

# the philosophical forum A QUARTERLY

NEW ESSAYS ON:

A SYMPOSIUM ON SUBJECTIVE TIME  
KANT NIETZSCHE ALSTON  
WILLIAMSON AND THE TRADITION

**PETER J. RIGGS**

*The Perceptions and Experience of the "Passage" of Time*

**TAMAR LEVANON**

*William James in Search of the "Minimum of Dynamism" in Temporal Experience*

**CHRISTOPHER D. CORDNER**

*Justice and Unconditional Valuing in Nietzsche's Genealogy*

**NECİP FİKRİ ALİCAN**

*Kant's Neglected Alternative:  
Neither Neglected nor an Alternative*

**JIM SLAGLE**

*Indicators and Depictors*

**CHUNG-YING CHENG**

*From "Knowledge First" to Unifying Knowledge and Belief:  
In Light of Deeper Understanding of Mind and Reality*

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**ADVERTISING** Kristin Mccarthy (email: [kmccarthy@wiley.com](mailto:kmccarthy@wiley.com))

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## KANT'S NEGLECTED ALTERNATIVE: NEITHER NEGLECTED NOR AN ALTERNATIVE

NECİP FİKRİ ALİCAN

This is a defense of Kant against the allegedly neglected alternative in his formulation of transcendental idealism. What sets it apart from the contributions of others who have spoken for Kant in this regard is the construction of a general interpretive framework — a reconstruction of the one Kant provides for transcendental idealism — as opposed to the development of an ad hoc defensive strategy for refuting the charges. Hence, comprehensive clarification instead of pointed rebuttal. The difference is between focusing on the text and focusing on the problem. No doubt, doing both is not only possible but also required, as the problem is supposed to be in the text, but the point is that it is not there, and further, that we need not go anywhere else to show that it is not there. Thus, the approach is constructive rather than defensive, or more accurately, constructive as well as defensive. And the construction rests on what Kant actually said rather than on what he might have meant or on what he should have said instead.

### I. OVERVIEW

Ever since the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>1</sup> Kant's formulation of transcendental idealism has been saddled with a gap, a supposedly neglected

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kant are to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/1787), using the Akademie pagination and the Norman Kemp Smith translation (1933). Quotations omit footnote reference markers in the original. Much else may be relevant, but nothing else is necessary. Drawing on a wide assortment of sources may have its own advantages, but this is more of an analytic than a scholarly initiative. I am interested neither in whether Kant had anticipated the problem when he published his first piece nor in whether he had solved it when he wrote his last. I am interested only in showing that the alleged problem is not really a problem where it is supposed to be a problem: the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The title is abbreviated throughout as “*Critique*” rather than “first *Critique*” given that the other two *Critiques* do not come up in this paper.

alternative<sup>2</sup> between objective and subjective reality, such that things may, *pace* Kant, happen to be just the way they appear to be.

The alternative in question emerges against Kant's express denial of the possibility of knowledge of things in themselves, thus revealing a position of ignorance regarding whether they are or are not what they appear to be, while affirming nevertheless that they are not. This apparent contradiction is not itself the neglected alternative but an epistemically prior problem underlying and encouraging the associated charge.

The neglected alternative, strictly speaking, is more specific. It concerns the instantiation of that general problem as a particular complication in Kant's position on space and time as nothing more than forms of human sensibility (pure forms of intuition), which comes with a denial, not just by implication but by declaration as well, of any possibility of their being objectively real. The alternative neglected, then, would be the possibility that space and time might be both objective and subjective. The charge in all this is that Kant rejects the objectivity of space and time, based on (nothing more than) the subjectivity of space and time, while neglecting the alternative that space and time may be objective forms as well as subjective conditions.

The history of the problem dates back to Kant's own lifetime. And there has been no shortage of discussion since then. A sense of the historical background and of the current state of scholarship is provided in the second half of section two and in the corresponding notes and references. The one thing they show in unison is that the solutions proposed so far have not yet laid the matter to rest. This certainly leaves room for another attempt,<sup>3</sup> the pursuit of which becomes all the more urgent if the solution is provided by Kant himself, or is at least readily available in Kant.<sup>4</sup> The overarching aim of this paper is to move the discussion

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<sup>2</sup> I tend to drop qualifications such as "allegedly" and "supposedly" for brevity and convenience. Where I do, "neglected alternative" is shorthand for "allegedly neglected alternative." I also refrain from using scare quotes. There, too, I acknowledge no more than an allegation.

<sup>3</sup> A critic has asked me whether we might not instead be warranted in drawing the moral that we have already failed, or put differently, that we have done all we can and that there is only so much we can do. In his own words: "If we have not yet been able to lay the matter to rest, after well over two centuries, is it not perhaps time we gave it a rest?" Perhaps it is. No one could reasonably call that a hasty decision. But that decision, as I will show, would leave us without a solution that is otherwise at our disposal in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Talk of a solution "readily available" in Kant may seem presumptuous, given that eminently qualified scholars have long been scouring what is readily available in Kant. In reality, however, it is no more presumptuous than the provision of any other solution, the sharing of which is almost always motivated by a belief in having filled a need. This is the standard reason for exposing one's work to critical scrutiny. My own satisfaction with what Kant says comes not with an exemption from the widely acknowledged difficulty of reading Kant but from a disinterested attempt to give credit where it is due, to Kant himself.

forward with an interpretive framework showing that Kant himself successfully confronts the allegedly neglected alternative.<sup>5</sup>

The process unfolds as follows: Section two lays out the central thesis of Kant's transcendental idealism and describes the problem posed for it by the neglected alternative. Section three, taking a negative approach, shows that what is in question is not so much neglect as it is denial, meaning that the most Kant can be accused of is not neglecting but wrongly rejecting an alternative. Section four, switching to a positive approach, distinguishes between problems in deduction and problems in consistency as two related objections inherent in the neglected alternative and incorporates each one as a critical benchmark in the emerging interpretive framework. Section five tests the tenability of the interpretive platform set up in section four, appraising and confirming its ability to accommodate different senses of the otherwise ambiguous distinction between things as they appear and things as they are in themselves. The end result is that the supposedly neglected alternative ceases to be an alternative, let alone a neglected one.<sup>6</sup> Section six, a conclusion of the synoptic rather than deductive kind, reviews the result thus established.

