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Jacobi's Dare: McDowell, Meillassoux, and Consistent Idealism

"Dwell in your own house, and you will know how simple your possessions are."

Kant (quoting Persius), Axx

Abstract: Does Kant's restriction of knowledge to phenomena undermine objectivity? Jacobi argues that it does, daring the transcendental idealist to abandon the thing in itself and embrace the "strongest idealism". According to Bruno, McDowell and Meillassoux adopt a similar critique of Kant's conception of objectivity and, more significantly, echo Jacobi's dare to profess the strongest idealism – what McDowell approvingly calls "consistent idealism" and Meillassoux disparagingly calls "extreme idealism". After exposing the Cartesian projection on which Jacobi's critique rests, Bruno shows that McDowell's and Meillassoux's critiques make the same projection. He argues that whereas McDowell offers an inconsistent alternative to Kant's idealism, Meillassoux begs the question against it. Finally, Bruno sketches the account of objectivity that follows from Kant's distinction between general and transcendental logic.

Transcendental idealism may seem, as it has since its first reception and to readers of various styles, to depict an insufficiently objective world. Kant's doctrine that objects have the "twofold meaning" (Kant, Bxxvii) of knowable appearances and unknowable things in themselves seems to contradict scientific and ordinary notions of objectivity. In a supplement to *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a Dialogue*, Jacobi issues a challenge to the transcendental idealist:

according to the common use of language, we must mean by 'object' a thing that *would be present outside us in a transcendental sense* [...] But since the whole of transcendental idealism would collapse as a result, and would be left with no application or reason for being, whoever professes it must disavow that presupposition. For it must not even be *probable* to him that there be things present outside us in a transcendental sense, or that they have connections with us *which we would be in a position of perceiving in any way at all* [...] The transcendental idealist must have the courage, therefore, to assert the strongest idealism that was ever professed, and not be afraid of the objection of speculative egoism. (Jacobi 1994, p. 338)

It is apparently inconsistent of Kant to posit a transcendental object, for, given transcendental idealism, it cannot be present to us in possible experience.¹ He

¹ See Kant, A46/B63, A109, A191/B236, A250.

must accordingly renounce his idealism or else reject the idea of a limitation on our experiential standpoint. But Jacobi aims to taunt, not to advise. The “courage” of denying objects “outside us in a transcendental sense” is, for him, the folly of abandoning objectivity altogether.

Jacobi’s critique of transcendental idealism rests on a discernible Cartesian projection. As we will see, John McDowell’s and Quentin Meillassoux’s more recent critiques of Kant do as well. More significantly, they each echo Jacobi’s dare to profess the “strongest idealism” – what McDowell approvingly calls *consistent idealism* and Meillassoux disparagingly calls *extreme idealism*.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell lauds Kant’s insight that the world “must exert a rational constraint on our thinking,” not a force incompatible with our “obligation to be responsibly alive to the dictates of reason” (McDowell 1996, p. 42). But he charges that Kant’s “transcendental story” about the thing in itself yields a view on which “rational answerability lapses at some outermost point of the space of reasons, short of the world itself” (McDowell 1996, pp. 41–42). To posit an unknowable object beyond experience is

to slight the independence of the reality to which our senses give us access. What is responsible for this is precisely the aspect of Kant’s philosophy that struck some of his successors as a betrayal of idealism: namely, the fact that he recognizes a reality outside the sphere of the conceptual. Those successors urged that we must discard the supersensible in order to achieve a consistent idealism. In fact that move frees Kant’s insight so that it can protect a commonsense respect for the independence of the ordinary world. (McDowell 1996, p. 44)

In order both to render idealism consistent and to respect the world’s objectivity, we must take Jacobi’s dare and deny any “reality outside the sphere of the conceptual”. As McDowell notes, this is the German idealists’ (Jacobi-inspired) strategy, which he invokes with the image of the unboundedness of the conceptual.²

² Cf. Fichte 2000: “It is contradictory to ask about a reality that supposedly remains after one has abstracted from all reason; for the questioner himself (we may presume) has reason, is driven by reason to question, and wants a rational answer; he, therefore, has not abstracted from reason. We cannot go outside the sphere of our reason; the case against the thing in itself has already been made, and philosophy aims only to inform us of it and keep us from believing that we have gone beyond the sphere of our reason, when in fact we are obviously still caught within it” (p. 39). Cf. Hegel 1991: “According to the Kantian philosophy, the things that we know about are only appearances for us, and what they are *in-themselves* remains for us an inaccessible beyond. The naive consciousness has rightly taken exception to this subjective idealism, according to which the content of our consciousness is something that is *only* ours, something posited only through us. In fact, the true situation is that the things of which we have immediate knowledge are mere appearances, not only *for us*, but also *in-themselves*, and that the proper determination of these things, which are in this sense ‘finite’, consists in having the ground

Meillassoux's *After Finitude* laments Kant's institution of a "correlation" between thought and being whereby absolute being is unknowable. Correlationism subverts the realist meaning of "ancestral" statements about the "arche-fossil" – scientific claims about the world prior to our species – by relativizing all truth-apt statements to the human standpoint. Rather than pretend to respect scientific realism, he says,

the consistent correlationist should stop being modest and dare to assert openly that he is in a position to provide the scientist with an *a priori* demonstration that the latter's ancestral statements are *illusory* [...] But then it is as if the distinction between transcendental idealism – the idealism that is (so to speak) urbane, civilized, and reasonable – and speculative or even subjective idealism – the idealism that is wild, uncouth, and rather extravagant – it is as if this distinction which we had been taught to draw – and which separates Kant from Berkeley – became blurred and dissolved in light of the fossil-matter. Confronted with the arche-fossil, *every variety of idealism converges and becomes equally extraordinary* – every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism. (Meillassoux 2008, pp. 17–18)

Idealism of any sort is allegedly incompatible with the scientific disclosure of an objective world and is called out to confess its "wild" essence. Unlike McDowell, Meillassoux issues the dare in Jacobi's spirit: he demands consistent idealism from Kant, but thinks it is unviable and instead pursues "*intellectual intuition of the absolute*" (Meillassoux 2008, p. 82).

