognition and knowledge on “orthogonal progressions” (26). In the *Critique*, Kant locates cognition on a progression of representations which involves first perception, sensation, and then cognition (A320/B376-7). But later in the “Canon of Pure Reason,” he draws a separate progression defined by the different levels of “the subjective validity of judgement” involving acts of ‘taking to be true’ [*Fürwahrhalten*] (A822/B850) or assent. According to Tolley, the different progressions can be understood as being fundamentally concerned with different aspects of our representations. In the former case, Kant is concerned with “differences in grades or degrees of ‘objective content’ in our representations,” and in the latter he is concerned with the grades or levels of the subjective validity of our representations (26).

Kant says that assent, or ‘taking something to be true’ “is an occurrence in our understanding that may rest on objective grounds, but that also requires subjective causes in the mind of him who judges” (A820/B848). A judgement could have an objective ground⁴⁶ and be

⁴⁵ The understanding plays a significant role in introducing the necessary structures of our experience. For an account of how it does this, see: Watkins and Willaschek (2017, 95-101). For the importance of the normativity of cognition, see: Anderson (2001).

⁴⁶ Roughly, *justification*. See: Chignell (2007).

true but still fail to count as knowledge if the subject does not sufficiently hold her judgement to be true. Kant specifies three levels or “stages” of assent: “having an opinion, believing, and knowing” (A822/B850). Assuming a judgement is objectively sufficient, if one neither assents nor recognizes its objective sufficiency, then the judgement is merely opinion. If one assents but thinks it objectively insufficient, then it is belief. A judgement only counts as knowledge when one both assents and recognizes the judgement as objectively sufficient.

In this picture of knowledge, cognitions will typically be necessary for determining the objective sufficiency of judgements. For example, suppose Cora judges that the red ball she sees is soft and squeaky. Now, suppose that the ball is, in fact, soft and squeaky. It is the cognition of it that provides the objective grounds of her judgement. If Cora both assents to her judgement and is aware of its objective grounds, then she will be in possession of knowledge that the red ball is soft and squeaky. Cognitions relate to knowledge in a similar way ordinary objects relate to *a posteriori* justification.⁴⁷ Thus, all the knowledge gathered by the empirical sciences are grounded on cognitions.

Could there be knowledge without cognition? Given the differences between them, it is logically possible. This would explain why Kant holds experience to be instances of cognition, even though it does not seem plausible that they are cases of knowing (Tolley 2017, 27). On the flipside, it seems that knowledge and cognition come apart in analytic statements. For instance, the objective ground of the judgement that “all bachelors are unmarried” does not immediately

⁴⁷ “The touchstone of whether taking something to be true ... is therefore, externally, the possibility of communicating it and finding it to be valid for the reason of every human being to take it to be true ... in that case there is at least a presumption that the ground of agreement of all judgements ... rests on a common ground, namely the object, with which they therefore all agree and through which the truth of the judgement is proved.” (A820-1/B848-9)

rest on the cognition of bachelors, but on the logical containment relations between the subject and the predicate.⁴⁸

III *Revisited: The Problem of Noumenal Affection*

In the foregoing sections, we saw that (i) we cannot cognize things in themselves because they fail the intuitive condition, and (ii) knowledge, which involves subjective acts of ‘taking to be true,’ is different from cognition. This reveals that understanding noumenal ignorance in terms of the denial of *knowledge* is importantly different from understanding it in terms of the denial of *cognition*. It is the latter which is ultimately more consistent with not only the text, but Kant’s project as a whole.

The *Critique* is a marriage of epistemological and metaphysical concerns. Kant wants to investigate the limits of our knowledge, his concern is thus epistemological; but he also wants to examine the very *possibility* of knowledge, and thus his concern is metaphysical. To him, these are not separable questions, and his answer to both turn on the analysis of our *cognition*. Therefore, noumenal ignorance should be understood as the denial of cognition and not knowledge. Let’s now revisit our problem.

During the previous configurations of NA—things in themselves causally affects us—and NI—no knowledge of things in themselves—the problem of noumenal affection seemed intractable. These components, previously understood, made passages such as the following appear deeply inconsistent:

- (a) How is outer intuition – namely, that of space (the filling of it by shape and motion) – possible at all in a thinking subject? But it is not possible for any human being to find an answer to this question, and no one will ever fill this gap in our knowledge, but rather only indicate it, by ascribing outer appearances to a transcendental object that

⁴⁸ For an extensive treatment, see: Chignell (2014).

is the cause of this species of representations, with which cause, however, we have no acquaintance at all, nor will we ever get a concept of it. (A393)

Here, Kant says that we can never know how, in the first place, it is possible for us to perceive bodies in space. Instead, he says that we must ascribe to them a thing in itself which causes them. But, this cause is not something that we know or have a concept of.

