

Research Article

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The Loss of the Great Outdoors: Neither Correlationist Gem nor Kantian Catastrophe

DOI 10.1515/pipj-2017-0002

Abstract: This article concerns Quentin Meillassoux's claim that Kant's revolution is responsible for philosophy's catastrophic loss of the 'great outdoors', of our knowledge of things as they are in themselves. I argue that Meillassoux's critique of Kant's 'weak' correlationism and his defence of 'strong' correlationism are predicated on a fallacious argument (termed 'the Gem' by David Stove) and the traditional, but in my view mistaken, metaphysical interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction. I draw on Henry Allison's interpretation of Kant's idealism to argue that when Kant's transcendental distinction is understood epistemologically we can avoid the fallacious reasoning underpinning Meillassoux's argument, and at the very least attenuate his concerns about the 'Kantian catastrophe'.

Keywords: Allison, Copernican Revolution, Correlationism, Kant, Meillassoux, Stove's Gem, Things in Themselves, Transcendental Idealism

1. The Loss of the Great Outdoors

According to Quentin Meillassoux, "contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers".¹ The loss of "the great outdoors", of our "grasp [of] the in-itself" or knowledge of "what is whether we are or not" is the result of what Meillassoux terms "the Kantian catastrophe", or Kant's "Ptolemaic counter-revolution in philosophy".² Meillassoux's charge is that by making all actual and possible human knowledge and experience relative to human beings' intuitive and rational capacities, Kant's revolution catastrophically undermined the possibility of knowing things as they are in themselves, which is to say as they are independently of our modes of cognition and experience.

Correlationism

Meillassoux introduces the term 'correlationism' to refer to Kantian and post-Kantian perspectives that, he says, follow Kant in making all possible knowledge relative to us. In so doing, correlationist thinkers wind up proscribing possible knowledge of things as they are in themselves. For Kant, knowledge and

1 Meillassoux, Q., & Badiou, A. (2008). *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (R. Brassier, trans.), London: Continuum, p.7. Hereafter, AF.

2 Ibid., p.27, 125, 118. The charge that Kant's philosophy is anti-Copernican or Ptolemaic is far from new. Norman Kemp Smith (2003, p.23) describes Kant's philosophy as a "Ptolemaic anthropocentric metaphysic"; Bertrand Russell (1992, p.9) claims that it would be "more accurate if [Kant] had spoken of a 'Ptolemaic counter-revolution'"; and J. J. C. Smart (1963, p.151) concludes that "Kant's so-called Copernican revolution was really an anti-Copernican counter revolution".

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experience of the world are not only correlated with our cognitive and intuitive faculties and frameworks, but are also correlated with the unknowable things in themselves that underpin phenomena.³ According to Meillassoux, post-Kantian thought adds a further correlationist addendum to Kant's view that things in themselves are the unknown correlates of phenomena. He claims that post-Kantian philosophy holds that neither thought nor the world to which thought refers can be understood independently. Thus, Meillassoux explains that “[c]orrelationism is the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other”.⁴ Correlationism, therefore, “consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of each other”.⁵ The upshot, claims Meillassoux, is that it “[n]ot only become[s] possible to insist that we never grasp an object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object”.⁶

Correlationism, therefore, has two central theses. The first is that our knowledge (or ‘grasp’) of the world is always relative to us. The consequence of this is that we have no means of determining the extent to which our knowledge and experience of the world are generated by, or correspond to the way things are in themselves. The second thesis is that, despite this limitation, the nature of the thinking subject cannot be understood independently of the world of objects and its encounters as an object among other objects.

We will return to Meillassoux's analysis of correlationism shortly. For now, however, it is important to note his claim that even when correlationism holds that we are “always-already related to an object” this can mean only that the objects in question are objects ‘for us’ and thus not in themselves.⁷ The upshot of this is that although correlationism is not (at least not explicitly) sceptical about the existence of an external world (it is not phenomenalism or subjective idealism) it will not only refuse the possibility of knowing the world as it is in itself, but, as we shall see, in its most strident form it also will deny the coherence of the thought of the world as it is in itself.

In this article I first focus on a central component of the argument by which Meillassoux attempts to breach correlationism's defences and deduce knowledge of things as they are in themselves. I will not address his important (though not unproblematic) claim that the ‘literal’ (and, therefore, deepest) meaning of certain scientific statements is incompatible with correlationist rejoinders, or the extraordinary absolute (or in-itself) he claims to have demonstrated.⁸ Instead, I focus here on the small but crucial argumentative

³ The term ‘correlate’ (*korrelatum*) first appears in *The Critique of Pure Reason* at the end of the first section of ‘The Transcendental Aesthetic’. Here, Kant explains that the “true correlate” (*wahres Korrelatum*) of “outer objects”, “i.e., the thing in itself”, “cannot be cognized through [representations]” and “is also never asked after in experience” (2005, A30/B45, p.162).

⁴ AF, p.5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* We should emphasise here that although Kant denies the possibility of both knowledge and experience of the world as it is in itself, he does think that thought can be considered apart from its relationship to being or the world. Indeed, Kant is explicitly concerned with determining the nature and epistemic capacities of the human mind *qua* human mind, which is to say, as it is independently of being.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁸ A note about the ancestral and Meillassoux's absolute is appropriate here, however. On the ancestral: according to Meillassoux, scientific statements that provide non-relative dates of profoundly ancient events like the big bang and the accretion of the earth (what he terms ‘ancestral statements’) ought to astonish honest modern correlationist philosophers. He argues that the reason for this is that ‘the literal meaning’ of ancestral statements is incompatible with the correlationist procedure of relativising knowledge to us. When ancestral statements are taken literally, which is to say, as in-principle correct claims about the dates of events that occurred at a time before the advent of life (and, therefore, before anything which is given to an experiencing entity) they violate the conditions of intelligibility entailed by correlationist thinking. For Meillassoux, insofar as there is no possible way to maintain that the literal meaning of ancestral statements is a relative meaning then, for him, ancestral statements are very good candidates for ‘absolute knowledge’, i.e., knowledge of the world as it is in itself. His approach is to pit the literal truth of ancestral statements against correlationism, to show that when confronted with the meaning of ancestral statements, “every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism” because correlationism “is incapable of admitting that what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science” (AF, p.18). Explaining how science is able to produce claims that make sense only if they cannot be made relative to or ‘for us’ is the central task Meillassoux sets himself in *After Finitude*. Ray Brassier (2010, pp.58–60) mounts a particularly robust critique of Meillassoux's so-called ‘challenge of the ancestral’. On Meillassoux's absolute and his speculative materialism: The