To clarify the prospects of a transcendental idealist view of objectivity, it is worth assessing McDowell's and Meillassoux's critiques of Kant as well as their responses to the Jacobian dare. In 1., I articulate Jacobi's critique of Kant and expose its Cartesian projection. In 2., I detect Cartesian premises in McDowell's critique and show that his substitute for the transcendental story is inconsistently idealist. In 3., I show that the Cartesian premises of Meillassoux's critique beg the question against transcendental idealism. In 4., I briefly draw out the account of objectivity that follows from Kant's distinction between general and transcendental logic.

of their being not within themselves but in the universal divine Idea. This interpretation must also be called idealism, but, as distinct from the subjective idealism of the Critical Philosophy, it is *absolute idealism*" (pp. 88–89).

1

Jacobi's dare occurs in *David Hume*. But its appeal to the "common" meaning of 'object' invokes a form of realism he defends in *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*. The *Letters* recount conversations in which Lessing declares there is "no other philosophy" than Spinoza's (Jacobi 1994, p. 187). "That might be true," Jacobi replies, but only because Spinoza is more committed than any philosopher to "the ancient *a nihilo nihil fit*," a negative formulation of the principle of sufficient reason according to which nothing exists without a ground (Jacobi 1994, p. 187). Casting grounds in terms of efficient causation, Jacobi says that committing to the principle entails determinism and that a "determinist, if he wants to be consistent, must become a fatalist" and renounce freedom as an "illusion" (Jacobi 1994, p. 187–188). Infinitely determined by other modes, we simply "accompany the mechanism" of nature (Jacobi 1994, p. 189). Yet Jacobi "love[s]" Spinoza:

[H]e, more than any other philosopher, has led me to the perfect conviction that certain things admit of no explication: one must not therefore keep one's eyes shut to them, but must take them as one finds them. I have no concept more intimate than that of the final cause; no conviction more vital than that *I do what I think*, and not, *that I should think what I do*. Truly therefore, I must assume a source of thought and action that remains completely inexplicable to me. (Jacobi 1994, p. 193)

Since total explanation by efficient causes dulls our "intimate" sense of freedom, Jacobi must turn to conviction. Spinoza teaches him that where knowledge alienates us from our agency, faith is required: "to explain all things absolutely" is to "run into absurdities," like denying the "genuine human truth" of the reality of freedom. Faith dispels such unnatural doubt. With it, "we know that we have a body, and that there are other bodies and other thinking beings" (Jacobi 1994, p. 231). What sort of realism is this?

For Jacobi, faith is not an irrational leap,³ but a "*salto mortale*," i.e., a humane reversal of alienation from our deepest convictions: "once one has fallen in love with certain explanations, one accepts blindly every consequence that can be drawn from an inference that one cannot invalidate – even if one must walk on one's head" (Jacobi 1994, pp. 189, 194). Reason wed to proof is numb to our lived context and even defies it, renouncing our will and our being unless they admit of demonstration. Hence Jacobi adopts Pascal's dictum: "nature confounds the Pyrrhonists, and reason the dogmatists" (Jacobi 1994, p. 237). Skep-

³ See Crowe 2007.

ticism and dogmatism are equally insensitive to “*existence*,” i.e., “the unanalyzable, the immediate”, for which explanation, which is only “a proximate – never a final – goal,” is mere “means” (Jacobi 1994, p. 194). As Jacobi tells Mendelssohn, conviction “by proofs is certainty at second hand,” for true certainty consists in direct access to absolute, i.e., transcendently real being. It is in this sense that rational conviction derives its force “from faith alone” (Jacobi 1994, p. 230). Jacobi’s conception of faith thus supports a realism for which ‘object’ signifies transcendental reality.⁴

Transcendental realism frames Jacobi’s dare to the idealist. In the *David Hume* supplement, he says that Kant gives an implausibly “alien meaning” to ‘object’, one that denies anything “*present outside us in a transcendental sense*” (Jacobi 1994, p. 338).⁵ Kant seems, like Descartes, to restrict objective certainty to the contents of a mind, putting mind-independent reality into doubt. And with no divine intervention at our disposal on the Kantian view, “we cannot pass by inference” to anything beyond “determinations of our own self” (Jacobi 1994, p. 337). Jacobi cites passages in which Kant says space and time are forms “in us” and appearances are “nothing” outside them (Kant, A370–9) and says:

what we realists call actual objects or things independent of our representations are for the transcendental idealist only internal beings *which exhibit nothing at all of a thing that may perhaps be there outside us, or to which the appearance may refer. Rather, these internal beings are merely subjective determinations of the mind, entirely void of anything truly objective.* (Jacobi 1994, pp. 332–334)

Even worse, Kant subverts “the spirit of his system” with the illegitimate idea of an unknowable source of sensory matter, since for him an empirical object “cannot exist outside us”, whereas “we never know anything” of a “*transcendental object*” (Jacobi 1994, pp. 334–335).⁶ Worse still, Kant’s view that space and

⁴ Jacobi 1994 clarifies his position in the second edition of *David Hume*: “My philosophy [...] claims but a single knowledge through sensation, and it restricts reason, considered by itself, to the mere faculty of perceiving relations clearly, i.e., to the power of *formulating the principle of identity and of judging in conformity to it*” (pp. 255–266).

⁵ Cf. Strawson 1975, p. 235.