The uncomfortable tension lies in the claim that there is a transcendental cause which we do not know. Supposing the relation between things in themselves and appearances is a causal one, how are we supposed to not know it, and even worse, not have a concept of it? And even if we grant for a moment that by the transcendental cause Kant means nothing like causality, there is still the problem that the categories are being utilized beyond experience.

The problem of noumenal affection has been made difficult through the unnecessary assumption that noumenal affection is a causal relation. This assumption hopelessly corners Kant. There doesn't seem to be a way for him to emerge unscathed, and this is reflected by the solutions that have been provided in the literature. They span from proposing that Kant merely *believes*, as a personal conviction, in noumenal affection and in things in themselves (Van Cleve 1999); that he employs things in themselves as a piece of philosophical fiction (Schaper 1966); or that he is somehow coerced (by reason or by transcendental philosophy) into the claim that things in themselves causally affects us (Rescher 1972, Allison 2004). Moreover, the consequence of these solutions is not only that things in themselves are reduced into nothingness, but Kant is *still* guilty of violating his constraint on the categories, *and* he does not really abide by the categorical denial of knowledge, either. Instead, he does so elliptically, because you can't really (literally) have knowledge of things that don't exist.

These seem to be messy solutions to a messy problem. But what if we've understood the components of the problem wrong? Let's try 'plugging in' the way I have argued we should

understand NA and NI. Now, another look at the problematic passage, this time through different lenses:

- (a) How is outer intuition – namely, that of space (the filling of it by shape and motion) – possible at all in a thinking subject? But it is not possible for any human being to find an answer to this question, and no one will ever fill this gap in our knowledge, but rather only indicate it, by ascribing outer appearances to a transcendental object that is the cause of this species of representations, with which cause, however, we have no acquaintance at all, nor will we ever get a concept of it. (A393)

Initially, it seems implausible that Kant can claim there is a “gap in our knowledge” if appearances are just caused by things in themselves. But this tension disappears if we interpret noumenal affection non-causally as a grounding claim. The ‘gap’ refers to the unknowable nature of the grounding relation—how is it that things in themselves ground appearances? What is the general rule that applies? This renders intelligible the final part of the passage, which claims we lack a concept of the cause, that is, the *ground*, and acquaintance with it. Since things in themselves are never present in experience (despite their grounding the appearances) we are not acquainted with them. This is another way of phrasing what we had discussed above: in the cognition of appearance there is no cognition of things in themselves. Moreover, it is due to our inability to cognize things in themselves that precludes the possibility of us having a concept of their grounding relation. Our inability to cognize them means we cannot determine the ‘general rule’ that applies to noumenal affection, leaving us with nothing more than the generic concept of a real ground.

The resource provided by the grounding interpretation further allows us to explain the entirety of the passage, and those like it, without having to contend with the problem that Kant applies the categories beyond experience. On my account, he simply does not need the categories to explain noumenal affection.

Thus far, we've only made sense of the passage in terms of the alternative interpretation of noumenal affection I proposed in chapter two. However, it is not enough to resolve the problem of noumenal affection just by moving into the grounding interpretation, because we need to consider whether the grounding interpretation itself is compatible with noumenal ignorance. In other words, is the analytic knowledge we derive from the concept of noumenal affection as a generic real ground possibly compatible with noumenal ignorance?

So long as we do not misunderstand noumenal ignorance as a constraint on knowledge, then it is possible for NI to be compatible with the merely analytic knowledge given by NA. Knowing them to be ontologically more fundamental than appearances, for example, is not derived through their cognition but logically from the concept of a real ground. Therefore, these minimal claims are compatible.

However, the constraint on cognition *is* severely limiting. There is very little we can accomplish with regards to things in themselves without cognizing them. Apart from what noumenal affection tells us, Kant also says that things in themselves exist, and are non-spatiotemporal. The latter claim finds its objective sufficiency in the surety that things in themselves are not given to us in intuition because they are non-spatiotemporal. Nonetheless, this result is in accord with Kant's project of limiting speculative thought.

The compatibility of noumenal affection with noumenal ignorance crucially depends on it going no further than merely analytic knowledge and so presumes no cognition of things in themselves. On its own, it would not be sufficient because the categorical denial of knowledge would not discriminate between those that are synthetic or those that are analytic. It may be *better* to claim *only* analytic knowledge, but that would still be in violation of the knowledge constraint. From the perspective of law, an offense is still an offense even if it is a minor one.

This situation is like the problem where Kant, under the causal interpretation of NA, could not avoid using the categories transphenomenally. Reducing the severity of the crime is a possible move, but it is less than ideal and in danger of seeming ad hoc.