## II. PROBLEM

In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant examines the principles of *a priori* sensibility in an effort to delineate the pure forms of intuition. In the *Expositions* (space: A22–25/B37–41; time: A30–32/B46–49), he submits that space and time are necessary *a priori* intuitions and that they are the only such intuitions: They are pure forms of intuition serving as principles of *a priori* knowledge. That is to say, they are *a priori* representations constituting the conditions under which objects are given to us. In the *Conclusions* (space: A26–30/B42–45; time: A32–36/B49–53), which he deduces from the *Expositions*, he argues that space and time are neither things in themselves nor determinations of things in themselves. This conclusion, together with his claim that we can know things only as they appear and not as they are in themselves (A30/B45, A42/B59), constitutes the core of his transcendental idealism. In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, the briefest

<sup>5</sup> My touchstone of successful confrontation is not direct refutation beyond all doubt. I can live with a Kant who neither neglects the alternative in question nor rejects it lightly. In what follows, I demonstrate that this is indeed the Kant we have. The apparent alternative is undermined by the critical philosophy, thus precluding a full-blown confrontation. To be more specific, from Kant's perspective, that is, from what I imagine to have been Kant's perspective, a proper elucidation of the critical philosophy leaves no room for the supposed alternative and, thereby, no need for a formal attack or defense.

<sup>6</sup> It may seem suspicious to claim both that Kant did not neglect the alternative and that it is not an alternative. The claim, however, is that what may seem like an alternative at first (in the broadest scope of consideration) turns out not to be an alternative after all (in the context of the critical philosophy).

continuous passage that comes closest to exhibiting the core construction is the following:

It is, therefore, not merely possible or probable, but indubitably certain, that space and time, as the necessary conditions of all outer and inner experience, are merely subjective conditions of all our intuition, and that in relation to these conditions all objects are therefore mere appearances, and not given to us as things in themselves which exist in this manner. For this reason also, while much can be said *a priori* as regards the form of appearances, nothing whatsoever can be asserted of the thing in itself, which may underlie these appearances. [A48–49/B66]

The inherent thesis of transcendental idealism can be taken up in two parts:

- *Ontological Thesis*: Neither space and time nor what we experience in space and time are things in themselves;<sup>7</sup> rather, space and time are forms of human sensibility,<sup>8</sup> and what we experience in space and time is appearances (things as they appear).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Kant's rejection of space and time, together with whatever is experienced in and through them, as things in themselves hardly needs specific references. This is the leitmotif of the Transcendental Aesthetic (cf. space: A22–30/B37–45; time: A30–41/B46–58).

<sup>8</sup> This part of the ontological thesis, that space and time are forms of human sensibility, is the theme of Kant's second (A26/B42) Conclusion on space and his second (A33/B49–50) and third (A34/B50–51) Conclusions on time. Often left in skeletal form for brevity, both in the main body of this paper and in the notes, the thesis actually comes with greater specificity. Stated more fully, the claim is that (1) *only* space and time are forms of human sensibility, and that (2) space and time are *only* forms of human sensibility, but not that (3) space and time are forms of *only* human sensibility. Kant brings out the first reading in the Elucidation, where he reasons that “transcendental aesthetic cannot contain more than these two elements, space and time” (A41/B58). He confirms the second reading in at least two ways (and in at least as many places) in the Transcendental Aesthetic: he refers to space and time as “nothing but” (A26/B42 on space; A33/B49 on time) and “merely” (A39/B56 and A48/B66 on both) such forms of sensibility. Concerning the third reading, he leaves it open whether space and time are exclusively human forms of sensibility (A41–42/B59 in the first General Observation; B72 in the fourth General Observation).

<sup>9</sup> This part of the ontological thesis, that what we experience in space and time is not things in themselves but things as they appear, is the theme of Kant's first (A26/B42) Conclusion on space and his first (A32–33/B49) and third (A34/B50–51) Conclusions on time. With respect to space, this is the theme of Kant's first Conclusion on space (A26/B42), and he reiterates it in what immediately follows the two specific Conclusions (especially at A28/B44, where he “establishes” the “transcendental ideality” and “empirical reality” of space, and at A30/B45, where he issues a “critical reminder”). With respect to time, this is the theme of his first (A32–33/B49) and third (A34/B50–51) Conclusions on time, and he reiterates it in what immediately follows the three specific Conclusions (especially at A35–36/B52, where he “maintains” the “empirical reality” and “transcendental ideality” of time).

- *Epistemological Thesis*: We can know things only as they appear and not as they are in themselves.<sup>10</sup>

A common objection is that the ontological thesis is too ambitious a conclusion to draw from the Expositions, and that the ontological thesis, because it is too strong a claim, contradicts the epistemological thesis. The root of this objection is the following reading of the *Transcendental Aesthetic*: Kant recognizes only two possibilities, either space and time are the conditions of human sensibility through which we experience things as they appear or they are objective receptacles where things in themselves actually exist, but he neglects the alternative that both disjuncts may obtain, to wit, that space and time may be conditions of human sensibility while also constituting a transcendently real medium in which things in themselves exist. Some form or other of this objection is commonly known as the “neglected alternative.”<sup>11</sup>

The allegedly neglected alternative is not a recent discovery. The potential problem had already been recognized during the publication process of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in fact, coming up in print as early as the interval between the first and second editions. This was in an anonymous review by Hermann Andreas Pistorius (1786, 92–123) of a book-length commentary by Johann Schultz (1784) on the *Critique*.<sup>12</sup> The issue was also noted, perhaps more famously, by Johann Gebhard Ehrenreich Maaß (1788, 117–149; 1789, 469–495), who was part of an opposition movement led by Johann August Eberhard and carried out by a group of scholars promulgating their views in the *Philosophisches Magazin*, a journal founded as a vehicle for opposition to the critical philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

Yet it was not until a century after the publication of the *Critique* that the matter of the neglected alternative reached its height as a full-blown controversy. This was the result of an extended debate throughout the 1860s between Adolf Trendelenburg and Kuno Fischer. Ferocious by academic standards, the dispute

<sup>10</sup> The epistemological thesis, that we can know things only as they appear and not as they are in themselves, is at the heart of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Statements to this effect occur throughout the *Critique*, beginning as early as the preface to the second edition (Bxx, Bxxv–xxvi, Bxxvi). Two specific passages in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* are as follows: At the end of the section on space, he says that “the thing in itself, is not known, and cannot be known” (A30/B45); in the first General Observation, he says that “[w]hat objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us” (A42/B59).