⁶ Hence Jacobi famously states: “*without* that presupposition [of a transcendental object] I could not enter into [Kant’s] system, but *with* it I could not stay within it” (336). Cf. Strawson 1975: “The doctrine that we are aware of things only as they appear and not as they are in themselves because their appearances to us are the result of our constitution being affected by the objects, is a doctrine that we can understand just so long as the ‘affecting’ is thought of as something that occurs in space and time; but when it is added that we are to understand by space and time themselves nothing but a capacity or liability of ours to be affected in a certain way by ob-

time constitute an “all-encompassing” whole of which objects are mere “limitations” is “entirely in the spirit of Spinoza,” for whom modes are mere limitations of nature (Jacobi 1994, p. 218n30; cf. Kant, A25, A32). Transcendental idealism thus offers a determinism without even a pretense to objectivity, for it is the fatalism of a self-enclosed Cartesian mind – an egoism based on “*absolute and unqualified ignorance*” of absolute being (Jacobi 1994: p. 338), against which faith-based realism is the only defence.

But it is a Cartesian projection – and a false dichotomy – to hold that objects are mentally internal unless they are absolutely external, i. e., empirically ideal unless they are transcendentally real. First, we can distinguish senses of internality. Space and time “dwell in us,” not as empirically acquired mental content, but *a priori* “as forms of our sensible intuition” in virtue of which the representation of content is possible (Kant, A373). Thus, whereas mental content is empirically internal to a subject, space and time are transcendentally internal to the standpoint of human experience. Second, as Kant argues in the Fourth Paralogism, we can distinguish senses of externality. Jacobi actually cites this argument, yet ignores these senses:

since the expression *outside us* carries with it an unavoidable ambiguity, since it sometimes signifies something that, as a thing in itself, exists distinct from us and sometimes merely something that belongs to outer appearance, then in order to escape uncertainty and use this concept in the latter significance [...] we will distinguish empirically external objects from those that might be called ‘external’ in the transcendental sense, by directly calling them ‘things that are to be encountered in space’. (Kant, A373; Jacobi 1994, p. 333)⁷

An appearance is empirically external in that it is spatially manifest in a possible experience whereas a thing in itself is transcendentally external in that it exceeds possible experience. Kant’s conception of empirical externality thus captures the common sense view about objectivity, for it signifies the matter of what appears to us – rather than matter beyond sensibility, which “is nothing” for us (Kant, A370).⁸ Ironically, it is the transcendental realist who alienates

jects not themselves in space and time, then we can no longer understand the doctrine, for we no longer know what ‘affecting’ means, or what we are to understand by ‘ourselves’” (p. 41).
 7 Cf. Kant: “it can very well be proven that there is something outside us of an empirical kind, and hence as appearance in space; for we are not concerned with objects other than those which belong to a possible experience, just because such objects cannot be given to us in any experience and therefore are nothing for us. Outside me empirically is that which is intuited in space [...T]he concept: *outside us*, signifies only something in space” (AA 4, pp. 336–337).

8 Cf. Kant: “there may very well be something outside us, which we call matter, corresponding to this appearance; but in the same quality as appearance it is not outside us, but is merely as a

us from the empirical meaning of objects as spatial and who thereby “plays the empirical idealist” (Kant, A369).

Since we cannot “think up” the matter of sensation, Kant says, it must be “really given.” Although matter “cannot be actual” for us except through our forms of intuition, its source is a “transcendental object” (Kant, A373–6).⁹ This object is “entirely unknown” as its concept cannot be theoretically schematized. Yet it is an “intelligible cause of appearances,” for, even absent sensibility’s “restricting condition” on its empirical significance, its concept still bears the “logical significance” of a unity of thought (Kant, A147/B186, A494/B522). As Kant says, we must be able to think things in themselves even if we cannot cognize them. Moreover, his argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that practical reason affords “cognitions of a supersensible order” – insofar as we can “cognize ourselves” as “intelligible beings determined by the moral law” (Kant AA 5, pp. 105–106; cf. pp. 5–6, 42–43, 49, 55–57, 97–98) – bears out his claim in the first *Critique* that the thought of noumenal causality can gain “objective validity” from practical sources of cognition (Kant Bxxvi-n; cf. Kant’s notes at A542/B570, A571/B599), which, *contra* Jacobi, opposes the spirit of Spinoza’s determinism. Just as no Cartesian gap divides us from empirical objects, so, too, the idea of a transcendental object is consistent with the spirit of transcendental idealism.

Jacobi helps to initiate a reading – resilient, as we will see – on which Kant implausibly and illegitimately posits an unknowable thing in itself. But Kant must posit it, on pain of thinking up the matter of sensation, and can posit it without schematizing its concept: it is simply the source of matter that is informed *a priori* by space as a form of sensibility. As he says in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, whereas “material or Cartesian idealism” is certain of the mind yet doubts the existence of spatial objects, “[f]ormal idealism” affirms the spatiality of matter given in outer sense (Kant AA 4, pp. 336–337; cf. B274). The one-dimensional character of a Cartesian conception of internality and externality obscures their transcendental and empirical senses, the grasping of

thought in us, even though this thought, through the sense just named, represents it as being found outside us” (A385).

⁹ Cf. Kant: “I call that in the appearance which corresponds to sensation its matter, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the form of appearance. Since that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation, the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*, and can therefore be considered separately from all sensation” (A20/B34; cf. A143/B182). See Stang 2015 for an account of how sensation is not a hylomorphic compound, but rather “the ‘prime matter’ in Kant’s hylomorphic theory of mind” (14).

which stops the oscillation between explaining objectivity in terms of either mental content or absolute being. Formal idealism thus initiates its own reversal of alienation, specifically, from self-delusion toward self-knowledge:

understanding occupied merely with its empirical use, which does not reflect on the sources of its own cognition, may get along very well, but cannot accomplish one thing, namely, determining for itself the boundaries of its use and knowing what may lie within and what without its whole sphere [...] But if the understanding cannot distinguish whether certain questions lie within its horizon or not, then it is never sure of its claims and its possession, but must always reckon on many embarrassing corrections when it continually oversteps the boundaries of its territory (as is unavoidable) and loses itself in delusion and deceptions. (Kant, A238)

The reflective use of understanding affords self-knowledge because its empirical use is indifferent to, and thus liable to misidentify, its proper bounds. To correct alienation from our own cognitive faculties, we must distinguish the different senses of internality and externality.

