

Kant's Theoretical Reasons for Belief in Things in Themselves

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Abstract: I argue that Kant's commitment to the existence of things in themselves takes the form of a commitment short of knowledge that does not violate the limitations on knowledge which he lays down. I will argue that Kant's commitment fits his description of what he calls "doctrinal belief": acceptance of the existence of things in themselves which is subjectively sufficient but not objectively sufficient. I outline two ways in which we accept the existence of things in themselves which are subjectively sufficient. First, we must accept the existence of appearances, which requires us to accept the existence of things in themselves. Second, we must accept the existence of an unconditioned ground of appearances.

Kant's transcendental idealism is usually interpreted as a metaphysical or an epistemological doctrine.¹ The main disadvantage of the metaphysical interpretation is that it attributes to Kant the view that things in themselves exist, while his transcendental idealism

¹ The metaphysical/epistemological distinction cuts across the one-world/two-world distinction in the literature on Kant's transcendental idealism. For example, one can hold that (1) things in themselves are things delineated by non-sensible properties of the objects we are familiar with (metaphysical, one-world view) (Adickes, Erich: *Kant und das Ding an sich*. Berlin. 1924, 9, 16, 8, 20, 23; Adickes, Erich: *Kants Lehre von der doppelten Affektion unseres Ich*. Tübingen. 1929, 3; Langton, Rae: *Kantian Humility*. New York. 1998, 12f; Allais, Lucy: "Kant's One World: Interpreting 'Transcendental Idealism'". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12. 2004, 655-684), (2) things in themselves are numerically distinct from everyday objects (metaphysical, two-world view) (Strawson, Peter: *Bounds of Sense*. London. 1966, 236-239; Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind*. Bloomington. 1983, 89, 91, 103, 109, 195, note 11; Aquila, Richard: "Things in Themselves and Appearances". *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61. 1979, 296f; Guyer, Paul: *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. Cambridge. 1987, 333, 335; Van Cleve, James: *Problems from Kant*. New York. 1999, 150), or (3) things in themselves are a way of considering things in general as abstracted from their sensible qualities (epistemological, one-world) (Prauss, Gerold: *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*. Bonn. 1974, 20, 27, 126; Pogge, Thomas: "Erscheinungen und Dinge an Sich". *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 45. 1991, 505f; Allison, Henry: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, rev. ed. New Haven. 2004, 16f).

seems to rule out knowledge of things beyond the bounds of possible experience.² I will argue that although Kant holds that we *believe* that things in themselves exist for theoretical reasons, he does not hold that one can *know* that they exist. That is, we do not have objectively sufficient reasons for believing that they exist, though we do have subjectively sufficient reasons for believing that they exist. If I am right, then the metaphysical reading of Kant's transcendental idealism is not vulnerable to the objection of incoherence, and Kant's claims about things in themselves are clarified.³

The claim that Kant merely assumes or presupposes the existence of things in themselves has been made by Manfred Baum, and the claim that Kant is committed to the existence of things in themselves has been made by H. J. Paton and Karl Ameriks.⁴ However, in these cases little if any textual evidence is given to support these claims. In the case of Baum and Paton, no explanation as to *why* Kant has the indicated epistemic attitude towards things in themselves is given. In Ameriks's case, he proposes that Kant's commitment comes from his commitment to common sense.⁵ I propose another solution. Following a suggestion from Andrew Chignell, I will argue that Kant's epistemic attitude toward things in themselves is what Kant calls "doctrinal belief."⁶ I provide textual evidence to support this view.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will outline the concept of things in themselves and the reasons why we cannot cognize things in themselves. Next, I will discuss passages in which Kant says that our sensibility is affected by the transcendental object, and I will raise the question as to why Kant says that and related things about the non-sensible cause of our

² Jacobi, F. H.: *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus*. Breslau. 1787, 209-230.

³ Cf. Chignell, Andrew: "Belief in Kant". *Philosophical Review* 116. 2007, 351.

⁴ Baum, Manfred: "The B-Deduction and the Refutation of Idealism". *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25, supplement. 1987, 93. Cf. Baum, Manfred: *Deduktion und Beweis in Kants Transzendentalphilosophie*. Königstein/Ts. 1986, 43. Paton H. J.: *Kant's Metaphysic of Experience*. New York. 1970, 2:453. Paton says this with regard to the Phenomena and Noumena section, and provides textual support for this view from that section only. Ameriks, Karl: "A Common-Sense Kant?" in *Kant and the Historical Turn*. New York. 2006, 127. See also *Ibid.*, 128. See also Ameriks, Karl: *Interpreting Kant's Critiques*. New York. 2003, 7.