<sup>11</sup> The more inclusive scenario it represents is a logical possibility Kant purportedly fails to consider. It also has the advantage of not contradicting the epistemological thesis as Kant supposedly does.

<sup>12</sup> The anonymous review is readily available in the archives of the journal in which it originally appeared (*Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* 66:1) as well as in an abridged English translation offered in a relatively recent compilation of early reactions to Kant (Sassen 2000, 93–105).

<sup>13</sup> The position of the Eberhard camp and the nature of the opposition there to Kant is covered in detail by Allison (1973). See pp. 34–36, especially p. 34, n. 48, for the role of Maaß (1788, 119–123; 1789, 470–472) in publicizing the neglected alternative.



spanned a decade and spawned several publications on both sides, pertaining generally to the Transcendental Aesthetic, but often focusing specifically on the possibility of a gap in the exclusive subjectivity of space and time. Then known as the “Trendelenburg gap,” a phrase coined after the title of one of the publications (Trendelenburg 1867)<sup>14</sup> in the polemical engagement, this is the difference between claiming that space and time are subjectively real (or valid) and denying that they are objectively real (or valid), with no apparent explanation of why they might not be both.

Ever since, Kant scholars have been proposing reformulations of and solutions to the Trendelenburg gap, which has come to be known as the neglected alternative.<sup>15</sup> Norman Kemp Smith (1918, 112–114), for example, summarizes the problem as follows:

Kant recognises only two alternatives, either space as objective is known *a posteriori*, or being an *a priori* representation it is subjective in origin. There exists a third alternative, namely, that though our intuition of space is subjective in origin, space is itself an inherent property of things in themselves. [Kemp Smith 1918, 113]

<sup>14</sup> Although the original name (“Trendelenburg gap”) of the neglected alternative can be traced back to a single publication by Trendelenburg (1867), his opposition spans several works, including, most notably, *Logische Untersuchungen* (1840/1862/1870).

<sup>15</sup> A historical grounding in the neglected alternative best begins with Vaihinger’s (1892, 134–151, 290–326) coverage of more than a century of reactions, including the protracted and sensational debate between Trendelenburg and Fischer. Among more recent commentators, Allison (1973, 34–36) and Sassen (2000, 93–105) can be consulted profitably for insight into both the early reception of the *Critique* in general and the emergence of the neglected alternative controversy in particular. Kanterian (2013, 263–288) and Specht (2014, 514–534) must also be singled out for filling an important need, as they reintroduce us to Trendelenburg’s point of view at a level of detail often neglected by Kant scholars (and by the present author). These can fruitfully be supplemented with other recent or current studies of the problem itself: Adair-Toteff (1994, 131–148); Allais (2010, 47–75); Allison (1976, 313–321, especially 313–315; 1983, 102–114, especially 111–114; 1996, 3–26; 2004, 118–132, especially 128–132; 2006, 111–124); Ameriks (1992, 329–342, especially 335–337); Bennett (1966, 22–27); Bird (2006a, 173–178; 2006b, 486–499; 2013, 289–300); Bonaccini (2008, 107–120); Breitenbach (2004, 137–148); Buroker (1981, 93–100; 2006, 36–72, 305–309); DeLong (2009, 13–26); Disalle (2006, 55–79); Falkenstein (1989, 265–283; 1995, 289–309, 310–333, 334–355; 2006, 140–153); Gardner (1999, 57–74); Gram (1984, 207–210); Guyer (1987, 333–383); Hanna (2001, 95–105, 105–119, especially 105–113); Herissone-Kelly (2007, 269–282); Hogan (2009a, 49–63; 2009b, 355–382); Insole (2011, 608–638); Katz (1995, 91–100); Keller (1998, 217–234, especially 224–228); Kemp Smith (1918, 112–114); Kitcher (2001, 599–608); Kömer (1955, 37–39); Kroon (2001, 165–181); Langton (1998, 7–14, 15–47); Paton (1936, 171–175, 180–181); Pippin (1982, 54–87, 188–215); Rescher (1981, 289–299); Rogerson (1988, 271–286); Rosefeldt (2013, 755–764); Rosenberg (2005, 61–87); Scott-Taggart (1966, 171–209, especially 184); Senderowicz (2005, 97–110, 135–157); Setiya (2004, 63–88); Strawson (1966, 47–71, 235–273); Thompson (1983, 33–48); Van Cleve (1999, 134–171); Walker (2010, 821–843); Werkmeister (1981, 301–311).