Even if he misreads Kant as a Cartesian, Jacobi unwittingly inspires the German idealists' systematic refutation of nihilism.¹⁰ In the second edition of *David Hume*, he describes the first edition's critique of Kant as a diagnosis of "nihilism" (Jacobi 1994, p. 544), a term he coins in an intervening open letter to Fichte to signify the denial of the immediacy of existence. For Kant, justificatory relations mediate our access to existence such that appearances lack any intrinsic nature, whereas things in themselves lack any manifest nature. This explains Jacobi's dare to the idealist to reject this core Kantian distinction and embrace nihilism in the guise of egoism, according to which nothing external is immediately present in perception (Jacobi 1994, p. 338). He chides Fichte for taking the bait and declaring the thing in itself "a piece of whimsy, a pipe dream, a non-thought," "the uttermost perversion of reason, and a concept perfectly absurd" (Fichte 1988, p. 71; 1994, p. 56). By eliminating the transcendental object or "*the true*," Fichte "ceases to feel its pressure" and so cannot "reach beyond" the I's "production" of objects in thought (Jacobi 1994, pp. 508, 511–512).¹¹ For Jacobi, by contrast, reason is "nothing but the *perception*" of the true. As he says: "I do *not* possess with this human reason of mine the perfection of life, not the full-

¹⁰ See Franks 2005, pp. 162–174.

¹¹ Cf. Jacobi 1994: "The philosophizing of pure reason must therefore be a chemical process through which everything outside reason is changed into nothing [...] *must* necessarily lay at its foundation that *will that wills nothing*, that *impersonal personality*, that naked *I-hood* of the I without any *self* – in a word, *pure and bare inessentialities*. For love of the secure progress of science you *must*, yea you cannot but, subject conscience (*spirit most certain*) to a living-death of *rationality*, make it *blindly* legalistic, deaf, dumb, and unfeeling" (pp. 507, 516–517).

ness of the good and the true [...] My solution [...] is not the *I*, but the 'More than I!'" (Jacobi 1994: pp. 514–515).¹² A philosophy that denies this "higher faculty of perception" must "lose itself" in a "void of cognition." With no friction from absolute being, Fichte's idealism is no more than "*Nihilism*" (Jacobi 1994, pp. 519, 544–545).¹³

Like Jacobi, McDowell rejects the twin perils of construing nature as a "lethal environment" that fatalistically excludes freedom and construing reason as "a frictionless spinning in a void" (McDowell 1996, pp. 11, 66, 98). Yet he dares to "discard the supersensible" in order to secure a "consistent idealism." I will show that his critique of Kant to this end shares Jacobi's Cartesian projection and then assess the consistency of the idealism to which he turns.

2

According to McDowell, an antinomy ensnares two powerful theses on the question of how thought is answerable to experience: experience either *must* or *cannot* stand as a tribunal over thought about the world. It must if thought is to be guided by sensibility about how things are, but cannot if thought is not simply guided by sensibility, but is itself a spontaneous ability to judge how things ought to be, i.e., a conceptual capacity (McDowell 1996, pp. xii, 67, 69). But, against the first thesis, if we are not rationally responsible for what is sensibly given, then what is given cannot figure in warranted judgment: any appeal to it is mythical. And, against the second thesis, if relations by which judgment is warranted are conceptual, then they are confined to the space of reasons, coherent yet unhinged from anything given in sensation (McDowell 1996, pp. 5–9, 14). The spoiling idea shared by both theses is that sensibility is not, in its use, a conceptual capacity. We can resolve the antinomy by rejecting this idea on the

¹² Cf. Jacobi 1994: "[W]ithout the *Thou*, the *I* is impossible [...] God is, and is *outside me*, a *living, self-subsisting being*, or I am God. There is no third" (pp. 231, 524).

¹³ Cf. Jacobi 1994: "I summed up the result of Fichtean Idealism in a simile. I compared it to a knitted stocking [...] To this stocking of mine I give borders, flowers, moon and stars, all possible figures, and cognize how all this is nothing but a product of the productive imagination of the fingers hovering between the *I* of the thread and the not-*I* of the stitches [...] If this simile is so inappropriate as to betray a crude misunderstanding on the part of its author, then I do not know how [Fichte's] philosophy can pretend to be actually *new*, and not just a variant formulation of the old philosophy *based in one way or other on some dualism*; but then it would not be a truly and genuinely *immanent* philosophy, a philosophy *of one piece* [...] Should it turn out *only* to mean the same thing [as the old philosophy] *in any way at all*, empiricism ultimately remains still on top" (pp. 509–510).

basis of Kant's insight that "intuition without thought" is "nothing for us" (Kant, A111). As McDowell puts it, sensible receptivity "draws" conceptual spontaneity into operation insofar as empirical content is always implicitly conceptual, always a matter for judgment. In this sense, there is no space enclosing the space of reasons, no "boundary around the sphere of the conceptual" (McDowell 1996, pp. 13, 34). A world outside my thoughts neither entails nor requires a world outside what is thinkable. Echoing Kant's distinction between transcendental and empirical externality, McDowell notes that his distinction between what is thinkable and what one thinks avoids "ambiguity in phrases like 'outside the sphere of thought'" (McDowell 1996, pp. 28, 39).

However, McDowell claims that Kant's transcendental story is "incoherent" because the thing in itself exceeds our conceptual capacity. As it is simply given to us, the thing in itself places no rational constraint on judgment (McDowell 1996, p. 105). The threat, then, is that "the world itself" lies beyond the space of reasons to which rational constraint belongs. What sort of interpretation supports this critique of Kant?