⁵ Ameriks, Karl: "A Common-Sense Kant?" in *Kant and the Historical Turn*. New York. 2006, 119, note 57, 127-131.

⁶ Chignell, Andrew: "Belief in Kant". *Philosophical Review* 116. 2007, 349-351, 353. Chignell prefers to use the term "theoretical belief" instead of "doctrinal belief" for Kant's *doktrinaler Glaube* in order to avoid the misunderstanding that doctrinal belief has only to do with religion. *Ibid.*, 345.

representations. Third, I will discuss the passages in which Kant appears to argue that since there are appearances, there must be things in themselves. Fourth, I will explain Kant's concept of doctrinal belief. Fifth, I will discuss passages in which Kant says that if we accept that there are appearances, we must accept that there are things in themselves. Sixth, I will discuss Kant's argument as to why we must accept that there is an unconditioned basis of appearances.

I will limit my discussion in the following ways to keep it within the scope of a single paper. First, I will consider only theoretical as opposed to practical arguments for the existence of things in themselves. Second, I will focus on textual evidence in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena*. Third, I will refer mostly to commentators who subscribe to the metaphysical interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism.

I. The Concept of Things in Themselves

In this section, I will explicate Kant's concept of things in themselves.⁷ By 'thing in itself' Kant means an object apart from how it relates to our cognitive faculties.⁸ Kant sometimes says that we can regard objects either as they appear or as they are in themselves.⁹ While some commentators interpret these passages as the central and proper way of understanding what Kant means by things in themselves, there are too many references to things in themselves that cannot be read in this way.¹⁰ I take Kant to be referring sometimes to things

⁷ Some commentators argue that the limits that Kant's transcendental idealism place on our knowledge do not even permit us to use the concept 'thing in itself.' See, for example, Bennett, Jonathan: *Kant's Dialectic*. Cambridge. 1974, 52, Gram, Moltke: "How to Dispense with Things in Themselves (I)": *Ratio* 18. 1976, 1-16, Walsh, W. H.: *Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics*. Edinburgh. 1997, 79f. Ameriks, Karl. "Recent Work on Kant's Theoretical Philosophy" in Ameriks, Karl: *Interpreting Kant's Critiques*. New York. 2003, 66-97 provides a helpful overview and criticism of these views. I agree with Ameriks that our use of the concept 'thing in itself' is not contrary to the limits that Kant's transcendental idealism places on our knowledge.

⁸ KrV, AA 03: 14.04-14, Bxx.

⁹ KrV, AA 03: 17.02-05, Bxxvi.

¹⁰ The epistemological interpretation has been championed in the following works: Prauss, Gerold: *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*. Bonn. 1974, 20-35; Allison, Henry: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* rev. ed. New Haven. 2004, 3-17. The objection that too many other passages point to a metaphysical interpretation can be found in Aquila, Richard: "Things in Themselves and Appearances: Intentionality and Reality in Kant". *Archiv für*

considered as they are in themselves and sometimes as things in themselves *simpliciter*.¹¹ Besides the term ‘thing in itself,’ Kant also uses the terms ‘transcendental object’ and ‘noumenon’ which require elucidation here.

Kant uses the term ‘transcendental object’ to refer to “the merely intelligible cause of appearances in general” and the “non-sensible cause of [our] representations”.¹² In some passages, Kant says that the transcendental object is a thing in itself.¹³ The merely intelligible cause of appearances in general would have to be a thing in itself because it does not relate to our cognitive faculties. However, we cannot say that that this is the only kind of object that does not relate to our cognitive faculties. That is to say, while the transcendental object must be a thing in itself, there may be other things in themselves. Therefore, the two concepts are not equivalent.

Kant distinguishes between “beings of the understanding [*Verstandeswesen*] (noumena)” and “beings of the senses [*Sinnenwesen*] (phenomena)”.¹⁴ He speaks of noumena as being equivalent to things in themselves.¹⁵ Kant distinguishes between two different senses of ‘noumenon’ as follows. The noumenon in the positive sense is an object of a non-sensible

Geschichte der Philosophie 61. 1979, 296f; Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind*. Bloomington. 1983, 91, 195, note 11.