step which precedes and which is required for Meillassoux to stage the confrontation between correlationism and absolute idealism that lies at the core of his argument in *After Finitude*, and from which his claims about things in themselves are drawn. Whatever the merits or defects of that argument, or the plausibility of the conclusions he draws from it, it relies on first establishing and defending what he takes to be the most consistent correlationist position. To establish this position (which will set the terms for the confrontation between correlationism and idealism) he contrasts two articulations of correlationism: one labelled ‘weak’ and the other labelled ‘strong’. Meillassoux argues that, insofar as strong correlationism avoids the contradictions of weak correlationism, it constitutes a more consistent and robust philosophical position.

To understand the difference between the two positions we should briefly return to Meillassoux’s account of the argument upon which correlationism rests. Although correlationist philosophies are diverse and not at all exclusively focused on the relation between mind and world, they are all, he claims, underpinned by “the correlationist circle”.⁹ Essentially a reworking of Berkeley’s so-called ‘Master Argument’, the correlationist circle entails that any attempt to think something in itself that is not in some way ‘for us’ is self-defeating because we cannot think a non-thought.¹⁰ “[O]ne cannot think the in-itself”, writes Meillassoux, “without entering a vicious circle, thereby immediately contradicting oneself”.¹¹ The result of the correlationist circle is that “it is impossible to conceive an absolute X, i.e., an X which would be essentially separate from a subject”.¹² The basic distinction between the weak and strong correlationist positions is drawn sharply when he writes:

According to Kant’s [weak correlationism], we know a priori that the thing-in-itself is non-contradictory and that it actually exists. By way of contrast, the strong model of correlationism maintains not only that it is illegitimate to claim that we can know the in-itself, but also that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least think it. The argument for this de-legitimation is very simple and familiar to everyone...the correlationist circle.¹³

Meillassoux makes the point again when he notes that “the ‘argument from the circle’ means not only that the thing in itself is unknowable, as in Kant, but that the in itself is radically unthinkable”.¹⁴ To this he adds that, unlike strong correlationism, which adheres more robustly to the ‘argument from the circle’, Kant:

[G]ranted to theoretical reason ... the capacity to access four determinations of the in-itself: according to Kant, I know 1) that the thing in itself effectively exists outside of consciousness (there are not only phenomena); 2) we know that it affects our sensibility and produces in us representations (that’s why our sensibility is passive, finite, and not spontaneous); 3) the thing in itself is not contradictory- the principle of non-contradiction is an absolute principle, not one that is merely

extraordinary absolute Meillassoux claims to demonstrate in *After Finitude* is that, as it is in itself, the universe is necessarily contingent. This, he says, means that anything could happen at any time and in any place neither for any reason nor on account of any cause. The argument by which he demonstrates this is deft, even if it is not always persuasive. Put very briefly and crudely, it turns on an effort to show that once we enter Kant’s critical philosophy and reject dogmatic or naïve metaphysical realism then the only means by which we can avoid endorsing a form of absolute or subjective idealism (for which there is nothing outside of thought) is to hold fast to the idea that, whether thinkable or not, we cannot rule out the possibility of the existence of things in themselves. From here Meillassoux argues that for this possibility to make sense it must be a real possibility (and not just an incapacity of thought). According to Meillassoux, the only way that this real possibility can be established is if we take the thought-world correlate as a merely contingent (and so non-necessary) fact. From the facticity or contingency of the correlate he claims to derive the proof that all things are necessarily contingent. And this conclusion, argues Meillassoux, constitutes absolute knowledge of the universe as it is in itself.

⁹ AF, p.8.

¹⁰ The phrase ‘Berkeley’s Master Argument’ is first used by André Gallois (1974). It amounts to the view that thinking about an unperceived or un-conceived material tree, for example, would be impossible because any attempt to do so would be a thought. Berkeley (1999, p.xxix) writes that “[w]hen we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas”. We will see presently why this argument is far from compelling.

¹¹ Meillassoux, Q., (2008). ‘Time Without Becoming’. Unpublished paper delivered at Middlesex University, London, 2008, p.2. Hereafter, TWB.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.2. Of course, this is why Meillassoux finds the literal meaning of ancestral statements (that cannot be conceived as ‘for us’) so problematic.

¹³ AF, p.35.

¹⁴ TWB, p.2.

relative to our consciousness; and lastly, 4) we know that the thing in itself can't be spatiotemporal because space and time can only be forms of subjective sensibility and not properties of the in itself.¹⁵

Meillassoux's critique of (the Kantian) weak correlationist model is straightforward. Kant simply oversteps the limits imposed by the correlationist circle. Again, the circle argument entails that because we cannot think a non-thought, any knowledge we have about the world is by definition knowledge about the world as it is 'for us', and therefore, not about the world as it is in itself. In contrast to Kant's position, the virtue of the strong correlationist model is that it "prohibits most decisively the possibility of thinking what there is when there is no thought".¹⁶ By properly embracing the correlationist circle the strong correlationist model holds that the very notion of a thing in itself is contradictory and thus meaningless.¹⁷

Stove's Gem

Before responding to Meillassoux's critique of what he says is Kant's weak correlationism and to his argument for strong correlationism it is important to pause here to register that, even if we accept that knowing things independently of our means of knowing is impossible, it is not at all obvious that thought (or indeed knowledge) of things in themselves, of 'an absolute X', is a contradiction. It has been argued that Meillassoux's belief in "the exceptional strength of [correlationism's] antirealist argumentation" is misplaced.¹⁸ Ray Brassier and Graham Harman have noted that the correlationist circle argument is an unambiguous example of what David Stove sarcastically termed, 'the Gem', by which he means the worst argument in the world.¹⁹ Put simply, the Gem points out that even if we must employ thoughts to think of anything it does not follow that what is thought of must itself be a thought.