Kant remarks that while mere intuitions are blind, mere concepts are empty (Kant, A51/B75). McDowell reads emptiness here as the absence of thought: "[Kant] is not, absurdly, calling our attention to a special kind of thoughts, the empty ones" (McDowell 1996, p. 4). But this conflicts with what follows Kant's remark, namely, that unifying the faculties of concepts and intuitions – understanding and sensibility – is necessary, not for thought, but for "cognition". We have "great cause" to separate these faculties in thought, for their rules are set by distinct sciences: logic and aesthetic, respectively. Logic is general when it sets the "absolutely necessary rules of thinking" and transcendental when it sets "the rules of the pure thinking of an object" (Kant, A51–7/B75–82). Hence, while concepts alone yield no cognition, they are not thereby thoughtless, for they are thinkable precisely for Kant's twofold science of logic.¹⁴ Moreover, that we must think things in themselves follows general-logically or *analytically* from the fact that appearances are of what appears, yet follows transcendental-logically or *synthetically* from reason's demand for an "entirely heterogeneous" ground for the "homogeneous" series of appearances (Kant, Bxxvi; AA 4, pp. 354–355).¹⁵

McDowell's disregard for Kant's distinction between thought and cognition does not just happen to coincide with his claim that the transcendental story

¹⁴ Cf. Bird 1996, pp. 228, 242; Moore 2006, p. 333.

¹⁵ On Kant's analytic and synthetic commitments to the thing in itself, see Franks 2005, pp. 43–47.

is incoherent. Rather, it results from a Cartesian misreading of that story, one that echoes Jacobi's charge that positing the thing in itself is both implausible and illegitimate.

First, McDowell says that the thing in itself "present[s] itself as no more than the independence any genuine reality must have," which implausibly renders the empirical world's independence "fraudulent" by contrast (McDowell 1996, p. 42). Yet Kant presents the thing in itself as "more than" empirical reality to the extent that it analytically explains the matter of sensation and synthetically explains the unity of appearances. Analytically, "the concept of an appearance" entails "a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something, i. e., an object independent of sensibility" (Kant, A251–252). Appearance entails given matter, whose source is the transcendental object. But mere matter does not constitute "genuine reality," which belongs exclusively to the empirical world whose form is jointly supplied by the faculties of concepts and intuitions. Synthetically, theoretical reason's "highest end" is "a totality of cognition [...] without which unity our cognition is nothing but piecemeal." Since appearances raise empirical questions "to infinity," only a thing in itself can secure their "highest ground" and give reason "hope to see its desire for completeness in the progression from the conditioned to its conditions satisfied for once" (Kant AA 4, pp. 350, 354).¹⁶ The idea of the thing in itself does not defraud, but unifies, the empirical world in a way that no aggregate of cognitions can. By misreading the thing in itself as "true objectivity" and opposing it to a "disingenuous[ly]" independent world (McDowell 1996, pp. 42, 96),¹⁷ McDowell projects onto Kant a Cartesian sense of externality and internality, misplacing the transcendental and empirical senses that make available the very insight on which he draws.

Second, McDowell claims that affection by a transcendental object is illegitimate, since "by Kant's own lights we are supposed to understand causation as something that operates within the empirical world" (McDowell 1996, p. 42). This claim, which results from conflating thought and cognition, repeats Jacobi's charge that we cannot know a transcendental object, which, as we saw, neglects the logical significance of unschematized concepts. McDowell compounds this

¹⁶ Cf. Kant: "[reason] sees around itself as it were a space for the cognition of things in themselves, although it can never have determinate concepts of those things and is limited to appearances alone [...Transcendental ideas have] led us, as it were, up to the contiguity of the filled space (of experience) with empty space (of which we can know nothing – the *noumena*)" (AA 4, pp. 352, 354).

¹⁷ Cf. Strawson 1975, p. 38.

oversight by describing Kant's transcendental story as a third-personal or "side-ways-on" view of something circumscribing the space of reasons (McDowell 1996, p. 42). Grasped synthetically, however, the concept of the thing in itself denotes, not a something, but a *task*. It is a concept "to which no congruent object can be given in the senses" and thus serves as an "idea." Kant views ideas first-personally in that they are "given as problems by the nature of reason itself" (Kant, A327/B383–384).¹⁸ The idea of the thing in itself guides our pursuit of unified cognition, a goal set, not by "objects," but by "maxims of reason for the sake of its self-satisfaction" (Kant AA 4, p. 349).¹⁹ Such an idea is legitimate precisely as a rule for "the pure thinking of an object."

Like Jacobi, McDowell misreads the transcendental story. Yet he dares to jettison it in order to avoid a form of Spinozism. As worrisome as the coherentist picture of reason as a frictionless capacity is the "disenchanted" picture in which natural law excludes reason as a spontaneous capacity. The worry is how we are free "to take charge of our active thinking" and how our bodily movements are intentional, not "mere happenings" (McDowell 1996, pp. 70, 85, 90). Kant does not allay the worry by restricting subjectivity to the formal referent of 'I' (McDowell 1996, pp. 43, 97, 102–103, 111).²⁰ McDowell's response is to argue that spontaneity "belong[s] to our way of actualizing ourselves as animals," developing through a formative process of initiation into the space of reasons (McDowell 1996, pp. xx, 77–78, 84, 88, 92).²¹ Ensuring that this space is boundless (so as to dissolve the above antinomy) is the idea that social formation affords us the only capacity with which and the only context in which to reflect. McDowell infers that this, the ubiquity of social formation, "leaves no genuine questions about norms, apart from those that we address in reflective thinking about specific norms, an activity that is not particularly philosophical"

18 Cf. Kant's distinction between assuming something relatively (*suppositio relativa*) and assuming it absolutely (*suppositio absoluta*) (A676/B704).

19 Kant's view that maxims of reason are subjectively valid presuppositions (A671/B699, A680/B708) differs crucially from Jacobi's view that reason is "a faculty of presupposing the true, the good, and the beautiful," which presuppositions have "objective validity" owing to faith, construed as a faculty "above reason" (1994, p. 541).

20 See di Giovanni 1998: "The 'space of reasons' must be conceived [...] not as external to the realm of nature but, on the contrary, as the function of human activities such as are exercised in the first place by real individuals in the context of real life. This is where Jacobi had sought the object of his philosophy from the very beginning – a philosophy which, for Jacobi no less than for Strawson and McDowell, had therefore to be descriptive" (p. 78).