¹¹ See the following for an argument that Kant uses the term ‘thing in itself’ both metaphysically and epistemologically. Meerbote, Ralf: “The Unknowability of Things in Themselves” in Beck, Lewis White, ed.: *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge*. Dordrecht. 1974, 166-174.

¹² KrV, AA 03: 340.32-37, 341.01-03, A494/B522. I have translated quoted passages myself, and occasionally I have been unable to improve on their rendering of a particular word, phrase, or clause from the translations of Norman Kemp Smith (Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. London. 1958) or Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge, 1998). I will provide references both to the Akademie edition and to the first and second editions of the *Critique*, where applicable.

¹³ KrV, AA 03: 231.06-07, KrV, AA 04: 230.18-20, A288/B344, A366.

¹⁴ KrV, AA 03: 209.10-11, 16-17, B306.

¹⁵ KrV, AA 03: 211:18-27, B310; KrV, AA 03: 212.21-24, B312; KrV, AA 03: 213.13-15, B315; Prol, AA 04: 360.19-22. In the first edition, Kant denies that the transcendental object is a noumenon (KrV, AA 04: 165.08-13, A253), while also holding that the transcendental object is a thing in itself (KrV, AA 03: 231.03-10, A288/B344; KrV, AA 04: 230.18-20, A366). Perhaps Kant believed at the time he wrote the first edition that the transcendental object was a noumenon in the negative sense. Kant says that we are permitted to call the transcendental object ‘noumenon’ (KrV, AA 03: 231.03.15, A288/B345).

intuition; the noumenon in the negative sense is not an object of our sensible intuition.¹⁶ Kant describes the noumenon in the positive sense as follows:

If one assumes [*nimmt man...an*] the existence of an object of a non-sensible intuition as given, then one can certainly represent it through the predicates that lie in the presupposition that nothing applies to it that belongs to sensible intuition: that is, it is not extended, or in space, its persistence is not in time, that it undergoes no alteration (a consequence of determinations in time), etc.¹⁷

Kant is talking only of the predicates that follow from the concept of an object of non-sensible intuition. Notice that they are all negative: non-spatial, non-temporal, and incapable of alteration. In place of the “etc.,” Kant could have very well listed all negative predicates that follow from being non-spatial, non-temporal, and incapable of alteration.

If anything were to correspond to the concept ‘thing in itself’ or ‘noumenon’, we could not cognize it. Cognition (*Erkenntnis*), according to Kant, requires intuition and concepts.¹⁸ If one were to cognize things in themselves, one would need an intuition of things in themselves. But an intuition of a thing in itself, according to Kant, would require intellectual intuition, while humans have only sensible intuition.¹⁹ Our intuition, pure or empirical, necessarily takes the form of space and time, but things in themselves can be neither spatial nor temporal.²⁰ Therefore, sensible intuition of things in themselves is impossible. Kant says the following regarding the representation of an object of non-sensible intuition as non-spatial and non-temporal:

This alone however is no actual cognition when I merely demonstrate how the intuition of the object is not, without being able to say what is contained in it. Therefore I have not

¹⁶ KrV, AA 03: 209.32-37, 210.01-02, B307.

¹⁷ KrV, AA 03: 118.19-25, B149.

¹⁸ KrV, AA 03: 74.15-16, A50/B74.

¹⁹ KrV, AA 03: 70.11-31, B68.

²⁰ KrV, AA 03: 55.02-08, A26/B42; KrV, AA 03: 57.5-14, A30/B45. I will not consider here whether or not Kant’s denial that things in themselves can be spatial or temporal is dogmatic. See Guyer, Paul: *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. New York. 1987, 333-335.

at all represented the possibility of an object to my pure concept of the understanding, because I cannot give any intuition that corresponds to it, rather, I can only say that our intuition is not valid for it.²¹

Thus, the concept of a thing in itself necessarily rules out our cognition of a thing in itself.²²

Kant says a concept is logically possible if it does not contradict itself, though he warns against confusing the logical possibility of a concept with what he calls the “real” (i.e., metaphysical) possibility of the thing the concept is of. Real possibility, according to Kant, has to do with the principles of possible experience, while logical possibility has to do only with the principle of non-contradiction.²³

Kant argues that we cannot rule out the existence of things in themselves.²⁴ He gives two reasons for this. First, he says that our form of intuition and our form of understanding do not permit us to cognize them does not mean that they do not exist. We cannot deny that they exist because nothing in their concept rules this out. We also cannot claim that they are objects for our understanding because no category is applicable to them.²⁵ Second, we do not have reason to believe that our form of intuition is the only possible one. It would be absurd to not allow for the possibility of things in themselves because one held our kind of intuition to be the only possible kind.²⁶ Therefore, besides the objects we experience, there is “place for more and other objects remaining”.²⁷

²¹ KrV, AA 03: 118.25-30, B149.