Herbert James Paton (1936, 171–175) puts it in the form of a question:

Granting that by means of our pure intuitions of space and time we can know *a priori* the conditions, or forms, of all appearances, why should not space and time be real things which are at the same time conditions, or forms, of things, not only as they appear to us, but as they are in themselves? [Paton 1936, 174]

Stephan Körner (1955, 37–39) offers perhaps the most memorable exposition of the neglected alternative through a colorful metaphor. He likens Kant's conception of space and time to irremovable spectacles through which we experience the world:

To use a very crude analogy, space and time are the spectacles through which our eyes are affected by objects. The spectacles are irremovable. Objects can be seen only through them. Objects, therefore, can never be seen as they are in themselves. [Körner 1955, 37]

He then introduces the twist that, because of the way the world may possibly be in itself, the spectacles could, unbeknownst to us, turn out to be irrelevant to the experience, making our perception the same with or without them:

It is quite possible that what a person sees through his irremovable spectacles as, let us say, pink, is also pink in fact, and would be so even if *per impossibile* the spectacles were removed. [Körner 1955, 38]<sup>16</sup>

Körner's point is that, even where we experience the world through irremovable spectacles, and in no other way, the world itself just might happen to be exactly the way we experience it through the irremovable spectacles.<sup>17</sup> We must

<sup>16</sup> The spectacles are not unique to Körner. In fact, they are available in a variety of colors. Paton already had them in blue (1936, 180, 581) a couple of decades before Körner came out with the pink model (1955, 37–38). Van Cleve retired these in favor of a red version (1999, 267, n. 1, cf. p. 36). Russell (1912, 13) had anticipated the blue ones nearly a quarter of a century before Paton introduced them, though Russell did not reference Kant in his own analogy until reformulating it in a later work (1945, 707–708) published roughly a decade after Paton's. A rose-tinted alternative now seems to be in vogue in generalist textbooks. Any color will do, of course, just as well as any other. Note, however, that Paton's thought experiment is somewhat different from the rest in that he asks us to imagine the world turning blue upon putting on the relevant spectacles, whereas the others work with spectacles that are permanently attached to the subject (whose world just happens to be the color imposed by the spectacles).

<sup>17</sup> The analogy does not seem alien to Kant, who shows elsewhere — at the end of Note 2 (Remark 2) in the first part of “The Main Transcendental Question” in the *Prolegomena* (§ 13 Ak. 4:289–290) — that he is as reluctant to associate the representation of space with the object as he is to take the sensation of red to be a property of the cinnabar giving rise to the sensation. Admittedly, what he actually says in the relevant passage is couched in terms of “similarity” rather than “association,” but this still leaves room for the possibility that he was not oblivious to an analogy of the sort inspired by the example of the irremovable spectacles. At any rate, the matter is best confined to a footnote as it is extraneous to the promise of a defense based on the *Critique* alone. See, however, Kant's own footnote in the second edition of the *Critique*, specifically in the third General Observation on the Transcendental Aesthetic, regarding the color and smell of the rose, including talk of ascribing “redness to the rose *in itself*” (B69–70).

embrace this contingency, he urges, because we have no grounds to dismiss the possibility altogether.

### III. ANALYSIS

The term “neglected alternative” is elegant but inaccurate. It is clear from the outset (Transcendental Aesthetic) that Kant does not neglect the alternative described. He instead examines and rejects it. Due consideration begins as early as the Metaphysical Exposition of space, where he contemplates three answers to the question “What are space and time?” (A23/B37–38): The first is Newton’s *absolutistic view* that space and time are “real existences.” The second is Leibniz’s *relational view* that space and time are “only determinations of things, yet such as would belong to things even if they were not intuited.” The third is Kant’s *critical view* that space and time “belong only to the form of intuition, and therefore to the subjective constitution of our mind, apart from which they could not be ascribed to anything whatsoever.”

Kant takes these three answers to be jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The Newtonian and Leibnizian positions, as the leading theories recognizing space and time as objectively real (transcendentally real) as opposed to subjectively real (empirically real and transcendentally ideal), together cover the untenable portion (from Kant’s perspective) of what proponents of the neglected alternative accuse Kant of neglecting. He need not second-guess his own view (that space and time are only subjectively real) with an alternative that incorporates positions he actively resists.

A case in point is the following passage of the Elucidation, where Kant argues against both the “mathematical students of nature” (the Newtonian answer) and the “metaphysical students of nature” (the Leibnizian answer):

Those, on the other hand, who maintain the absolute reality of space and time, whether as subsistent or only as inherent, must come into conflict with the principles of experience itself. For if they decide for the former alternative (which is generally the view taken by mathematical students of nature), they have to admit two eternal and infinite self-subsistent non-entities (space and time), which are there (yet without there being anything real) only in order to contain in themselves all that is real. If they adopt the latter alternative (as advocated by certain metaphysical students of nature), and regard space and time as relations of appearances, alongside or in succession to one another — relations abstracted from experience, and in this isolation confusedly represented — they are obliged to deny that *a priori* mathematical doctrines have any validity in respect of real things (for instance, in space), or at least to deny their apodeictic certainty. [A39–40/B56–57]

The Expositions and the Elucidation are not the only places Kant considers the neglected alternative. He takes it up again in the General Observations on the Transcendental Aesthetic. In the latter half of the first General Observation, he entertains the possibility that “space and time are in themselves objective, and

are conditions of the possibility of things in themselves" (A46/B64). But he quickly objects that synthetic *a priori* knowledge becomes impossible on this supposition, insisting that such knowledge is possible only with the answer represented by his critical view. Furthermore, in the third General Observation, he invites the reader to reflect on the absurdities that follow "if we regard space and time as properties, which, if they are to be possible at all, must be found in things in themselves" (B70).

Kant seems to be attempting a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Newtonian and Leibnizian positions.<sup>18</sup> That he is attempting this is more important, at least for ascertaining what he is doing, than whether he succeeds. Space and time may perchance be transcendently real in some other way, but these were the two ways confronting Kant as the most serious alternatives to his own view. And refuting them, or even simply rejecting them, would have left him little incentive to consider the further alternative that reality just may happen to coincide with both his own view and the views he is at pains to discredit.

It may be objected that even if the Newtonian and Leibnizian positions constitute an alternative to Kant's position, they do not contradict Kant's position (though they do contradict each other), and furthermore, that the neglected alternative corresponds neither to Newton's position nor to Leibniz's position, nor even to some sort of combination or synthesis of the two, but rather to the possibility that one or the other is true along with Kant's position. To revert to the more concrete terms of the actual charge, this is to object that Kant fails to rule out the logical possibility that space and time may be both objectively and subjectively real. This, however, is to take Kant's position to be merely that space and time are forms of sensibility and to ignore that he declares them to be merely forms of sensibility.