21 Cf. Jacobi 1994: "we are all born in the faith, and we must remain in the faith, just as we are all born in society, and must remain in society" (p. 230).

(McDowell 1996, pp. 80 – 81, 93, 95, 98 – 99). This suits his preference for a sort of quietism.

The idea of formation dislodges the picture of disenchanting nature by locating spontaneity in our “natural history” (McDowell 1996, p. 95).²² On its own, however, this idea does not face the justificatory challenge to which critique is a response. What is, for Kant, “particularly philosophical” is deducing our right to the “norms” or categories of experience. Facing the question of right is required for reason’s maturation: if we do not ask it, reason stalls at its “childhood” (Kant, A761/B789).²³ Moreover, if McDowell is right that “the best we achieve is always to some extent provisional and inconclusive” (McDowell 1996, p. 82),²⁴ we foreclose the justificatory task of Hegelian dialectic, which negates ever-determinate categories in order to deduce “*a system of totality*” (Hegel 2010, p. 749).²⁵ Formation may initiate us into a space of reasons in ways that Kant overlooks, but it raises the issue of the principle that grounds this space and by what right we posit it. The principal thought for an idealist who is up to Jacobi’s challenge is the thought of such a principle.²⁶

22 Contrast Pippin 2002: “Hegel has his own way of accounting for the ‘place’ of [anthropological] appeals, but that way does not require any second *nature*. The plot for his narrative concerns attempts by human spirit to free itself from a self-understanding tied to nature, and these anthropological elements are understood as initial, very limited successes” (pp. 68–69).

23 See Bruno 2018.

24 McDowell notes that formation involves “a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection” on tradition (1996, p. 126, cf. 99), but this is qualified by his prohibition on questioning norms in general.

25 The *Science of Logic* concludes: “The method, which thus coils in a circle, cannot however anticipate in a temporal development that the beginning is as such already something derived; sufficient for an immediate beginning is that it be simple universality. Inasmuch as this is what it is, it has its complete condition; and there is no need to deprecate the fact that it may be accepted only *provisionally* and *hypothetically* [...] The method of truth also knows that the beginning is incomplete, because it is a beginning; but at the same time it knows that this incompleteness is necessary, because truth is but the coming-to-oneself through the negativity of immediacy” (pp. 750–72). Cf. the Preface: “*Reason* is negative and *dialectical* [...] It negates the simple, thereby posits the determinate difference of the understanding; but it equally dissolves this difference, and so it is dialectical. But spirit does not stay at the nothing of this result but is in it rather equally positive, and thereby restores the first simplicity, but as universal, such as it is concrete in itself [...] On this self-constructing path alone, I say, is philosophy capable of being objective, demonstrative science [...] his culture and discipline of thought by which the latter acquires plasticity and overcomes the impatience of incidental reflection is procured solely by pressing onward, by study, and by carrying out to its conclusion the entire development” (pp. 10, 21).

26 See Bruno (forthcoming).

A Hegelian thought ostensibly sounds in McDowell's call to unify "reason and nature," but it is stifled by his claim that philosophical questions are unanswerable if their terms arise from antinomous theses. Dissolving such questions, he says, is the only "hard" or "constructive" work philosophy can do (McDowell 1996, pp. xxiii-iv, 108). But harder work is needed to realize Hegel's image of boundless conceptuality. Indeed, this image is more "threatening to common-sense" than McDowell suggests (McDowell 1996, p. 83). As Hegel says in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

[T]he familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood. The commonest way in which we deceive either ourselves or others about understanding is by assuming something as familiar, and accepting it on that account; with all its pros and cons, such knowing never gets anywhere, and it knows not why. Subject and object, God, nature, understanding, sensibility, and so on, are uncritically taken for granted as familiar, established as valid, and made into fixed points for starting and stopping. (Hegel 1977, p. 18)

On pain of deceiving "ourselves or others," there must, *contra* McDowell, be genuine questions about norms. In light of this, Hegel expands Kant's view of rational maturation, and in disquieting fashion: "[t]he onset of the new spirit is the product of a widespread upheaval in various forms of culture, the prize at the end of a complicated, tortuous path and of just as variegated and strenuous an effort" (Hegel 1977, p. 7). At the heart of German idealism is the justificatory work of deduction.²⁷ After all, beyond a mere tribunal of experience, there must be "a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions," which court is "none other than the critique of pure reason itself" (Kant, Axi-ii).

To be sure, in denying that we can restrict "the self-scrutiny of reason," McDowell echoes the German idealist aim of removing limits on reason's capacity to justify its claims, especially limits that Kant installs by denying cognitive access to a principle that grounds our forms of intuition and judgment (McDowell 1996, p. 52; Kant, B145–6, A680/B708).²⁸ Objecting that the transcendental story restricts our ability to "take charge of our lives" (McDowell 1996, p. 43) is, we saw, a misguided response to our inability to think up sensible matter. But when McDowell reprises his plea for "the unlimited freedom of reason" in "He-

²⁷ See Rödl 2007 on how the *Critique of Pure Reason* becomes the *Science of Logic* through a conversion of the Analytic of Concepts, the Analytic of Principles, and the Transcendental Dialectic into a single deduction of pure concepts, and why this conversion is more complex than the position defended in *Mind and World*. Cf. Gardner 2013, pp. 135–136.

²⁸ Cf. Strawson 1975, pp. 79–81. For an account of Fichte and Hegel's dissatisfaction with Kantian deduction, see Bruno 2018a.

gel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant," he shifts to the objection that Kant posits forms of intuition as a "brute fact about us" that "remains outside" reason's deductive capacity (McDowell 2009, pp. 76, 79, 85).²⁹ We will see that his quietism skirts the hard work of deducing space and time.