²² Marcus Willaschek thinks this point is sufficient to establish that Kant held that we can never decide if there are noumena or not. Willaschek, Marcus: “Phaenomena/Noumena und die Amphibolie der Reflexionsbegriffe” in Mohr, Georg and Willaschek, Marcus, eds.: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Berlin. 1998, 336.

²³ KrV, AA 03: 399.33, note, A596/B624.

²⁴ For reasons given in this paragraph, I rule out ascribing fictionalism about things in themselves to Kant. According to fictionalists, Kant holds that *there are no things in themselves*. Vaihinger, Hans: *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*. Aalen, 1986, 613-733; Schaper, Eva: “The Kantian Thing-in-Itself as a Philosophical Fiction.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (64). 1966, 233-243; Rescher, Nicolas. *Kant and the Reach of Reason*. Cambridge. 2000, 20.

²⁵ KrV, AA 03: 231.03-10, A288/B344.

²⁶ Prol, AA 04: 350.34-35, 351.01-05.

²⁷ KrV, AA 03: 230.35-36, A288/B344.

Kant says that we have no determined concept of things in themselves.²⁸ What does he mean by this? According to Kant, a concept relates to an object via a characteristic (*Merkmal*) that may be common to multiple objects.²⁹ According to Kant, determination involves adding characteristics to a concept, and abstraction involves removing them from a concept. No concept can be fully determined, since only an individual can be fully determined. Concepts alone cannot give us cognition of an individual, since intuition is required for cognition.³⁰ Concepts can be more or less determined, though Kant sometimes speaks of them simply as being determined or undetermined.³¹

However one understands it, the concept ‘thing in itself’ is not sufficiently determined to be the concept of an object. According to Kant, this is because the concept ‘noumenon’ is only the problematic concept of something that would be an object for a being with another form of intuition and another kind of understanding.³² By ‘problematic,’ Kant means a concept that contains no contradiction and which serves to denote which concepts belong to other forms of cognition.³³ The question of whether there are things not bound by our sensibility cannot be answered: our sensible intuition does not extend to all things without qualification. We lack a determined concept of these other things.³⁴

II. Our sensibility is affected by the transcendental object

Given that we cannot cognize things in themselves, it seems odd that Kant so frequently makes claims about things in themselves that go beyond discussing their concept or the possibility of their existence. In this section, I will discuss Kant’s claims that our sensibility is affected by the transcendental object.

²⁸ Prol, AA 04: 351.27-28.

²⁹ KrV, AA 03: 250.04-07, A320/B377.

³⁰ Log, AA 09: 99.13-16. Cf. Prol, AA 04: 332.12-19.

³¹ E.g. In the *Groundwork*, Kant says that the concept ‘happiness’ is indeterminate (Prol, AA 04 :418.01-02), but the concept ‘morality’ is determinate (Prol, AA 04: 448.25).

³² KrV, AA 03: 230.26-30, A287/B343-344.

³³ KrV, AA 03: 211.15-18, B310.

³⁴ KrV, AA 03: 230.33-34, A287-288/B344.

Kant says that “we can call the merely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object only so that we have something that corresponds to our sensibility as a kind of receptivity”.³⁵ Kant also describes the source of affection as a noumenon:

That same something that underlies outer appearances, which affects our mind so that it receives the representations of space, matter, figure, etc., this something, regarded as noumenon (or better, as transcendental object), could at the same time be the subject of thought, though we receive from it no intuition from representing, willing, etc. but only merely from space and its determinations. This something however is not extended, not impenetrable, not constituted, because all these predicates are relevant only to the sensibility and its intuitions.³⁶

These passages from the *Critique* unambiguously refer to the source of affection as something transcendent.