Although Stove's critique of the Gem is directed principally at Berkeley's argument, Alan Musgrave rearticulates the Gem's basic form like this: "You cannot X things unless C, a necessary condition for X-ing things, is met. Therefore, you cannot X things-as-they-are-in-themselves".²⁰ Put this way, any argument that states that knowledge is relative to (or correlated with) us (our thought, culture, mind, language, biology, etc.) and that, therefore, we cannot know things in themselves, is an example of the Gem. Musgrave stresses that the Gem is the worst argument not only because it derives a non-tautological conclusion (we cannot know or think things in themselves) from a tautological premise (we cannot think something without thinking it) but also because, for him, its conclusion is clearly false. For both Musgrave and Stove it is clear that we can, and do, have objects such as "trees-without-the-mind" in mind all the time, because that is

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ AF, p.36.

¹⁷ Although the focus here is the coherence of Meillassoux's critique of Kant's 'weak' correlationism, it is worth noting that Meillassoux combines the strong correlationist commitment to the meaninglessness of the notion of things in themselves with the view that this meaninglessness does not prohibit the possibility of the existence of things in themselves to draw the distinction between strong correlationism and absolute idealism, and then transform the former in to his speculative materialist position.

¹⁸ TWB, p.1.

¹⁹ Brassier, R. (2011). 'Concepts and Objects'. In L. R. Bryant, N. Srnicek, & G. Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (pp.47–66). Melbourne: Re.press, p.57; Harman, G. (2015). *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.56; Stove, D. C. (1991). *The Plato Cult and other Philosophical Follies*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp.83–113.

²⁰ Musgrave, A. (1999). 'Conceptual Idealism and Stove's Gem'. In M. Chiara, R. Giuntini, & F. Laudisa (Eds.), *Language, Quantum, Music (Selected Contributed Papers of the Tenth International Congress of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science, Florence, August 1995)* (pp. 25–35). Dordrecht, NL: Springer Verlag, p.27. Stove locates the clearest expression of the Gem in Berkeley's master argument. For Stove, Berkeley's argument amounts to this: "you cannot have trees-without-the-mind in mind, without having them in mind. Therefore, you cannot have trees-without-the-mind in mind" (Stove, 1991, p.139). According to Stove, Berkeley's argument is both formally fallacious and relies on an equivocation between things conceived (or perceived) and physical things. The tacit equivocation between the thought of an object and a physical object allows Berkeley to collapse the latter into the former and then claim to conclude that the latter is incoherent, and so impossible. In this respect, Berkeley's conclusion assumes what he says it proves: it is question begging. Stove was not the first to identify this problem in Berkeley's argument. See Downing (2013) for an account of a similar critique developed by Bertrand Russell.

simply what it means to speak about physical or material objects.²¹

Unsurprisingly, for both Stove and Musgrave, Kant is one of philosophy's greatest Gem-mongers. "Observing that we cannot think of things without bringing them under the categories of our thought", writes Musgrave, "Kant concluded that we cannot think of things-as-they-are-in-themselves ... we think of things-as-thought-of-by-us".²² Although, as above, Stove's and Musgrave's direct realist approach tends to the view that we do in fact know things as they are in themselves, the point here is that for them Kant's conclusion (that we cannot know things as they are in themselves) does not follow from his premise ('that we cannot think of things without bringing them under the categories of our thought').²³

From the Gem to Idealism

Musgrave claims that once Kant embraced the Gem, and once a pursuant distinction between phenomena and noumena is postulated, two core problems emerge that encourage the embrace of full-blown idealism. The first problem is the "inescapable cognitive disadvantage" that we cannot know "the real things".²⁴ The second problem is that, in order to maintain the sharp distinction between appearances and things in themselves, Kant is compelled to claim that although things in themselves exist they possess no phenomenal qualities ("no colours, smells, tastes, shapes or sizes, motions or weights") and (what is "queerer still") they are not in space or time and cannot play a role in causing phenomena.²⁵ In short, as Musgrave puts it, "things-in-themselves are nowhere, at no time, and do nothing".²⁶ For Musgrave, the problems that result from Kant's embrace of the Gem "disappear... if we do away with the noumenal world and its things-in-themselves, and opt for idealism".²⁷

It is interesting that Musgrave's brief account of the pressures to embrace idealism to a large extent tracks Meillassoux's account of why the strong correlationist position is more rigorous than Kant's weak position. Although Musgrave and Meillassoux clearly disagree about the strength of the correlationist circle argument, they both hold that the correlationist reply to Kant's problematic claims about things in themselves tends towards a full-fledged idealism in which the notion of the thing in itself is finally extirpated.²⁸ Of course, in contrast to Musgrave — for whom Kant's problems stem from embracing the correlationist circle (and the pursuant view that there are distinct noumenal and phenomenal domains) —

²¹ Stove's appeal to the common-sense use of language is persuasive, not least because it is very witty. He writes: "All sane use of language requires that we never relax our grip on the tautology that when we speak of kangaroos, it is kangaroos of which we speak. Berkeley would persuade us that we lose nothing, and avoid metaphysical error, if we give up kangaroos in favour of phenomenal kangaroos: in fact we would lose everything. Phenomenal kangaroos are an even poorer substitute for kangaroos than suspected murderers are for murderers. At least a suspected murderer may happen to be also a murderer; but a phenomenal kangaroo is a certain kind of experience, and there is no way it might happen to be also a kangaroo" (Stove, 1991, p.110). Stove takes a similar approach to what he says is Berkeley's meaning argument. According to him, Berkeley's meaning argument begins from the premise that when we say an object exists, or has certain qualities, we mean that this object or quality is perceived, or that under particular circumstances it would be perceived. Berkeley, says Stove, concludes from this that "[i]t either makes no sense or is self-contradictory, to say of a physical object or a quality of a physical object, that it is unperceived and would not be perceived whatever the circumstances were" (Stove, 1991, p.141). In reply, Stove complains that "the only rational response to Berkeley's meaning argument is simply to say that we do not mean that a physical object or quality is perceived, or would be perceived under such-and-such circumstances, when we say that it exists. And this is something which (to borrow a phrase from Berkeley) *whoever understands English, cannot but know*" (ibid., p.142).

²² Musgrave A. (1999), p.26.

