**In Defence of Transcendental Idealism: Reply to McWherter**

**Guus Duindam**

***This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the* Journal of Critical Realism *on* October 11, 2018, available online here:** [**10.1080/14767430.2018.1531340**](https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=DUIIDO&proxyId=&u=http%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1080%2F14767430.2018.1531340)

**Please cite published version.**

1. **Introduction**

I recently argued in this Journal that critical realists ought to reject Bhaskar’s arguments for transcendental realism and adopt Kant’s transcendental idealism instead (Duindam 2018). Building on his sophisticated analysis of Bhaskar’s arguments in *The Problem of Critical Ontology* (2013), Dustin McWherter responds that transcendental idealism suffers from two fatal flaws (2018). First, it fails to account for the distinctive epistemic significance of experimental experience and activity, as opposed to everyday experience (2018, 1–2). Second, it is inherently inconsistent due to the problem of the thing-in-itself (2018, 3). In this brief reply, I defend transcendental idealism against both objections.

1. **On experiments**

According to McWherter, transcendental idealists cannot explain the epistemic significance of experiments because on their account “experience of extra-experimental reality alone should be sufficient for knowledge of causal relations” (2018, 2). “If causal relatedness among objects is a necessary a priori feature of all cognitive experience,” McWherter asks, “how does experimental experience in particular further our knowledge of causal relations in a way that non-experimental experience does not?” (2018, 2). He concludes that Kant’s concept of causal relations cannot accommodate the epistemic significance of experimentation because it is overly theoretical.

It is worth noting that Kant did not take himself to be advocating a theory which rendered experimentation obsolete. To the contrary, he repeatedly emphasizes the crucial epistemic importance of experimentation to any successful natural science even as he defends transcendental idealism. Thus in the B-preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* he observes:

When Galileo rolled balls of a weight chosen by himself down an inclined plane, or when Torricelli made the air bear a weight that he had previously thought to be equal to that of a known column of water, or when in a later time Stahl changed metals into calx and then changed the latter back into metal by first removing something and then putting it back again*,* a light dawned on all those who study nature. […] *Reason, in order to be taught by nature, must approach nature with its principles in one hand*, according to which alone the agreement among appearances can count as laws, *and, in the other hand, the experiments thought out in accordance with these principles* – yet in order to be instructed by nature not like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them. [my emphasis] (Kant 1998, B xii-xiv)*.*

If McWherter is right, Kant was deeply mistaken about the implications of his own views. But, it seems to me, there is no reason to accept this. Transcendental idealism can and does account for the epistemic significance of experimentation.

For Kant, the concept of *cause* is a pure concept of the understanding (1998 A80/B106). But this is not to say that we can come to know particular *causal laws* a-priori. That possibility is ruled out explicitly: “[p]articular laws, because they concern empirically determined appearances, *cannot* be *completely derived* from the categories, although they all stand under them. Experience must be added in order to come to know particular laws *at all*. [Kant’s emphasis]” (1998, B165) (See also Kant 1998, A127).

Since we cannot in general deduce particular causal laws a-priori,1 a-posteriori experience is required to acquire knowledge of them. McWherter suggests that on the transcendentally idealist view, ordinary day-to-day experience should do (2018, 2). But it is not clear how the Kantian could advance beyond wild guesses at particular causal laws in the absence of data from experimentation. In fact, this seems to be just the point Kant is making in the passage from the B-preface: random empirical observations could never add up to knowledge of causal laws. For instance, I may observe that rock is not flammable, but wood is. Rock and wood, I observe, also differ in color, internal consistency, weight, etc. This single set of observations, though to be sure it is synthesized under the categories,2 tells me nothing about which causal law governs flammability. It may lead me to a hypothesis – e.g., perhaps brownness causes flammability – but that hypothesis would be nothing more than a (rather bad) guess. Further unregulated (non-experimental) experiences will, it is true, eventually lead me to rule out the most egregiously erroneous hypotheses: before long I will surely encounter a brown object which is not flammable. But scores of false hypotheses will continue to be live possibilities to me even after many lifetimes of unregulated experience of flammable objects. If I am to come to a reliable hypothesis about the causes of flammability, I must “compel nature to answer…[my] questions” (Kant 1998, B xii). That “compelling” of nature occurs in the experimental setting alone.