In the *Prolegomena*, Kant repeatedly and clearly says that things in themselves affect our sensibility:

These [empirical] objects are not for instance representations of things as they are in themselves and how they would be cognized by a pure understanding, rather, they are

³⁵ KrV, AA 03: 340.37, 341.01-03, A494/B522. Erich Adickes attempted to establish that, according to Kant, we are affected by things in themselves. Unfortunately, his account is only supported by a single citation to a passage in the *Critique* (B38) and passages in the *Opus Postumum*. As Adickes himself admits, the theory of double affection (empirical affection of the empirical self by empirical objects and transcendent affection of the ‘I’ in itself by means of things in themselves), is “handled in a stepmotherly way and was never made the subject of an independent, thorough presentation together with its conditions and consequences (excepting the *Opus Postumum*).” Adickes, Erich. *Kant und das Ding an sich*. Berlin. 1924, 37, cf. Adickes, Erich: *Kants Lehre von der doppelten Affektion unseres Ich*. Tübingen. 1929, 46, 54. Since it is not always clear whether Kant takes what he writes in the *Opus Postumum* as being new or not, Adickes fails to establish that Kant in his critical philosophy claims that there is transcendent affection.

³⁶ KrV, AA 04: 225.34-37, 226.01-06, A358. I take Kant’s reason for saying that the something that underlies our appearances is better regarded as the transcendental object instead of a noumenon to be the following. While the something that underlies our appearances is a noumenon (in the negative sense), there may be noumena besides the transcendental object.

sensible intuitions, that is appearances whose possibility rests on the relations of certain things unknown in themselves to something else, namely, our sensibility.³⁷

Our sensible representation is in no way a representation of things in themselves, but it is rather only the way that they appear to us.³⁸

[The object of sensation is possible] by means of the character of our sensibility, according to which it is touched in a way unique to it by objects which are unknown in themselves and which are completely different from those appearances.³⁹

Kant seems to take for granted without explanation or argument that things in themselves cause our sensible intuitions. We cannot dismiss these passages as only a semantic account of commonsense affairs which neither requires nor entails a distinction between things in themselves and appearances.⁴⁰ These passages just cited clearly refer to the existence of non-sensible things.⁴¹

Why does Kant make these claims? I do not see an argument for these claims in the *Critique* or the *Prolegomena*. I agree with Karl Ameriks when he says

The very first page of the *Critique* proper stresses that we are receptive beings and ‘objects are given to us’. I believe this can be read as indicating not an *inference* but a *commitment* to the presumably unquestionable truth, which Kant often repeats elsewhere,

³⁷ Prol, AA 04: 286.20-25.

³⁸ Prol, AA 04: 287.05-06.

³⁹ Prol, AA 04: 318.10-13. Erich Adickes takes 4:318 to say that things in themselves affect our sensibility. Adickes, Erich: *Kant und das Ding an sich*. Berlin. 1924, 32. Adickes’s position is that Kant took the existence of a plurality of things in themselves to be obvious. *Ibid.*, 4-19.

⁴⁰ Contra Gram, Moltke. *The Transcendental Turn*. Gainesville. 1984, 213.

⁴¹ Falkenstein, Lorne. *Kant’s Intuitionism*. Toronto. 1995, 314-316.

that, whatever happens to be the case ‘empirically’, it is also true that we are affected by distinct things in themselves.⁴²

Ameriks does not provide textual support for this view (besides his reference to the first page of the *Critique*). I aim to do this in sections 4-6 below, and also to explain *why* Kant is committed to the existence of things in themselves. Before I do that, however, I will discuss an alternative explanation.

III. Does Kant Argue That Appearances Entail Things in Themselves?

Kant appears in some passages to argue that appearances cannot exist in themselves, and, therefore, things in themselves exist. I will argue that this argument attributed to Kant is a bad one. While the fact that an argument is a poor one is not a good reason by itself to deny that Kant made it, the fact that an argument that one attributes to someone is poor ought to make one reconsider whether the author might have been correctly interpreted. I will offer an alternative interpretation of the passages frequently cited in favor of attributing this argument to Kant. I will argue that Kant in these passages is only making claims about the content of the concepts ‘appearance’ and ‘thing in itself.’ Since concepts alone cannot establish the existence of any object, this argument for the existence of things in themselves cannot succeed. In the remainder of the paper, I will offer an argument for why Kant believes that things in themselves exist.

According to Kant, appearances are the undetermined objects of empirical intuition.⁴³ Kant says “Appearances do not exist in themselves, but only relative to the same being in so far as it has senses”.⁴⁴ Again, Kant says that “If appearances are taken to be nothing more than they in fact are, namely not as things in themselves but rather as mere representations that cohere according to empirical laws, so they *must* themselves have grounds that are not appearances”.⁴⁵

⁴² Ameriks, Karl: “A Common-Sense Kant?” in *Kant and the Historical Turn*. New York. 2006, 127. Emphasis added. See also *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴³ KrV, AA 03: 50.04-05, A20/B34.