²³ Strictly speaking Kant's point is not that we cannot know things in themselves because we must use categories to think them. It would be more accurate to say that for Kant we cannot know things in themselves because we must 'use' our forms of intuition to know them. The difference is crucial to Kant's argument but does not affect Musgrave's critique.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p.27.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hegel sums up this trajectory in post-Kantian thought well in *The Science of Logic*: "In its more consistent form, transcendental idealism did recognize the nothingness of the spectral thing-in-itself, this abstract shadow divorced from all content left over by critical philosophy, and its goal was to destroy it completely" (2010, p.27).

Meillassoux holds that Kant's problems emerge from an inconsistent embrace of the circle argument in the first place, from a failure to adhere fully to the circle argument's demand that the in-itself is unknowable. As we saw above, Meillassoux claims that in its more robust form the (strong) correlationist reply to Kant's weak correlationism maintains that even the notion of things in themselves is incoherent: it is a contradiction in terms and, therefore, meaningless.²⁹

F. H. Jacobi's Challenge and the Metaphysical Interpretation of Kant's Idealism

The complaints both Musgrave and Meillassoux raise in response to Kant's distinction between, and claims about, appearances and things in themselves are far from new. Musgrave's issue (that Kant's things in themselves seem to have no properties, are not in space and time and yet somehow cause phenomena) and Meillassoux's critique that Kant contradicts himself (when he claims to know that things in themselves are unknown and unknowable but also that they exist, are non-contradictory, non-spatiotemporal and affect our sensibility) are at least as old as the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.³⁰ Their complaints almost exactly repeat the words of Kant's influential contemporary F.H. Jacobi, who in 1787 raised three discrete but overlapping problems in Kant's *Critique*. The first is Meillassoux's issue: Kant's claim that things in themselves are unknown and unknowable is incompatible with his claims that they exist, are not in space and time, and cause appearances. The second, related, ontological problem is closer to Musgrave's concerns. It is the question of how things in themselves which are not in space and time could possibly affect us and cause appearances. The third issue for Jacobi (which Musgrave basically shares) is that transcendental idealism amounts to Berkeleyan idealism or phenomenalism, despite Kant's explicit refutation of this charge.³¹ The conclusion Jacobi draws from these issues is summarised in his frequently quoted remark that "without that presupposition [of the thing in itself] I could not enter into [Kant's] system, but with it I could not stay within it".³²

The question of how to make sense of (let alone reconcile) Kant's claims about things in themselves remains a mainstay of Kantian scholarship. Underpinning this question, however, is a more basic question of how we should interpret the nature of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves. The debate is centred on the question of whether that distinction should be understood metaphysically or epistemologically. The metaphysical ('traditional') reading remains common. At the heart of this

²⁹ Meillassoux notes that it is Fichte who gets closest to the strong correlationist position he has in mind. In his presentation at the Speculative Realism workshop at Goldsmith's University in 2007 he says that it was Fichte who provides "the most rigorous expression of the correlationist challenge to realism" (Collapse III, 2007, p.410). It is not hard to see why. Fichte writes that "[t]he thing-in-itself is something for the self, and consequently in the self, though it ought not to be in the self: it is thus a contradiction" (1991, p.249). Indeed, for Fichte, the correlationist circle is inescapable: "that the ... finite spirit must necessarily posit something absolute outside itself (a thing-in-itself), and yet must recognize, from the other side, that the latter exists only for it (as a necessary noumenon), is that circle which it is able to extend into infinity, but can never escape" (ibid., p.248). Fortunately, we need not enter into a reconstruction of Fichte's idealism here (or, for that matter, examine the extent to which Hegel's response to both Kant and Fichte's idealism excises the contradictory notion of things in themselves).

³⁰ See quotation from TWB referenced in note 14.

³¹ This charge (that Kant's transcendental idealism amounts to a Berkeleyan or phenomenalist variety of idealism) was articulated in the very first published review of the *Critique*, by Christian Feder and J. G. Garve in 1782. It so infuriated Kant that in response he published an appendix to the *Prolegomena*, explaining how and why transcendental idealism differs from Berkeley's idealism. Moreover, the addition of the chapter on 'The Refutation of Idealism' in the second edition of the *Critique* can be seen as another attempt to address this persistent critique. For the Feder/Garve review and a discussion, see Sassen, B. (2007), pp.53–77.

³² Jacobi, F. H. (1994). 'Appendix to David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, A Dialogue'. In G. D. Giovanni, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (pp. 253–339). Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, p.336. Accordingly, Jacobi argues that in order to avoid collapsing under its internal tensions, transcendental idealism should be unburdened from its vestigial commitment to things in themselves (and hence to the existence of an extra-mental reality). It is for this reason that Jacobi concludes his appendix with the following challenge: "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, for it is impossible for him to pretend to stay within his system if he tries to repel from himself even just this last objection" (ibid., p.338).

interpretation is the idea that things in themselves and appearances denote two distinct ontological domains or realms. On this view, the realm of appearances is known to us and organised according to our forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding, and the world of things in themselves is the real but unknowable world of things that lie beyond, and yet somehow cause the world of appearances. This traditional metaphysical interpretation very clearly underpins Jacobi's reading and rejection of Kant's transcendental idealism, just as it does Peter Strawson's reading and rejection of Kant's idealism 200 years later.³³ On the basis of their complaints it is clear that both Musgrave's and Meillassoux's critiques of Kant are based on the traditional metaphysical reading of Kant's idealism.³⁴

The Epistemological Interpretation of Kant's Idealism

We can now turn to the alternative, epistemological interpretation of Kant's idealism. In what follows I briefly explain and defend the core features of this interpretation. From this explanation and defence I aim to demonstrate four things: first, when understood according to the epistemological interpretation Kant's transcendental idealism is well equipped to answer Jacobi's complaint that Kant contradicts himself; second, the consequence of this is that the step from weak to strong correlationism that Meillassoux requires to stage the confrontation between correlationism and idealism is at best unnecessary; third, when properly construed, Kant's transcendental idealism is not reliant on the Gem (or correlationist circle argument); and fourth, when read metaphysically, Kant's transcendental idealism is indeed reliant on the Gem.

Components of an epistemological and one world/two aspect interpretation of Kant's idealism can be located in Fichte's philosophy, but it is given clearest expression by three contemporary thinkers: Gerold Prauss, Henry Allison and Graham Bird.³⁵ I will focus on two components of Allison's systematic interpretation and reconstruction of Kant's transcendental: the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves; and Kant's critique of transcendental realism in relation to his Copernican revolution and argument for transcendental idealism.