In point of fact, Kant states explicitly that space and time are *merely* (A39/B56, A48/B66) — or *nothing but* (A26/B42, A33/B49) — forms of human sensibility (pure forms of intuition), on top of which he adds, for good measure, that they are not objectively real (A23/B37–38, A48–49/B66). This is neither the language nor the disposition of someone who speaks from a position of neglect in the sense of omission, disregard, or carelessness. It is manifestly closer to a considered opinion: "not merely possible or probable, but indubitably certain" (A48–49/B66).

This, of course, says nothing of the logical content of the charge, suggesting only that another name (avoiding reference to "neglect") might be more appropriate.<sup>19</sup> Put differently, the fact that Kant did not actually neglect the allegedly

<sup>18</sup> The most persistent advocate of this reading is Allison (1976, 315–317; 1983, 107–111; 2004, 123–128).

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, "third alternative" is also in common parlance. See, for example, Kanterian (2013), who favors "third alternative," abbreviating it as "3A." See also Allison (1976, 316), whose count makes it the fourth alternative.

neglected alternative does not absolve him of the charge that he wrongly rejected it.<sup>20</sup> The remainder of the paper is devoted to showing that he is innocent of the latter charge as well.

#### IV. RESPONSE

The neglected alternative poses two related challenges to Kant's transcendental idealism. The first is a problem in deduction, the second a problem in consistency. The problem in deduction is that the ontological thesis does not follow as a conclusion from the Expositions. What follows is a weaker claim: Space and time are forms of human sensibility and we experience things as they appear in space and time, but we cannot know whether space and time are things in themselves and whether things in themselves really do exist in space and time. The problem in consistency is that the ontological thesis contradicts the epistemological thesis because both the claim that space and time, which are not things in themselves, are forms of human sensibility, and the claim that things in themselves do not exist in space and time, admit at least some knowledge of things as they are in themselves.

Kant's distinction between things as they appear and things in themselves is at the heart of these problems. He tends to construe that distinction in two different senses: In one sense, he takes it as a distinction between two kinds of objects, in the other sense, as a distinction between two ways of viewing objects. One sense is *objective*, the other *subjective*.<sup>21</sup> The first sense of the distinction, the *objective dichotomy*, is where he distinguishes between kinds of things, specifically according to whether they are given in experience: Things as they appear are given in experience while things in themselves are not given in experience. The second sense of the distinction, the *subjective dichotomy*, is where he distinguishes between ways of viewing things, specifically according to whether they are viewed through forms of human sensibility: Things as they appear are viewed

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<sup>20</sup> Bird (2006a, 173–174) offers a succinct summary of the relevant possibilities as they are actualized in print: “Trendelenburg [1865] thinks Kant did not even *consider* the neglected alternative, while Vaihinger [1892] thinks that Kant mentions it but never took it seriously, and Guyer [1987] holds that Kant deliberately *excluded* it” (bracketed dates given in pp. 170–174, before and after the passage just quoted). The 1865 date Bird gives for Trendelenburg's *Logische Untersuchungen* corresponds to the second edition (1862) of the Trendelenburg (1840) entry among the works cited in this paper.

<sup>21</sup> This is not my invention. Some such distinction in the distinction is fairly common in the literature. The interplay here between *objective* and *subjective* dichotomies is an instantiation of the opposition between “two-world” and “two-aspect” interpretations of Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves. References are inexhaustible. My own reading was inspired by Allison (1976, 317–321; 1983, 111–114; 1996, 3–26; 2004, 128–132).

through forms of human sensibility while things in themselves are viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.

To be sure, not everyone agrees that Kant conceives of his transcendental distinction in two different senses, but this is not for a lack of evidence:<sup>22</sup> The twin conceptions emerge almost immediately<sup>23</sup> in the *Critique*, where Kant invokes both senses repeatedly and seems unable to choose between them: He starts out favoring the *subjective dichotomy*,<sup>24</sup> later relying more on the *objective dichotomy*.<sup>25</sup> The possibility that he maintains such a distinction is worth exploring, regardless of whether one finds the evidence compelling, if only for the implications it holds for the neglected alternative.

What, then, on this interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction, is the claim that we can know things only as they appear and not as they are in themselves? In terms of the *objective dichotomy*, this means that we can know only the things that are given in experience and not the things that are not given in experience, or more perspicuously, that we can know things only as they are given in experience and not otherwise (not as they are in themselves independently of how they are given in experience). In terms of the *subjective dichotomy*, it means that we can know only the things that are viewed through forms of human sensibility and not the things that are viewed independently of forms of human sensibility, or more briefly, that we can know things only as they are viewed through forms of human sensibility and not otherwise (not when they are considered independently of forms of human sensibility). In terms of each of these ways of construing the epistemological thesis, substitution in the larger thesis of transcendental idealism, as expressed in the formulation in section two, yields the following two versions:

<sup>22</sup> Aquila (1983) and Gram (1984), for example, deny that Kant holds two different senses of the distinction between things as they appear and things as they are in themselves.

<sup>23</sup> The two senses of Kant's transcendental distinction appear as early as the preface to the second edition of the *Critique*. He invokes the *objective dichotomy* where he characterizes "an object of sensible intuition" as "an appearance" and argues that we cannot know "mere objects of *experience*" as "things in themselves" (Bxxvi). He invokes the *subjective dichotomy* where he takes "objects as appearances" to "conform to our mode of representation" (Bxx).

<sup>24</sup> In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant leans toward the *subjective dichotomy*. Midway through the *Elucidation*, in a parenthetical reference, he refers to an object's being "viewed in and by itself" as its being viewed "without regard to the mode of intuiting it" (A38/B55). At the beginning of the first General Observation, he takes "what objects may be in themselves" to mean "apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility" (A42/B59). At the beginning of the third General Observation, he links the "mode of intuition of the subject" with the "object as *appearance*" and argues that this "is to be distinguished from itself as object *in itself*" (B69).