⁴⁴ KrV, AA 03: 127.03-04, B164.

⁴⁵ KrV, AA 03: 365.21-25, A536-537/B564-565, emphasis added. Richard Aquila takes this passage to be evidence that Kant held that things in themselves exist. Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind*. Bloomington. 1983, 111. Cf. Ameriks, Karl. *Kant’s Theory of Mind*. New York. 2000, 197.

Kant says in two passages that there is a contradiction in denying that something underlies appearances. The first reads, “We must at least be able to *think* if not *cognize*...objects also as things in themselves, because otherwise the absurd sentence would follow that there would be an appearance without something that appears”.⁴⁶ Another statement of Kant’s is more explicit: “If a constant circle is not to result, the word ‘appearance’ already indicates a relation to something, whose immediate representation is indeed sensible, but which is in itself also without this attribute of our sensibility... something, that is an object independent of our sensibility must exist”.⁴⁷ What is Kant saying?

These passages seem to set out an argument proving the existence of things in themselves.⁴⁸ Kant seems to be arguing as follows:

1. If there are appearances, there are things in themselves.
2. There are appearances.
3. Therefore, there are things in themselves.⁴⁹

(1) seems innocuous at first, but it is more controversial than it seems. I agree with Dustin McWherter’s objection to this argument:

Kant cannot claim that things in themselves exist on the dual basis of our acquaintance with appearances and an analysis of the meaning of the word ‘appearance’ without begging the question. For if things in themselves are indeed logically implied by the concept of appearance, then Kant must first explain why ‘appearance’ is the appropriate term for the sensory representations given in sensibility. To do that, he must already know

⁴⁶ KrV, AA 03: 17.03-07, Bxxvi-xxvii. Several commentators take this passage as evidence that Kant held that things in themselves exist (Langton, Rae: *Kantian Humility*. New York. 1998, 21f; Walker, Ralph. “Empirical Realism and Transcendental Anti-realism II”. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 57. 1983, 174f; Walker, Ralph: “Idealism: Kant und Berkeley” in Foster, John and Robinson, Howard, eds.: *Essays on Berkeley*. New York. 1985, 126f; Van Cleve, James: *Problems from Kant*. New York. 1999, 135.

⁴⁷ KrV, AA 04: 164.22-27, A251-252. Cf. Langton, Rae: *Kantian Humility*. New York. 1998, 21f; Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind*. Bloomington. 1983, 110; Adickes, Erich: *Kant und das Ding an sich*. Berlin. 1924, 4f.

⁴⁸ Langton, Rae: *Kantian Humility*. New York. 1998, 21f.

⁴⁹ Cf. Van Cleve, James: *Problems from Kant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 135.

that these sensory representations are the appearances of things in themselves, but that is precisely what was supposed to be concluded by these means.⁵⁰

While no one can deny that there are appearances and things in themselves in an everyday sense of the term, Kant is clearly appealing to his own unique sense of the terms ‘appearance’ and ‘thing in itself.’ Kant distinguishes the transcendental appearance/thing in itself distinction from the empirical appearance/thing in itself distinction. To use his example, a rainbow is an appearance of sunlight refracted by raindrops. The raindrops here are things in themselves in an empirical sense, and the rainbow is an appearance in an empirical sense.⁵¹ However, in the transcendental sense of the terms, the raindrops are not things in themselves but they are the appearance of some unknown thing in itself. As Manfred Kuehn has observed, Kant is making an analogy from the empirical distinction to the transcendental distinction.⁵² But Kuehn observes that this analogy “is deeply problematic, since the transcendental distinction is not analogous to the empirical distinction.”⁵³ Such an analogy establishes neither that there are appearances nor things in themselves in the transcendental sense. (1) cannot be taken for granted without begging the question of whether things in themselves in the transcendental sense exist.

However, I do not think Kant is making the argument outlined in (1-3). The argument is never explicitly stated. As Richard Aquila notes, “Kant does not quite say that a logical contradiction is in question here.”⁵⁴ Karl Ameriks suggests that Kant is not making an inference but is only “unpacking the meaning of the term appearance.”⁵⁵ Other passages give reason to believe Ameriks is right. Consider the following passage. Kant seems to come close to making the argument outlined in (1-3) in the conclusion of the Transcendental Aesthetic. There he says that “things that we intuit are in themselves not what we intuit them to be”.⁵⁶ His reason for

⁵⁰ McWherter, Dustin: “Transcendental Idealism and Ontological Agnosticism”. *Kantian Review* 17. 2012, 54f. Cf. Haag, Johannes. *Erfahrung und Gegenstand*. Frankfurt am Main. 2007, 83f.