Drawing on Gerold Prauss' reading of Kant's *Critique*, Allison argues that Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves is best understood as resting on the difference between two ways of thinking about objects, "as a contrast between two ways in which such objects can be considered in a

³³ Strawson explicitly characterises Kant's notion of things in themselves as indexing a reality that exists independently of the sensible world (i.e., the world of appearances). He writes that for Kant "reality is supersensible and . . . we can have no knowledge of it" (2007, p.16). Like Jacobi, Strawson takes Kant's claims about things in themselves to be epistemologically and ontologically incoherent and concludes that Kant's transcendental idealism amounts to phenomenalism. "The only element in transcendental idealism which has any significant part to play in those structures [the structures of Kant's arguments and solutions]", writes Strawson, "is the phenomenalist idealism according to which the physical world is nothing apart from perceptions" (ibid., p.246). Rather than reject Kant's project outright (or, like Jacobi, suggest that the only remedy is a more robust idealism) Strawson argues that, despite providing no remedies for its obvious epistemological and ontological inconsistencies, when transcendental idealism is jettisoned from the *Critique* many of Kant's insights can be usefully reconstructed and defended. The central Kantian insight that Strawson defends in *The Bounds of Sense* is what he calls Kant's 'principle of significance', which he formulates as follows: "There can be no legitimate or even meaningful employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application" (ibid., p.3). Strawson takes this to be both central to Kant's thought and an especially useful insight because it underpins "the framework of a truly empiricist philosophy, freed, on the one hand, from the delusions of transcendent metaphysics, on the other, from the classical empiricist obsession with the private contents of consciousness" (ibid., p.5).

³⁴ There are, of course, some interpreters who are committed to the view that Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves is metaphysical (things in themselves just are the real entities or real properties of entities) but who, unlike Jacobi, (who suggests a more robust idealism) and unlike Strawson (who suggests that we ought to jettison the idealist-cum-phenomenalist components of Kant's thought) adopt other strategies to explain the compatibility of Kant's determinations of things in themselves with the thesis that things in themselves are unknowable. See, for example, the approach developed by Rae Langton (1998).

³⁵ For a discussion of Fichte's anticipation of the epistemological reading of Kant's idealism see Allan Woods (2016, p.38). Allison, Bird and Prauss' treatments of Kant's transcendental idealism are developed in: Allison, H. E. (2004). *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defence*; Bird, G. (2006). *The Revolutionary Kant: A Commentary on the Critique of Pure Reason*; and Prauss, G. (1977). *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an Sich*.

philosophical reflection on the conditions of their cognition”.³⁶ On this interpretation Kant’s distinction between appearances and things in themselves is one of logical entailment. Thus, as Michelle Grier puts it, Kant’s approach to “the representation of the thing in itself” can be “very generally characterized [as] methodologically entailed by the critical procedure of reflecting on objects in relation to our cognitive faculties”.³⁷ According to this reading, when (in transcendental reflection) we consider things as appearances we consider them in accordance with the categorial and intuitive frameworks of human experience. This means that when considered as they appear, objects are in space and time (as these are the forms of our intuition) and can be brought under the twelve categories or rules of the understanding. Crucially, in order for the notion of appearance to make sense (to avoid “a constant circle” as Kant puts it) it must be contrasted with the notion of something that is not appearance, but which we must assume underpins appearance.³⁸ Thus, the relationship between appearances and things in themselves is one of logical implication, so that, as Allison explains, “the expression *appearance* is parasitic upon, or at least correlative with, the expression *thing in itself*”.³⁹ Just as the notion of ‘up’ makes sense only in contrast to ‘not up’, and black makes sense only in contrast to ‘not black’, the notion of appearance makes sense only in contrast to the notion of non-appearance, which (on the epistemological reading) is what Kant means by things in themselves. More specifically, in contrast to objects considered as appearances (which are in space and time, and necessarily appear in accordance with the categories of the understanding) objects considered as they are in themselves are objects *considered as they are not appearances*, which is to say, as they are non-spatiotemporally and as they do not appear according to the categories. Allison puts it this way: “[i]n considering things as they appear, we are considering them in the way they are presented to discursive knowers with our form of sensibility. Conversely, to consider them as they are in themselves is to consider them apart from their epistemic relation to these forms or epistemic conditions”.⁴⁰

This procedure helps us make sense of Kant’s *prima facie* contradictory claims about things in themselves that Jacobi *et al.* identify. We have already seen why consideration of objects as they are in themselves (and thus as not appearances) is by definition the consideration of objects as non-spatiotemporal. I have also suggested why, *pace* Meillassoux, the consideration of objects as they are in themselves is not a contradiction: despite objects as they are in themselves being unknowable, the notion of such objects in transcendental reflection is logically entailed by the notion of objects as appearances. Indeed, it is worth noting that without this entailment it is the notion of appearances that would be contradictory. For without the notion of an object in itself as the logical corollary of the notion of an object as it appears we would be forced to conclude that there are only appearances. But, as Kant famously puts it in the introduction to the *Critique*, “an appearance without anything that appears” is an “absurd proposition”.⁴¹ In fact, the conclusion that there are only appearances is tantamount to the view that appearances *are* things in themselves; which is effectively Berkeleyan phenomenalism.

The same procedure of logical entailment can be used to unpack the meaning of the claims that objects considered as they are in themselves exist and are the grounds or cause of appearances. To avoid both the conclusion that appearances are all that there is (and in so doing destroying the notion of appearance in the first place) and being forced to embrace Berkeleyan idealism or phenomenalism, we must reason that there is something unknown and unknowable that, nonetheless, underpins the appearance of objects, and which is itself something other than an appearance. In this way, the claim that objects considered as

³⁶ Allison, H. E. (2012). ‘Transcendental Realism, Empirical Realism and Transcendental Idealism’. In H. E. Allison, *Essays on Kant* (pp. 67–83). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.67. According to Prauss (1977, p.20) the phrase “thing in itself” is an abbreviation of “thing considered in itself” (*Ding an sich selbst betrachtet*).

³⁷ Grier, M. (2001). *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.89.

³⁸ Here is the full passage from the *Critique*: “if there is not to be a constant circle the word ‘appearance’ must already indicate 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” (1998, A252, p.348).