<sup>25</sup> Allison (1976, 313–321, especially 317, n. 15) notes that Kant uses the *objective dichotomy* specifically at B308–309, A287–288/B344–345, and A741/B769. He adds that the *objective dichotomy* is especially clear in a letter of 16 August 1783 from Kant to Mendelssohn (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Ak. 10:346).

*Objective Dichotomy Interpretation:*

- *Ontological Thesis:* Neither space and time nor what we experience in space and time are (the kinds of things that are) not given in experience; rather, space and time are forms of human sensibility, and what we experience in space and time is given in experience.
- *Epistemological Thesis:* We can know only what is given in experience and not what is not given in experience.

*Subjective Dichotomy Interpretation:*

- *Ontological Thesis:* Neither space and time nor what we experience in space and time are (the kinds of things that are) viewed independently of forms of human sensibility; rather, space and time are forms of human sensibility, and what we experience in space and time is viewed through forms of human sensibility.
- *Epistemological Thesis:* We can know only what is viewed through forms of human sensibility and not what is not (not what is viewed independently of forms of human sensibility).

What is the implication of these substitutions for the problems in deduction and consistency? The implication is that both problems disappear in each case.

The problem in deduction is no longer a problem because the neglected alternative becomes void in self-contradiction, both affirming and denying that space and time and what we experience in space and time are given in experience (*objective dichotomy*), and both affirming and denying that space and time and what we experience in space and time are viewed through forms of human sensibility (*subjective dichotomy*).

The problem in consistency is no longer a problem because the ontological thesis ceases to contradict the epistemological thesis: In terms of the *objective dichotomy*, the epistemological thesis denies knowledge of everything that is not given in experience, but the ontological thesis makes no claims about anything that is not given in experience. In terms of the *subjective dichotomy*, the epistemological thesis denies knowledge of everything that is viewed independently of forms of human sensibility, but the ontological thesis makes no claims about anything that is viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.

## V. EVALUATION

The substitution approach seems to have at least two *prima facie* shortcomings, each liable to attract a serious objection. First, it gives decidedly different

interpretations of transcendental idealism (through the *objective* and *subjective* senses of the transcendental distinction) without offering a way to choose between them. Second, it is not as clear on the ontological status of space and time as it is in regard to the things we experience in space and time. A sensible response is available in either case.

### *First Objection*

The first objection, pressing for a choice between the *objective* and *subjective* senses of the transcendental distinction, holds that they cannot both be right and therefore that they do not work or belong together. While this is a natural reaction to interpretive divisions in general, in this case, it fails to account for the abundance of textual evidence for both.<sup>26</sup> The problem here is not so much a matter of choosing between the two senses as it is of reconciling the two.<sup>27</sup> Kant himself does not employ one sense to the exclusion of the other. The two are closely related, connected in such a way, in fact, that rejecting one would take away from the meaning of the other (like an upstairs without a downstairs). However, they are not so closely related that they mean the same thing. There is a primacy relation between the two. Evidence suggests that the *subjective dichotomy* is primary. Consider, for example, the following passage:

This form [be it space or time] is not to be looked for in the object in itself, but in the subject to which the object appears; nevertheless, it belongs really and necessarily to the appearance of this object. [A38/B55]

This lends some support to a working hypothesis that the two senses of the transcendental distinction are connected through a primacy relationship favoring the *subjective dichotomy*. Toward an exploration of that connection, consider the most basic definitions of the two senses: The *objective dichotomy* distinguishes between what is and is not given in experience, whereas the *subjective dichotomy* distinguishes between what is and is not viewed through forms of human sensibility. Next, consider the transcendental distinction in a fourfold classification with respect to the senses given to “things as they appear” and “things in themselves” in both dichotomies. The following sets explicate the relevant relationships (whether possible or impossible):

<sup>26</sup> See nn. 23–25 above for textual evidence supporting both senses.

<sup>27</sup> My suggestion here finds a counterpart in Oberst's (2015, 53–75) attempt to reconcile two-world and two-aspect interpretations of Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves. We do not do the same thing in the same way, but we do work on manifestations of the same problem at different levels of specificity.



- (S1) The set of things that are given in experience and viewed through forms of human sensibility.
- (S2) The set of things that are given in experience and viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.
- (S3) The set of things that are not given in experience but are (nevertheless) viewed through forms of human sensibility.
- (S4) The set of things that are not given in experience and are (instead) viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.

The first set alone gives the extension of “things as they appear” in the *subjective dichotomy*. But the first and second sets together give the extension of “things as they appear” in the *objective dichotomy*, which, by definition, is concerned specifically with whether or not a thing is given in experience and is silent about the point of view taken. The third set is empty (and the only one that is empty) because it involves a contradiction. The second and fourth sets together give the extension of “things in themselves” in the *subjective dichotomy*. The fourth set alone gives the extension of “things in themselves” in the *objective dichotomy* because the third set, the only other relevant option, is empty.

This breakdown helps visualize how the two senses of the transcendental distinction might be connected so that rejecting one sense would take away from the meaning of the other. On the other hand, as proposed above without argument, the two senses are not so closely related that they mean the same thing, or do the same job, especially since S2 is included in the extension of “things as they appear” in the *objective dichotomy*, while it is included in the extension of “things in themselves” in the *subjective dichotomy*.<sup>28</sup> Another point of divergence (as well as connection) between the two dichotomies is that all and only things that are given in experience can be viewed through forms of human sensibility, whereas things that are not given in experience, as well as those that are, can be viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.

Kant’s transcendental distinction takes “things as they appear” to be things we can know and “things in themselves” to be things we cannot know. The *objective dichotomy* cannot be the primary sense of the transcendental distinction, because a differentiation between things that are given in experience and things that are not given in experience is epistemically insufficient to capture the full intent of the distinction between what we can and cannot know. In the context of the

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<sup>28</sup> This apparently strange relationship is actually not all that strange, as the extensional analysis proceeds with a substitution of terms adopted from basic definitions of the two senses of the transcendental distinction: the *objective dichotomy* distinguishing between objects in accordance with whether they are given in experience (while remaining silent on the points of view taken of them) and the *subjective dichotomy* distinguishing between the points of view taken of the objects by the subjects (while remaining silent on whether they are given in experience).