The B-Deduction avoids the threat that space and time are conditions of experience that do not bear categorial unity, and that therefore render this unity a "subjective imposition" onto sensibility, by showing that combining a sensible manifold is unintelligible without intellectual activity. Intuition presents an object to thought only if it bears categorial unity (McDowell 2009, pp. 73–75).³⁰ The deduction avoids the threat of subjective imposition, McDowell says, but remains saddled with the "brute-fact externality" of space and time, for Kant argues that they are forms of intuition yet sees no reason why they are *ours*: they are imposed by our peculiarly human sensibility and so we cannot be said to have any right to them. By conceding brute facts, Kant's deduction limits reason's freedom (McDowell 2009, pp. 76–77, 86).

McDowell's response to Kant is to replace transcendental idealism with Hegel's consistent – what he now calls "authentic" – idealism, according to which space and time derive from "the sphere of free intellectual activity." He adds that only this can ensure "commonsense realism about objective reality" (McDowell 2009, pp. 75, 80–81). But McDowell remains at odds with Hegel, for while he says that we must "eliminate the externality that vitiates Kant's Deduction," he prefers a "simple" path to the position to which Hegel's own path is "more complex" (McDowell 2009, p. 89). Complexity, of course, is the necessary positive work of dialectic, which quietism shuns. And, as we saw, commonsense is one of the external, i.e., self-alienated aspects of thought that Hegel sublates. Thus, by foregoing Hegel's deductive argument for the unboundedness of the conceptual, McDowell stalls on his path to consistent idealism.

Perhaps "successful critical idealism would have to be speculative in a Hegelian sense" (McDowell 2009, p. 79). But if we forgo the "tortuous path" to this end, we pass over Jacobi's dare in silence. In that case, a transcendental idealist is free to prove that categorial unity is not a subjective imposition and, furthermore, to make a case for acceptable – because insuperable – brute facts of experience.

²⁹ McDowell's new objection hints at the old by charging that transcendental idealism, by making the form of objectivity "a mere reflection of a fact about us," "degenerates into subjective idealism" (2009, pp. 78, 83). Cf. Strawson 1975, pp. 22, 35, 91.

³⁰ Cf. Rödl 2007.

To be sure, although Jacobi's critique of idealism prefigures a McDowellian attack on frictionless belief,³¹ he indulges mythical givenness in denying that sensibility is conceptual in its use: "as a realist I am forced to say that all knowledge derives exclusively from faith, for *things* must be *given* to me before I am in a position to enquire about relations" (Jacobi 1994, p. 256). But if McDowell has any advantage over faith, it is diminished by his quietistic response to Jacobi's dare.

3

The fate of reason after Kant involves, for many post-Kantians, the exclusion of absolute being, i. e., of a world outside possible experience. Meillassoux traces this fate to the turn from the pre-Kantian commitment to the "real necessity" of the existence of an entity such as God (Meillassoux 2008, p. 32) to the Kantian rejection of this commitment as dogmatic. Kant replaces this necessity with an account of what we may call the anthropic necessity of the conditions of possible experience. Critique secures these conditions against the "groundless pretensions" that render metaphysics "complete anarchy" (Kant, Axi). In this, it serves the task of "self-knowledge", i. e., knowledge of the nature and bounds of our understanding (Kant, Axi). For Meillassoux, by substituting anthropic for real necessity, we overcome metaphysical anarchy at the cost of subjectivizing ontology. In particular, by restricting necessity to conditions of experience, Kant neglects the alternative, which Meillassoux defends, that contingency itself is necessary, i. e., that everything is "*capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason*" (Meillassoux 2008, p. 53). If contingency is "an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge" (Meillassoux 2008, p. 53), then we can speak of necessity while avoiding both metaphysical anarchy and subjective ontology. Only then can we pursue "*intellectual intuition of the absolute*" (Meillassoux 2008, p. 82).

According to Meillassoux, we neglect the necessity of contingency if we confine understanding to the correlation between thought and being. Correlationism posits an insuperable bond between thought and being that renders absolute being unknowable. This, for Meillassoux, is the "exacerbated consequence" of the "Kantian catastrophe" of interpreting "scientific objectivity" in terms of "*intersubjectivity*," according to which an objective judgment is of an experience that is possible for any judge and is therefore valid for any judge (Meillassoux

³¹ See Bowie 1996.

2008, pp. 4, 124). By proscribing knowledge of “the uncorrelated” object, correlationism violates the scientific spirit (Meillassoux 2008, pp. 4, 8, 13, 16, 28, 124). According to Meillassoux, scientific statements about events prior to our species purport to refer to “ancestral” reality, which is “*anterior to every form of human relation*” (Meillassoux 2008, pp. 10, 15, 20). In other words, they purport to refer to transcendental reality. Thus, when we hear that ancestral statements have “a realist sense” or “no sense at all,” we see that, like Jacobi, Meillassoux presupposes that knowable reality is transcendental. And, like Jacobi, his challenge to the transcendental idealist who initiates correlationism is a taunt: “the consistent correlationist should stop being modest and dare to assert openly that she is in a position to provide the scientist with an *a priori* demonstration that the latter’s ancestral statements are *illusory*” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 17). Does Kant undermine scientific objectivity?

Following a long tradition, Meillassoux projects a Cartesian conception of internality and externality onto transcendental idealism. Kant’s empirical externality, he says, is “a cloistered outside” in that it is “relative to us.” We may know appearances, but we have “lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7). Meillassoux mourns the death of a God’s-eye view, lamenting that empirical externality confines us to a mental space that excludes, and affords no inference to, absolute being. As we saw, Kant employs both transcendental and empirical senses of internality and externality: space is in us without empirical objects being mental; and we can think, but cannot think up, transcendental objects. Empirical reality is “cloistered” only if it is conflated with mental contents, as on a Cartesian picture.³² Meillassoux’s projection leads him mistakenly to assert that, for Kant, empirical objects exist only if subjects do and thereby to assert, without reference to either the Refutation of Idealism or the *Prolegomena*, that Kant’s position is indistinguishable from Berkeley’s (Meillassoux 2008, pp. 28–29, 122).³³ Preoccupied by Kant’s conclusion that we can only know appearances, Meillassoux neglects his motivating problem, which is the question, not whether what appears is real, but how anything can appear at all. Kant’s concern is not whether appearances are dreams, but how appearances “belong” to an experiential standpoint, without which they would be “less than a dream” (Kant, A112).³⁴

Meillassoux aims to “reactivate the Cartesian thesis” that we can know “properties of the in-itself” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 3). But his rejection of tran-

³² See Ameriks 2015.