³⁹ Allison (2004), p. 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.16–17.

⁴¹ Kant (1998), Bxxvii, p.115

they are in themselves exist is another way of stating that the notion of appearances entails the notion of things in themselves as that which underpin or ground appearances. We should, nonetheless, note a concern here: in claiming that objects as they are in themselves exist, Kant seems to apply the categories of the understanding beyond their legitimate field of application, i.e., the field of objects considered as appearances. The same worry arises when explaining the meaning of the claim that objects considered as they are in themselves can be taken as the ground or cause of objects considered as they appear. However, Allison's treatment of the so-called 'problem of noumenal affection' (i.e., the question of how unknown and non-spatiotemporal things in themselves could cause or ground appearances) offers a persuasive response to these concerns.⁴² In reply to the problem of noumenal affection he first addresses and then dismisses one approach that might seem to follow from an epistemological reading of Kant's idealism. On this approach, Kant should have avoided the claim that things in themselves ground or cause appearances (just as he should have avoided the claim that things in themselves exist and are non-spatiotemporal). Instead, Kant should have concluded that the object that affects us and produces sensation can be only an empirical object, that is, an object considered as an appearance. Thus, we are affected by objects as they appear; as phenomena governed by space, time, and as falling under the categories. In this way, the problem of affection avoids the conclusion that something non-empirical gives rise to or causes sensation. But Allison himself notes that however compelling this reply is, it is unsatisfactory because it relies on "assigning to an object, considered apart from its relation to human sensibility precisely those features that, according to the theory, it only possesses in virtue of this relation".⁴³ As a consequence, he argues, the thought of the object in question (as the ground or cause of appearances) is by definition the thought of something non-sensible; it is the thought of a thing as it is in itself. This might seem to suggest that Kant's account does indeed tell us something about the matter or the content of things as they are in themselves; to which Allison replies that the requirement to hold the view that what causes or is the ground of appearances cannot be itself an appearance (and must, therefore, be non-empirical or super-sensible) does not commit Kant to any claims about the matter or content of things as they are in themselves. Rather, the conclusion that to think of an object as the ground of appearances is to think of an object as it is in itself (and not as itself an appearance) is merely an *analytic* claim based on the concept of an object conceived within transcendental reflection, which is to say, from two logically correlative ways of thinking about objects. Accordingly, to conceive of an object as the ground of appearance is to conceive of it as it is in itself, just as to conceive of an object as appearance is to conceive of it as not its own ground. In other words, the notion of the ground or cause of an object as an appearance indexes that object considered apart from (but as a logical correlate of) our forms of sensibility. This is what it means to consider an object as it is in itself. Taken as a whole, as Allison puts it, Kant's claims about things in themselves do not and are not supposed to "provide a [metaphysical] story about *how* the mind is affected by a non-sensible entity".⁴⁴ Rather, the determinations that Kant ascribes to objects considered as they are in themselves "merely stipulate how the affecting object must be conceived of in the transcendental account of affection required for the explication of Kant's theory of sensibility".⁴⁵

Allison acknowledges that Kant uses the language of the categories of the understanding when referring to objects considered as they are in themselves (specifically causation and existence) and he claims that this makes sense because the categories are concepts or rules that apply to the consideration of objects in general. This does not mean that Kant is *applying* the categories to objects that lie beyond the empirical sphere of appearances. Instead, according to Allison, whether we are dealing with the consideration of objects in general or the consideration of objects in transcendental reflection (which is to say as either appearances or as things in themselves) the function of the categories is purely logical, carrying with it no assumptions about the objects that may or may not lie in an empirically inaccessible realm. To highlight the point, Allison notes that although objects considered as they are in themselves and as the cause of appearances cannot be represented in space and time, this does not prevent such objects or causes *being* in

⁴² Allison (2004), pp.64–73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.73.

space or time.⁴⁶ His point is that, for Kant, establishing that things in themselves are in space and time (which may or may not be true) is beyond our possible knowledge even if we can conclude that in transcendental reflection the consideration of objects as they are in themselves is by definition the consideration of objects as non-spatiotemporal.

If Allison's epistemological or methodological interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction holds water, then it certainly seems to address both Jacobi's and Meillassoux's concerns. Jacobi's complaint that "without that presupposition [of the thing in itself] I could not enter into [Kant's] system, but with it I could not stay within it" could have been written by Meillassoux. On Allison's account one can consistently remain within Kant's system so long as one works with the method of transcendental reflection and the correlative notions of appearances and things in themselves properly, which is to say, non-metaphysically.

The Critique of Transcendental Realism and Kant's Revolution

The other crucial component of Allison's epistemological interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction is the critique of transcendental realism that, he says, underpins Kant's defence of transcendental idealism. Put bluntly, the distinction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism is that the latter "systematically identifies appearances with things in themselves".⁴⁷ Rather than providing a summary of Kant's account of why philosophies as diverse and antithetical as "rationalism... empiricism, metaphysical realism, as ordinarily understood, and Berkeleyan idealism... may be said in one way or another to conflate appearances with things in themselves" I shall focus on what Allison takes to be the common feature of these philosophical positions and their fundamental contrast with Kant's transcendental idealism.⁴⁸ According to Allison, what these philosophies share is a "meta-epistemological...commitment (either tacit or overt) to what is sometimes described as the 'theocentric paradigm' or model of knowledge".⁴⁹ He explains that "the defining feature of transcendental realism is its underlying assumption that human knowledge is to be measured and evaluated in terms of its conformity (or lack thereof) to the norm of a putatively perfect divine knowledge".⁵⁰ Thus, although empiricists marshalled sceptical arguments to criticise rationalists' claims to have attained *a priori* metaphysical knowledge, they remain, like the rationalists, "committed to the normative status of...the theocentric paradigm".⁵¹ By contrast, Kant's transcendental idealism shifts the grounds of legitimate knowledge of objects from the theocentric, or God's eye, view to the epistemic conditions that underpin human cognition and experience. It is these conditions that determine what for us could count as an object of knowledge and what objective knowledge of these objects thus consists in. Kant's argument is that *a priori* knowledge of objects, but only of objects considered as appearances, is possible. In contrast, according to Allison, the metaphysical interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction assumes a transcendental realist approach to the *Critique*. On the transcendental realist approach, Kant fails because he should, but cannot, provide an ultimate and metaphysical account of things in themselves that explains precisely what objects are like outside of appearances and exactly how these objects affect, cause, or ground appearances. In other words, on the transcendental realist view Kant fails because he owes us a God's eye account of objects. Such an approach, however, is entirely to misunderstand his Copernican revolution in philosophy. Kant's revolution is precisely an attempt to demonstrate that it is the conditions of human cognition that underpin possible human knowledge of objects rather than the opposite, traditional, view that knowledge consist in cognition conforming to objects as they are in themselves. Indeed, Kant's revolution consists in showing that such knowledge is impossible for finite beings. For him, the possibility

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.70.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.25.