⁵¹ KrV, AA 03: 67.17-31, A45/B63.

⁵² Kuehn, Manfred: “How, or Why, Do We Come to Think of a World of Things in Themselves”. *Kantian Review* 16. 2011, 225-227.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁴ Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind*. Bloomington. 1983, 111.

⁵⁵ Ameriks, Karl: “A Common-Sense Kant” in *Kant and the Historical Turn*. New York. 2006, 128, note 105.

Ameriks is referring to KrV, AA 03:17.05-07, Bxxvi.

⁵⁶ KrV, AA 03: 65.10-11, A42/B59.

thinking this is that “when we remove the subject or only the subjective nature of the senses, all relations of the object in space and time, even time and space themselves would disappear. As appearances they cannot exist in themselves but rather only in us”.⁵⁷ We might then expect Kant to conclude that appearances must have some non-spatiotemporal ground, and that this must be the thing in itself. However, instead, Kant only says “What kind of relationship appearances *may* have with the objects in themselves and abstracted from all of this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us”.⁵⁸ If Kant has in mind here the argument outlined in (1-3), he has not made it explicit.

A closer look at what Kant says in two passages that seem to contain an argument proving that things in themselves exist raises doubts as to whether Kant is making any such argument. For example, Kant says that even though the analytic parts of the *Critique* prove that we cognize only appearances and not things in themselves, he says “we must be able to at least *think* the same objects also as things in themselves even if we cannot *cognize* them. Because otherwise the absurd sentence would follow that there would be appearance without something that appears”.⁵⁹ Here it is clear that what we must be able to *think* things in themselves in order to escape absurdity. That is all. Thus, Kant is saying something more like this:

1'. If there are appearances, *we must at least be able to think of* things in themselves.

2. There are appearances.

Therefore,

3'. *We must at least be able to think of* things in themselves.

This argument is far weaker than the one found in (1-3).

Likewise, a closer reading of a similar passage shows that Kant is arguing for an even weaker conclusion.

Sensibility, and its field, namely that of appearances, is itself limited there by the understanding: that it does not extend to things in themselves, instead, it extends only to

⁵⁷ KrV, AA 03: 65.12-16, A42/B59.

⁵⁸ KrV, AA 03: 65.17-19, A42/B59, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ KrV, AA 03: 17.03-07, Bxxvi-xxvii.

the way things appear to us by means of our subjective character. That was the result of the entire Transcendental Aesthetic, and it follows also naturally from the *concept* of an appearance in general: that to it something would have to correspond [*ihr etwas entsprechen müsse*], which is in itself not appearance, because appearance cannot be anything in itself and regardless of our way of representing. Therefore, if a constant circle is not to result, the word ‘appearance’ already indicates [*anzeigt*] a relation to something whose immediate representation is indeed sensible, but which is in itself also without this attribute of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition grounds itself); something, that is an object independent of our sensibility, must exist.⁶⁰

Here Kant says that the concept ‘appearance’ would have to correspond to something that exists independently of our sensibility and that the word ‘appearance’ indicates a relation to something independent of our sensibility. Kant is *not* arguing as follows:

4. Appearances exist.
 5. The word ‘appearance’ indicates a relation to something non-sensible.
- Therefore,
6. Something independent of our sensibility exists.

One is easily misled into thinking this is Kant’s argument by the last clause of the quotation: “something, that is an object independent of our sensibility, must exist.” Yet Kant does not assert the existence of appearances there—note my emphasis on “concept” and “word” in the above quotation. If this is true, then Kant is only arguing from (5) to (6). That would be an invalid argument.

There is a way out of attributing such a bad argument to Kant. If we look at the next sentence in the *Critique*, we have reason to believe that Kant did not have (6) in mind. He says “From this arises now the concept of a ‘noumenon’”.⁶¹ A closer look at the text shows that (6) comes at the end of a long sentence in which the first occurrence of the word “something” marks an appositive phrase. The second occurrence of “something” picks up where the first occurrence left off: “the word ‘appearance’ already indicates [*anzeigt*] a relation to something...something,

⁶⁰ KrV, AA 04: 164.15-27, A251-252, emphasis added.