Kant explains why we need experiments despite the apriority of our concept of causation. Reason is “the faculty of deriving the particular from the universal,” and a universal is either given *a-priori* or it is not (Kant 1998, A646/B674). If it is, then it is “in itself certain” and particulars are “necessarily determined through it” (Ibid.). If it is not – and, we have seen, causal laws are not – we must hypothesize about the universal. In Kant’s words, we can assume it “only *problematically*” [Kant’s emphasis] (Ibid.). From there we must proceed by using “several particular cases” to test our hypothesis; in so doing, we eventually approximate the causal law that explains them (1998, A646-47/B674-75). And for particular cases to give us reliable information about a hypothesized causal law, we need experimental data. This is (among other things) because (1) we will not otherwise experience with sufficient frequency the particular cases we need to form an informed hypothesis and (2) we can rule out the causal interference which renders reliable hypothesis-testing impossible only in a controlled experimental setting.

In *The Problem of Critical Ontology*, McWherter argues that “for a transcendental idealist, the synthesis of the intuitional manifold according to the rule of hypothetical judgment should be enough to guarantee the objectivity of perception,” and from this concludes that experimentation cannot carry any special epistemic import for the transcendental idealist (2013, 135). It seems to me this conclusion could only follow from McWherter’s analysis if by “objectivity” he meant “truth.” If synthesis guaranteed truth, then experiments would indeed be unnecessary. But the mere process of the synthesis of our intuitional manifold cannot guarantee the truth of our perceptions. This would commit Kant to the obviously false view that nonveridical perception is impossible. For Kant, our intuitions are objective if they come to represent the objective world as being a certain way, whether truly or falsely. Hence, even universally communicable, empirically meaningful judgments which we are epistemically entitled to make may be false (as Kant affirms, see 1998, A84/B117-A86/B118). Before synthesis, our intuitional manifold means “nothing” to us (1998, A120), but afterwards it may still form the basis of mistaken judgments.

Kant’s assertion, finally, that empirical laws “carry with them an expression of necessity” (1998, A159/B198) does not entail, as McWherter suggests (2018, 2), that we can come to know the content of these laws in ordinary experience and without recourse to experimentation. Observations lead us to *posit* causal laws *problematically* as necessarily connecting a cause with an effect. As Kant notes, this is not to say that “the truth of the universal rule assumed as a hypothesis thereby follows” (1998, A647/B675). Instead, this ‘problematic’ assumption of some causal law as a hypothesis merely allows us to approximate knowledge of such laws.

So long as we may be mistaken about our hypotheses, we will need to test them, and so long as we need to test them, we need the controlled observations obtained only in experimentation. Kant’s account therefore accommodates, and in fact requires, the epistemic significance of experimentation.

1. **The Problem of the Thing-in-Itself**

McWherter poses a second challenge: he maintains transcendental idealism must be rejected as internally inconsistent (2018, 3). This is, he argues, because it affirms two contradictory propositions, namely: (1) that the Categories, including the Category of Existence, cannot be applied to things-in-themselves, and (2) that things-in-themselves exist.

There is some dispute in the literature about whether the Categories can be asserted of noumena (see, e.g., Allais 2015; Marshall 2018). For the purposes of this paper, I’ll set that dispute aside and assume, with McWherter, that they cannot. That position has significant textual support (see, e.g. the *Prolegomena,* Kant 1992, 4:312-313, “even the pure concepts of the understanding have no significance at all if they depart from objects of experience and want to be referred to things in themselves (*noumena*)”) [Kant’s italics]. The resulting position is not internally inconsistent; it implies only that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves.