³³ See Bruno 2017.

³⁴ See Conant 2004.

scendental idealism circularly posits that knowable reality is transcendental. The first premise of his “argument from the arche-fossil” is that ancestry denotes an event “*anterior to givenness itself*” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 20). If ancestral statements refer to reality independent of “*every form of human relation,*” including givenness in possible experience, and if they are true, then transcendental realism is true. But this is to say that transcendental idealism is false, which is no premise in a convincing argument to that conclusion.³⁵ In begging the question against Kant, Meillassoux fails to show that ancestral statements differ in kind from statements about the present. And he cannot show this: the former are as bound as the latter to possible experience.³⁶

Jacobi and Kant each aim to reverse a form of self-alienation. When Meillassoux urges us “*to get out of ourselves, to grasp the in-itself*” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 27), he demands what we might call a *salto immortale*, indulging self-alienation of the sort that Kant diagnoses in the Amphiboly:

If the complaints ‘That we have no insight into the inner in things’ are to mean that we do not understand through pure reason what the things that appear to us might be in themselves, then they are entirely improper and irrational; for they would have us be able to cognize things, thus intuit them, even without senses, consequently they would have it that we have a faculty of cognition entirely distinct from the human not merely in degree but even in intuition and kind. (Kant A277–8/B333–4)

Meillassoux’s wish for insight into what is “neither visible nor perceptible in things” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 82) is “improper and irrational,” for it renounces the human faculty on whose behalf Kant redresses an abiding estrangement.³⁷

4

Certain Kantian claims can tempt a Cartesian framing. So, too, can the impression that transcendental idealism is a doctrine about the mind. I want to suggest that Kant’s idealism is usefully interpreted as a doctrine about the modality of

³⁵ See Bruno 2018b.

³⁶ Cf. Zahavi 2018 on neuroscience’s privileging of knowledge of the brain.

³⁷ Cf. Cavell 1979: “In Wittgenstein’s view the gap between mind and the world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the appreciation and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human ‘convention’. This implies that the *sense* of gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a ‘stranger’ to, ‘alienated’ from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance [...Wittgenstein] never, I think, underestimated the power of the motive to reject the human: nothing could be more human” (pp. 109, 207).

the conditions of objectivity. For Kant, it is crucial to determine which logic is appropriate for securing these conditions. General logic, we saw, abstracts from all content to the “mere form of thinking.” It permits any non-contradictory claim, including speculative claims that outstrip experience and set reason adrift (Kant, A4/B8, A54/B78; cf. B19, B24). To forge a rigorous path, transcendental logic delimits the “form of a possible experience,” i.e., the universal and necessary conditions whereby judgment subsumes an object under a concept (Kant, A246–8/B303–5). Since general logic requires merely that thought not contradict itself, it can only explain analytic judgment. Accordingly,

the possibility of synthetic judgments is a problem with which general logic has nothing to do, indeed whose name it need not even know. But in a transcendental logic it is the most important business of all, and indeed the only business if the issue is the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments and likewise the conditions and the domain of their validity. (Kant, A154/B193)

Analytic judgment, which cannot amplify cognition, and synthetic *a posteriori* judgment, which affords neither universality nor necessity, raise the “real problem of pure reason,” namely, the possibility of universal and necessary yet ampliative judgment, i.e., synthetic *a priori* judgment (Kant, B19).³⁸ Transcendental logic solves this problem by determining the conditions of possible experience.

Crucially, such conditions are contingent in that they do not follow from the mere form of thinking, yet necessary in that they constitute the form of experience. In other words, their necessity is not general-logical, but their contingency is not empirical. The unique modality of conditions of objectivity qualifies them as factual.³⁹ They are brute facts about our orbit in logical space. Facticity abounds in Kant's thought: our forms of intuition are “peculiar to us;” their origin is a “mystery;” it is a “peculiarity of our understanding” that it has the forms of judgment and categories that it does; the common root of sensibility and understanding is “unknown;” and reason's “peculiar fate” is to pose unanswerable questions (Kant, Avii, A15/B29, A35/B51, B145, A268/B324, A278/B334).

38 Synthetic judgment thus cannot be governed only by the principle of contradiction, but must also be governed by the “supreme principle of all synthetic judgments,” which states that any object presupposes the necessary conditions of the unity of the manifold of intuition in a possible experience (Kant, A158/B197; cf. AA 4, pp. 267, 269; AA 8, p. 193).

39 While this definition of facticity differs from Meillassoux's, he does attribute the former to Kant (2008, p. 38). Yet his thought is incomplete: he includes space and time, but does not specify why they are factual; he omits the ideas of reason; and he includes the categories, but falsely denies that they are deducible.

Conditions of objectivity, in virtue of their facticity, are susceptible neither to rational doubt nor to rational grounding. They arguably avoid Cartesian and Humean skepticism insofar as they are necessary for possible experience, but they derive from no absolute first principle. By securing conditions with this modal character, transcendental logic supplants a logic incapable of resolving the antinomous accounts of objectivity that proliferate when reason restricts itself to analytic and synthetic *a posteriori* judgment. Not only does transcendental logic thereby transform reasoning from a Humean fork to a Kantian trident: assuming we eschew Cartesian projections, it affords a path between Jacobian faith and what Jacobi advertises as egoism.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ Thanks to the editors, Tom Krell, and Clinton Tolley for helpful comments on this chapter.

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