⁴⁸ Allison, H. (2006). 'Kant's Transcendental Idealism'. In G. Bird, *A Companion to Kant* (pp. 111–124). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. p.113. Also see Allison (2004, pp.23–34) for a discussion of the varieties of transcendental realist philosophies against which Kant positions transcendental idealism.

⁴⁹ Allison (2006), pp.113–114.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of knowledge and experience of the world is predicated on epistemic and intuitive frameworks. In contrast, knowledge of the world from a God's eye perspective would be knowledge of objects as they do *not* appear, i.e., as they are *not according to any intuitive framework*. In the absence of ordered sensory material there is no object, no world, to which the categories of the understanding can be applied to yield knowledge. Kant's point is that in the absence of an epistemic framework that combines ordered sensations with the categories of the understanding, knowledge is all but a contradiction in terms.⁵²

Since my argument relies on Allison's interpretation of Kant, I need to address a straightforward concern that has been raised against it. Both Paul Guyer and Rae Langton have argued that the entailment argument (wherein the consideration of objects as things in themselves is methodologically entailed by the consideration of objects as appearances) transforms the notion of things in themselves into a trivial and anodyne idea which amounts to the claim that we cannot know things in themselves because, by definition, knowing things in themselves means knowing things apart from the conditions that make knowledge possible.⁵³ Put this way, Allison's take on Kant's argument for the unknowability of things in themselves is at least suggestive of the Gem. Is Allison's Kant not saying that knowledge of the world requires certain conditions and that, therefore, we cannot know things in themselves? The short answer is that this is Allison's argument. Crucially, however, and as we have seen, when the notion of things in themselves is taken to apply to objects considered apart from the conditions of their appearance (i.e., as they are not according to some intuitive framework) then as a matter of definition things in themselves are unknowable—even if in transcendental reflection we can apply the categories of the understanding to the notion of things considered as they are in themselves. Unlike the Gem, Kant's conclusion that we cannot know things in themselves is not a non-tautological conclusion based on the tautology that knowledge requires certain conditions. Rather, Kant's conclusion (that we cannot know things as they are in themselves) is *itself tautological*, following directly from the thesis that to consider things as they are in themselves *means* to consider them as abstracted from, or apart from, the conditions of our knowledge of the world.

However, although we can be satisfied that Allison's interpretation of the transcendental distinction avoids the Gem's fallacious reasoning, this seems only to reinforce Guyer's and Langton's complaint that in Allison's hands, Kant's conclusions about things in themselves are trivial and anodyne; that “[in his reading of Kant, Allison] ... endeavored to resolve a substantive metaphysical dispute by a semantic sleight of hand, [by] making the non-spatiotemporality of things as they are in themselves virtually into a matter of definition”.⁵⁴ But the complaint is not reinforced.

Allison's reply both demonstrates that the “objection...rests on a misunderstanding of the terms” and indicates that when viewed according to the metaphysical interpretation, Kant's conclusion that things in themselves are unknowable *does* follow the Gem's fallacious reasoning.⁵⁵ Allison argues that the conclusion that things in themselves are unknowable is not merely the result of the definition of things considered as they are in themselves. Rather, the definition of things considered as they are in themselves *follows* from Kant's Copernican revolution. As we have seen, Kant's Copernican revolution is based on the view that the theocentric model of knowledge and the transcendental realist approach to its attainment (which tacitly

52 I use the qualification ‘all but’ here because, according to the reading of Kant I have developed, God's knowledge indexes a way of knowing through pure intellectual intuition, as Kant states. In contrast to the knowledge of finite rational beings (for whom knowledge of the world requires the synthesis of given sensations — pre-formed by our intuition — and the categories of the understanding) the way in which an infinite rational being might know (or even think) is a mystery. Whereas a discursive intellect requires sensation, i.e., information provided from an external world, a purely intellectual intuition would create content directly from its mind. It is, therefore, not at all clear that there would be any separation between God (an infinite being) and the universe God creates. As such, there would be no separation between knower and known. See McCormick, M. (2000)

53 Guyer, P. (1987). *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.333; Langton, R. (1998). *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*. Oxford: Clarendon, pp.8–12.

54 Allison (2012), p.75.

55 Ibid. We should note here that Allison's reply to Langton and Guyer is framed through a reply to the so-called ‘neglected alternative’ objection wherein Kant neglected the possibility that space and time were both forms of human sensibility and pertained to things as they are in themselves. Allison's reply (that Langton and Guyer assume a transcendental realist approach to Kant's claims about things in themselves) is a response to their complaint that the epistemological reading can neither *rule out* the possibility that things in themselves are spatiotemporal nor *rule in* the possibility that they are not.

underpins both dogmatic metaphysics and empiricist scepticism) is incoherent because, in the absence of an intuitive framework through which sensory material appears, there can be no empirical object to which the categories of the understanding can be applied; and, therefore, there can be no knowledge of the world and its furniture. For Allison, Kant's conclusion that things in themselves are (by definition) unknowable is far from trivial: for that conclusion follows from his argument that the particular spatiotemporal form of sensibility that structures the way in which the human mind receives sensory material (and which is required for that material to be ordered and orderable) can be (non-dogmatically) accounted for only if it is regarded as "a contribution of the cognitive subject".⁵⁶ Thus, Allison's reply to the complaint that he tries to 'resolve a substantive metaphysical dispute by a sleight of hand' is that the complaint itself assumes "a transcendently realist analysis of the situation", "an ontological thesis about the true nature of *an sich* reality".⁵⁷ His point is that if Kant's notion of things in themselves is taken metaphysically — if it is taken to index that which is really real (in opposition to that which is merely apparent) — then we have misunderstood the way in which the transcendental distinction (according to which the notion of things in themselves is the logical correlate of the notion of appearances) follows from the central insight that underpins Kant's Copernican revolution: that "the way in which sensibility presents its data to the understanding for its conceptualisation already reflects a particular manner of receiving...which is determined by the nature of human sensibility rather than by the affecting object".⁵⁸ What is more, when the transcendental distinction is construed metaphysically, so that the notion of things in themselves is understood to index real reality (whatever that is), then the charge that Kant falls for the Gem fallacy seems to hold. For the claim that we cannot know what is really real does not at all follow from the claim that the conditions of our knowing (and experiencing) the world are underpinned or framed by specific *a priori* forms of intuition.⁵⁹