Our analysis of NI reveals two flaws in the older understanding. First, the original version of NI doesn't enjoy textual support. Textually, it is overwhelmingly the case that Kant says what we cannot have of things in themselves is the cognition [*Erkenntnis*] of them. Second, the focus on cognition coheres better with Kant's whole project that is concerned with both metaphysical and epistemological questions. The focus on knowledge cannot explain why Kant cares so much about cognition, but the reverse is able to explain it perfectly. Kant cares about cognition, first and foremost, because the limits of what we can *know* are intertwined with what we can *experience*. The upper limit of "sense-meaning" is not independent from the lower limit of "sense-experience" (Gomes 2017, 19). To understand noumenal ignorance as the denial of knowledge involves exaggerating the feature of Kant's thought that inspired the logical positivists and their verificationism, and it comes at the expense of obscuring other parts of Kant's philosophy, namely, the side that rightly reflects him as the progenitor of German idealism.

In conclusion, with the components of the problem reconfigured it seems that many of the most persistent issues can be dealt with from within Kant's own system. Among the most persistent were the claims that Kant could not be consistent with his own constraints on the categories or on what he explicitly avows we cannot know. My analysis demonstrates that Kant is not held hostage by the categories to describe noumenal affection and the minimal knowledge

afforded by things in themselves are compatible with NI insofar as they do not rest on cognitions of things in themselves.⁴⁹

IV *The Implications of Our Noumenal Ignorance*

In the final section of this project, I address an implication of the preceding account of noumenal ignorance on a longstanding debate in Kant scholarship. This is the debate over whether transcendental idealism is committed to the existence of one or two worlds. This will help contrast my position on transcendental idealism with respect to other metaphysical interpretations.

The origins of this debate began with the phenomenalist interpretation of TI, which held that appearances were metaphysically separate entities to things in themselves. Under the phenomenalist picture, there is the world of perceived objects, and then there are, so to speak, their underlying true forms—the objects ‘in themselves.’ This view made it very easy to regard transcendental idealism as the most unsavory brand of idealism which reduces empirical objects into second-class entities or mere illusions. Largely in response to the shortcomings of the phenomenalist interpretation, there began a wave of interpretations which explicitly rejected any such talk of two metaphysically distinct entities. The epistemological interpretations rejected the notion of there being two entities (and thus two worlds) by removing the metaphysics from transcendental idealism (e.g., Allison 1983; 2004). On the contrary, alternative metaphysical accounts did this by resorting to a different metaphysical picture where appearances and things in

⁴⁹ Readers may wonder how this picture fits with transcendental or noumenal freedom. Kant does not think we can have *theoretical* cognition of things in themselves, so not in the narrow way I have been discussing cognition here. Rather, Kant leaves noumenal freedom and its justification to be dealt with on *practical* grounds. See: *CPR* (5:42-50). It seems to me that noumenal affection, as the grounds of appearances, and noumenal freedom, as the causality of the noumenal subject, lie in two separate domains of Kant’s philosophy according to the consistent distinction he makes between the theoretical and the practical. However, the boundary has not been well respected and the treatment of noumenal affection is often conflated with freedom (e.g., Adams 1997, Watkins 2005, Hogan 2009a). I suspect this is because of the dominance of the causal reading of noumenal affection.

themselves constituted two different, but real, ‘aspects’ of one single thing (e.g., Langton 1997, Allais 2004; 2015). These views defined themselves, at least in part, against the two-world picture of phenomenalism.

While I am sympathetic to the concerns and the inherent interest in the question of whether TI is committed to one or two worlds, I fear that the question itself takes us beyond the bounds of speculative philosophy which TI itself has drawn. The question requires us to speculate and characterize the metaphysical identity of things in themselves and appearances in a way that is at tension with Kant’s overarching project, and specifically with the doctrine of noumenal ignorance. It seems to me that a ‘one-world’ interpretation would require cognition of things in themselves because it would have to rule out the possibility that there are things in themselves which do not have an appearance or appearance-like aspect to them. But we could never have such determinate knowledge of things in themselves without cognizing them, and this to me seems to be the result that Kant desires.

It seems that one-world interpretations derive most of their force dialectically in opposition to phenomenalism. Of course, a two-aspectual distinction of things in themselves and appearances *need not* resort, nor even imply, that there are metaphysically two separate entities. However, how could we possibly go beyond this negative claim without cognition of the things in themselves? Yet, this negative claim merely establishes the absence of a need to posit an additional ‘world’ (whatever that might mean) but is logically insufficient to entail the positive claim that *there is only a single world*.

Instead, I think that agnosticism is the correct attitude towards this debate. In this vein, I am aligned with a recent view proposed by R. Lanier Anderson, in which he argues that the question of one versus two worlds is illegitimate from the standpoint of Kant’s own philosophy

(unpublished ms., 20).⁵⁰ Anderson manages to argue for this conclusion without sacrificing Kant's idealistic concerns, nor deflating things in themselves into mere epistemological standpoints. It seems to me that this kind of position is the most consistent with noumenal ignorance.

⁵⁰ Thanks to Professor R. Lanier Anderson for the permission to cite his unpublished manuscript, "Transcendental Idealism as Formal Idealism," in this project.

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