*objective dichotomy*, we can know only what is given in experience, namely, whatever activates the nerve endings in our network of sensory receptors. These are the tables, chairs, and desks that are the perennially popular and supposedly safe examples of ordinary physical things, usually countenanced by many who are otherwise wary of ontological commitment.<sup>29</sup> But do we really know these tables, chairs, and desks? That is, do we know them as they really are? No. Kant explains in the following passage that we can know them only as they appear, and not as they are in themselves, even if they are the kinds of things given in experience:

Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of *experience*. But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears. [Bxxxvi–xxvii]

Evidently, we are just not going to get to know the thing in itself. We are not going to get to know it no matter how it is given or how we look at it. Switching from one dichotomy to the other is not going to do the trick. Nor does it matter what sense of the transcendental distinction we use. Yet what is interesting, once we admit we are stuck with appearances, is that the *objective dichotomy* is not altogether adequate even for knowledge of things as they appear. Explicating what we can and cannot know, broadly as what is and is not given in experience, is not sufficient for knowledge. Something more is needed.

The *subjective dichotomy* fills this need by recognizing that things given in experience, when viewed through forms of human sensibility, can be known, but that the same things, when viewed independently of forms of human sensibility, though they cannot then be known, can still be thought. The defining criterion for distinguishing between what we can and cannot know, then, is not whether or not a thing is given in experience (which, incidentally, it must be, as a minimum condition) but whether or not it is viewed through forms of human sensibility. This suggests that the *subjective dichotomy* is the primary sense Kant gives to the transcendental distinction. In fact, the very conception of a transcendental distinction arises only when Kant proves that space and time are forms of human sensibility. The term “sensible object” turns out to mean “object viewed through forms of human sensibility.”

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<sup>29</sup> The experience obviously need not be direct, but the examples are best kept simple. The intention is not to rule out black holes, gravity waves, wormholes, and such. They are included, along with anything else that does not activate our nerve endings directly, so long as such activation remains a possibility through technological intermediation. Quarks and leptons may be an anachronism, but science and technology are not.

Another reason for the primacy of the *subjective dichotomy* is that it saves some of the traditional objects of metaphysics, such as God, Freedom, and Immortality, from a metaphysical and epistemological limbo left open by the *objective dichotomy*. From the point of view of the *objective dichotomy*'s epistemic requirement, that a thing be given in experience, matters do not look very promising for God, Freedom, and Immortality. On the other hand, the notion "sensible object," epitomizing the epistemic requirement of the *subjective dichotomy*, also precludes God, Freedom, and Immortality, because these are not and cannot be viewed through forms of human sensibility. However, the *subjective dichotomy* allows Kant to say that although God, Freedom, and Immortality are not given in experience, they might, when considered apart from their relations to forms of human sensibility, be intelligible. Thus, the term "intelligible object."

In the final analysis, then, "sensible object" means "object considered in terms of its relations to forms of human sensibility," and "intelligible object" means "object considered apart from its relations to forms of human sensibility." Even though the *subjective dichotomy* gives the primary sense of the transcendental distinction, Kant's using both senses in different places need not be thought of as confusion, carelessness, or superfluous variation. Depending on the particular context, he might find it useful to emphasize one over the other instead of invoking both each time. He might, for example, use the *objective dichotomy* to give the transcendental distinction an ontological emphasis, and the *subjective dichotomy*, to give it an epistemological emphasis.

The assignment of primacy to the *subjective dichotomy* over the *objective dichotomy* (and, more generally, to either one over the other) may seem to contradict the fact that both senses of the transcendental distinction capture an essential part of the epistemic process: The *subjective dichotomy* is at the forefront where the focus is on God, Freedom, and Immortality, but the *objective dichotomy* becomes indispensable where the focus is on tables, desks, and chairs. Does this vitiate the assignment of primacy? Not necessarily. The *objective dichotomy* establishes that we are not going to get very far with the ordinary objects of metaphysics (tables, desks, chairs) unless they are given in experience in the first place, and the *subjective dichotomy* adds that we must then view these things through the forms of human sensibility. The *subjective dichotomy* establishes that we are not going to get anywhere at all with the special objects of metaphysics (God, Freedom, Immortality) unless they are viewed independently of the forms of human sensibility, with the *objective dichotomy* adding nothing of substance to this observation. In the first case, the *objective dichotomy* and the *subjective dichotomy* are both essential. In the second case, the *subjective dichotomy* is sufficient for the conclusion, without reference to the *objective dichotomy*. Hence, one can sensibly defend the primacy of the *subjective dichotomy* at least from this perspective.

Admittedly, this still leaves the primacy of the *subjective dichotomy* open to question. It may be objected, for example, that it is not true that the *objective dichotomy* adds nothing of substance in the case of the special objects of metaphysics (God, Freedom, Immortality), with respect to which the first thing to be noted is not that they are viewed independently of the forms of human sensibility but that they are not given in experience. That is to say, while it is true that these must be viewed independently of the forms of human sensibility, it is also true, and ontologically significant (perhaps even more significant), that they are not given in experience, which, in turn, undermines the claim that the *objective dichotomy* adds nothing of substance to the matter. It may be objected, in addition or instead, that the *subjective dichotomy* adds as little of substance to the case of the ordinary objects of metaphysics (tables, desks, chairs) as the *objective dichotomy* is said to do with regard to the special objects of metaphysics (God, Freedom, Immortality).

Nevertheless, the existence of a relationship between the two senses of the transcendental distinction, or more to the point, their mutual consistency, is more important than the pecking order between them. The objection taken up in this subsection was that a choice between the two is necessary. The response, that it is not necessary, works all the same no matter which sense dominates the other and even if neither does. The primacy favored here merely fleshes out the details of the relationship. Proceeding on that basis, invoking both senses to explicate Kant's transcendental idealism helps show that the alleged problems in deduction and consistency associated with the neglected alternative can be countered regardless of which of the two senses is given to "things as they appear" and "things in themselves."