The Kantian can consistently claim that (1) we can have no cognition of things-in-themselves and (2) we are justified in assuming their existence.3 After all, assuming the existence of things-in-themselves is one thing; asserting that we *cognize* things-in-themselves *as existing things* quite another.

Only Berkeleyan idealists and radical skeptics reject the assumption that some real, mind-independent things exist. We need not here ask whether the Kantian could show these views to be false, since Bhaskar’s arguments for transcendental realism could not disprove either view even if they were valid and sound. Both the Kantian and the transcendental realist assume that some real things exist. The position that we cannot cognize these things as they are in-themselves does not threaten this assumption.

This is sufficient, it seems to me, to show that the transcendental idealist is not committed to an inherently inconsistent view. But there are resources in Kant to argue, further, that we *must* assume the existence of noumena. Kant suggests as much in the *Prolegomena* when he notes that: “if we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, as is fitting, then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them, although we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself, but only with its appearance…” (1992, 4:314-15). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant argues that in the exercise of practical reason we necessarily and justifiably assume noumenal freedom, (2015, 5:4-5:13). This position may well imply that we must also assume the existence of noumena (for an argument to this effect see Merrihew 1997).

Finally, in the Refutation of Idealism (1998, B275–76, Bxxxix n1) Kant argues that we could not temporally order any of our experiences if we were given *nothing* real in outer sensibility. For, temporal ordering requires a persistent, external point of reference. Since, in point of fact, we *can* temporally order our experiences, we must be given something real in outer sensibility. Therefore, it cannot be the case that nothing is mind-independent. On Dicker’s influential reading of the Refutation, it successfully establishes even to the radical skeptic at least this: that we must necessarily *conceive* of our experiences “as experiences of an objective world,” that is, of a world in which some real, mind-independent things exist (See Dicker 2008, 105). If this is true, Kant’s Refutation proves that we must assume noumena even if we cannot cognize them.

Whether or not one is convinced by these arguments – and there is not the space here to provide an independent defence of them – Kant’s position is not internally inconsistent. Assuming the existence of some real, mind-independent things – an assumption Kant has in common with Bhaskar – does not entail that we can cognize those things, thus, it does not necessitate application of the Categories to noumena.4

**Notes**

. This is excepting the few fundamental laws of nature Kant deduces a-priori in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Because these are not the kinds of causal laws at issue in this debate, we can safely disregard the complications of Kant’s discussions in that work here.

2. *Synthesis* is Kant’s term for the process by which we unify the raw input of our senses (the ‘manifold of intuition’) into one (further) representation. Concepts (including the pure concepts of the Categories) are the organizing principles that render this process possible.

3. In fact, all the Kantian needs here to avoid actual inconsistency is the weaker position that we have no good reason to doubt the existence of noumena. But it seems to me that Kant correctly takes the stronger position that we justifiably assume their existence.

4. I am grateful to Janum Sethi for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

**References**

Allais, Lucy. 2015. *Manifest Reality: Kant’s Idealism & His Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dicker, Georges. 2008. “Kant’s Refutation of Idealism.” *Noûs* 42 (1): 80–108.

Duindam, Guus. 2018. “Why Critical Realists Ought to Be Transcendental Idealists.” *Journal of Critical Realism* 17 (2). Taylor & Francis: 1–11. doi:10.1080/14767430.2018.1482724.

Kant, Immanuel. 1992. *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics*. Edited and translated by Gary Hatfield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2015. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press.

Marshall, Colin. 2018. “Never Mind the Intuitive Intellect: Applying Kant’s Categories to Noumena.” *Kantian Review* 23 (1): 27–40. doi:10.1017/S136941541700036X.

McWherter, Dustin. 2013. *The Problem of Critical Ontology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

———. 2018. “Critical Realism and Transcendental Idealism: Response to Duindam.” *Journal of Critical Realism* 0 (0). Taylor & Francis: 1–4. doi:10.1080/14767430.2018.1491248.

Merrihew, Robert. 1997. “Things in Themselves.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (4): 801–25.