Conclusion

I am now in a position to be able to spell out the conclusions that can be drawn. On the whole, these conclusions emerge from the view that Allison's epistemological interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism is sound, not least because that view avoids the problems of the traditional metaphysical interpretation. We have seen that Allison's interpretation enables us to make sense of Kant's claims that unknowable things in themselves exist, and that they are non-spatiotemporal and the ground of appearances. In each case these attributes of objects considered as things in themselves is established by logical entailment, from their logical contrast with objects considered as appearances. In addition to giving a robust reply to the traditional complaint (exemplified by Jacobi, Musgrave, and Strawson) that Kant contradicts himself, this reading puts into question Meillassoux's defence of strong correlationism. For if Kant has not contradicted himself then it cannot be said that the strong correlationist position is superior to Kant's weak correlationism *because* it is more consistent. Of course, Meillassoux's critique of Kant's correlationism is predicated on the view that his contradictory claims about things in themselves are the result of failing to adhere to the correlationist circle argument. Despite their considerably different approaches, Jacobi, Musgrave, and Meillassoux all argue that once the correlationist circle argument is embraced, the demands of greater consistency lead us towards absolute idealism and a rejection of the notion of things in themselves.⁶⁰ But the correlationist circle argument is a version of the Gem. Just as it does not follow that we cannot think things as they are independently of us (or in themselves) because we cannot but think in thought, so it does not follow that we cannot know things as they are independently of us (or in themselves) because there are conditions of knowing. I have argued that the metaphysical interpretation

⁵⁶ Allison (2004), p.14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁵⁹ Indeed, we would expect a scientific realist (like Stove or Musgrave) to claim that even if we do not know the details of the ultimate nature of reality, we are well equipped to draw inferences and deploy scientific techniques that enable us to be reasonably confident that we have some knowledge of what is real, as opposed to what is merely apparent.

⁶⁰ Meillassoux's whole argument consists in avoiding this slide into absolute idealism encouraged by the correlationist circle.

of Kant's transcendental distinction does indeed engage in the fallacious reasoning characteristic of the Gem because even if we add the qualification that the conditions of our knowing (and experiencing) the world are underpinned or framed by specific *a priori* forms of intuition then the claim that we can know things only as they appear (and not as they really are) does not follow. In contrast, I have argued, when we employ Allison's entailment argument and take the notion of things in themselves to refer to the consideration of objects in abstraction from (or as they are not according to) the transcendental framework of appearances (which is to say, as they are non-spatiotemporal and, hence, as they do not appear according to the categories of the understanding) then, by definition, we can know nothing of objects as they are in themselves, even if in transcendental reflection we can make claims about objects *considered* as they are in themselves. Allison's epistemological interpretation of Kant's transcendental distinction is significantly bolstered (and responds to the charge of triviality) when Kant's Copernican revolution is understood as a response to the scepticism and dogmatism generated by assuming a theocentric model of knowledge and a transcendental realist approach to its attainment. For Allison, Kant's point is that, in contrast to an anthropocentric model of knowledge, the theocentric model of knowledge indexes knowledge of the world and its furniture as they are not conditioned by, or as they are not according to, an intuitive framework; and, thus, as they do not appear. As we have seen, although we can deploy the categories of the understanding in transcendental reflection to generate determinations about objects *considered* as they are in themselves (as a contrast to objects *considered* as appearances) the categories of the understanding can yield genuine knowledge of objects only as they appear. Hence, we can have no genuine knowledge of objects as they are in themselves. Indeed, even though Kant retains the notion of things in themselves (not least to avoid a slide in to Berkeleyan idealism) for all that we know things in themselves could be any way or no way at all.

The lesson of Kant's revolutionary reply to the challenge of dogmatism and scepticism is that any and all knowledge of the world that we (or any other discursive intellect) could obtain is knowledge of appearances because knowledge (for such beings) requires an epistemic framework comprising the application of rules to something given (e.g., a sensory manifold). In broad terms, knowledge of appearances consists in the application of a formal, rule-governed framework (e.g., the categories of the understanding) to some thing (or class of things) pre-ordered by some basic form or forms of intuition and taken or sensed by some being as an object or phenomenon.⁶¹ In contrast, to know things as they are in themselves (as God might) would be to know things as they are not according to any such intuitive-epistemic framework. So defined, knowledge of things as they are in themselves has the air of a contradiction in terms. For although God, an infinite rational being, might know things in themselves it is not clear what knowledge so construed could be.⁶² Meillassoux is right that Kant's correlationist philosophy puts paid to our possible knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Lamentable as this may be, I have tried to demonstrate that it is far from catastrophic.

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⁶¹ Thus, we could speculate that there may be rational beings who do not experience time because their forms of intuition are in five dimensions. What appears to these beings through their form or forms of intuition and sensory faculties combined with the application of a set of rules or categories of the understanding will provide them with the basic framework by which they will produce knowledge of the universe. There is an interesting question about the extent to which these rules could be different from those of Kant's categories. On this issue see Quarfood, M. (2004), pp.28–29.

⁶² See note 52. The basic issue is that although we can conceive of what it means for Ann to know something about the universe and its furniture we cannot conceive of what it might mean for God to know. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer at *Perspectives* for useful feedback, not least of which was the advice that I clarify my account of God's knowledge in the epistemological framework reading of Kant's transcendental distinction. Thanks also to Bob Brecher and the editors at *Perspectives* (in particular David Markwell and Conor Morris) for helpful feedback on earlier drafts.

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