### *Second Objection*

The second objection concerns vagaries in the status of space and time in the terminological experiments conducted above. What does it mean to deny that space and time are things in themselves? Stated negatively, this is to deny either that they are not given in experience or that they are not viewed through forms of human sensibility. This already seems peculiar, given the double negative, yet the peculiarity is even more prominent in a positive statement of the same position: In terms of the *objective dichotomy*, space and time become forms of human sensibility given in experience, and in terms of the *subjective dichotomy*, they become forms of human sensibility viewed through forms of human sensibility. All this points to a curious conception of space and time as given in space and time and viewed through space and time.

This objection stems from a false dilemma represented by the following question: When Kant maintains that space and time are not things in themselves, does

he mean that they are given in experience (denying that they are not the kinds of things that are given in experience = affirming that they are not the kinds of things that are not given in experience) or does he mean that they are viewed through forms of human sensibility (denying that they are not the kinds of things that are viewed through forms of human sensibility = affirming that they are not the kinds of things that are not viewed through forms of human sensibility)?

The dilemma is false because it is a misreading of what it means to deny that space and time are things in themselves. Both horns of the dilemma introduce a vicious circle in the status of space and time. In terms of the *objective dichotomy*, the question whether space and time are given in experience does not make sense, because it is only in space and time that things are given in experience. Thus, it is only through space and time that we can ascertain whether things are given in experience. Likewise, in terms of the *subjective dichotomy*, the question whether space and time are viewed through forms of human sensibility does not make sense, because space and time are themselves those forms of human sensibility (the only ones). Space and time need not themselves be defined or determined by the transcendental distinction they define and determine for everything else (any more than the Platonic Form of Horse has to be a horse).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Here, by way of recapitulation, is the final rendition of Kant's thesis of transcendental idealism:

- *Ontological Thesis*: What we experience in space and time is given in experience and viewed through forms of human sensibility, whereas space and time themselves, being nothing other than those very forms of human sensibility, are not the kinds of things of which it makes sense to consider either whether they are given in experience or whether they are viewed through forms of human sensibility.
- *Epistemological Thesis*: We can know only what is given in experience and not what is not given in experience, and among the things given in experience, we can know only those viewed through forms of human sensibility and not those viewed independently of forms of human sensibility.

This not a substantive reformulation but an analytic expansion of the initial statement of the thesis in section two, or from a different perspective, a consolidation of the elaborate expression of it in section four. The problems in deduction and consistency disappear for the same reasons as before: The problem in deduction becomes a vacuous objection to an analytic definition, while the problem in

consistency ceases to depict a contradiction between the ontological thesis and the epistemological thesis.

It may be objected that the ontological thesis is not entirely clear of these difficulties, because what Kant should have established but fell short is a stronger version of the ontological thesis, such that what we experience in space and time is given *only* in experience and viewed *only* through forms of human sensibility. But the sense of “only” is already present in the ontological thesis. The supposedly stronger alternatives are actually superfluous on either interpretation of the transcendental distinction.

The *objective dichotomy* is about whether a thing is or is not given in experience. The question is not whether it is given in experience or given in some other way but whether or not it is given at all. If a thing is given at all, then it is given in experience, and if it is given in experience, then, by definition, it is given only in experience.

As for the *subjective dichotomy*, setting aside things that are not given in experience (for those would not be viewed through forms of human sensibility and would therefore also not be viewed only through them), a thing that is already given in experience would either be or not be viewed through forms of human sensibility. If and when it is viewed through forms of human sensibility, it would then be viewed only and exactly in that way. If and when it is not viewed through forms of human sensibility, it would either be considered independently of forms of human sensibility or not at all, failing in either case to “appear” in any sense, and failing therefore to qualify as an “appearance,” or as any manner of “thing that appears” (in accordance with the *subjective dichotomy*), which then at best underutilizes and at worst contradicts the fact that it is, as stipulated at the beginning, given in experience (in accordance with the *objective dichotomy*).

The desired (strong) sense of the ontological thesis — and thereby of transcendental idealism — is the only sense of the ontological thesis. Fortunately, Kant emphasizes that sense every step of the way.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Necip Fikri Alican** is an independent scholar hailing from Istanbul. He is the author of *Mill's Principle of Utility: A Defense of John Stuart Mill's Notorious Proof* (Atlanta, 1994) and *Rethinking Plato: A Cartesian Quest for the Real Plato* (New York, 2012). His recent work revolves around the intersection of metaphysics and the history of philosophy, with a particular affinity for Plato and for Kant.

**Chung-ying Cheng** obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Harvard. He is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and the Founding President of International Society for Chinese Philosophy. He specializes in Chinese philosophy, comparative philosophy, metaphysics, and philosophy of language. He is also currently a Chair Visiting Professor of Philosophy at Renmin University, Beijing, China.

**Christopher D. Cordner** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His main field of philosophical interest is ethics, including its overlap with aesthetics and some of its other overlooked historical links.

**Tamar Levanon** teaches at Bar Ilan University. She is interested in the metaphysics and phenomenology of time and motion and, in particular, in the various manifestations of the dynamic perspective on time and motion in early modern philosophy and early twentieth-century philosophy.

**Peter J. Riggs** is a physicist and a philosopher of science at the Australian National University. Dr. Riggs's research currently focuses on the nature of time and the foundations of physics. Publications include: *Quantum Causality: Conceptual Issues in the Causal Theory of Quantum Mechanics* (Springer, 2009) and *Whys and Ways of Science: Introducing Philosophical and Sociological Theories of Science* (Melbourne University Press, 1992).

**Jim Slagle** is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the University of Portland and George Fox University in Oregon. He recently published *The Epistemological Skyhook: Determinism, Naturalism, and Self-Defeat* (Routledge, 2016).

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