⁶¹ KrV, AA 04: 164.28, A252.

that is an object independent of our sensibility, must exist.” That is not a claim about existence, but a claim of what the concept ‘appearance’ indicates.

Thus, Kant’s argument is really as follows:

7. We possess the concept ‘appearance’

8. The concept ‘appearance’ indicates a relation to a thing in itself.

Therefore,

9. We can derive the concept ‘thing in itself.’

This argument is far less ambitious than (4-6), but it fits what Kant actually says.

I have argued in this section that it is preferable to interpret two passages⁶² not as an attempt to prove that things in themselves exist but rather that we must be able to think of things in themselves. For Kant, being able to think of something requires possessing its concept, since he says thinking is a matter of cognition through concepts.⁶³ Kant is merely explicating the concepts in question. Just as the concept ‘borrower’ requires the concept ‘lender,’ so we could say that the concept ‘appearance’ requires the concept ‘thing that appears’ or ‘thing in itself.’⁶⁴

IV. Doctrinal Belief in Things in Themselves

As we have seen, Kant repeatedly asserts the existence of things in themselves. I have argued in the previous section that Kant does not provide an argument for the existence of things in themselves. What exactly is Kant’s commitment to their existence, and what are his reasons for this commitment? Andrew Chignell suggests that the epistemic attitude Kant has towards the claim that “There are things in themselves that ground appearances” is an example of what Kant characterizes as “doctrinal belief”.⁶⁵ However, Chignell does not attempt to demonstrate this.

⁶² KrV, AA 03: 17.03-07, Bxxvi-xxvii and KrV, AA 04: 164.15-27, A251-252

⁶³ KrV, AA 03: 86.12, A69/B94.

⁶⁴ Aquila, Richard: “Things in Themselves and Appearances: Intentionality and Reality in Kant”. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61. 1979, 299, note 9.

⁶⁵ KrV, AA 03: 534.35-36, A825/B853. Chignell, Andrew. “Belief in Kant”. *Philosophical Review* 116. 2007, 349-351, 353.

Although, to my knowledge, Kant does not ever say that his belief in things in themselves is doctrinal belief, the reasons Kant gives for believing in things in themselves match his description of doctrinal belief. In this section, I will explain what Kant means by ‘doctrinal belief.’ In subsequent sections, I will argue that this is Kant’s epistemic attitude towards things in themselves.

In the third section of the Canon of Pure Reason, Kant gives an account of opinion, belief, and knowledge, which he refers to as species of acceptance (*Fürwahrhalten*).⁶⁶ These species of acceptance are either sufficient or insufficient in a subjective sense and in an objective sense. Subjectively sufficient acceptance has its ground in the particular nature of the subject.⁶⁷ Objectively sufficient acceptance is valid for everyone who has reason.⁶⁸ Opinion is subjectively insufficient and objectively insufficient. Belief is subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient. Knowledge is both subjectively sufficient and objectively sufficient.⁶⁹

With regard to belief, Kant distinguishes among pragmatic, doctrinal, and moral belief. Doctrinal belief, according to Kant, involves acceptance of the existence of objects that we cannot experience, but which we imagine we could experience if circumstances were different.⁷⁰ According to Kant, the expression of doctrinal belief is an expression of modesty from the objective point of view, but is also an expression of firmness of trust from the subjective point of view.⁷¹ For example, in Kant’s day, it was impossible to determine whether the planets of the solar system were inhabited.⁷² Yet, if circumstances had been different, it would have been possible to determine through experience that the planets either were or were not inhabited.⁷³

⁶⁶ KrV, AA 03: 532.36-37, KrV, AA 03: 533.01, A822/B850.

⁶⁷ Initially, it is unclear whether the subject Kant has in mind is a particular person or a type of subject such as human beings. His examples below indicate he has both in mind. Otherwise, a belief that the faculty of reason makes unavoidable for us would count as objectively sufficient (and hence as knowledge, which Kant denies).

⁶⁸ KrV, AA 03: 531.27-31, A820/B848.

⁶⁹ KrV, AA 03: 533.04-05, A822/B850.

⁷⁰ KrV, AA 03: 534.29-36, A825/B853.

⁷¹ KrV, AA 03: 535.32-34, A827/B855.

⁷² Kant’s reference to “inhabitants” (*Einwohner*) indicates he was thinking of intelligent extraterrestrial life, not extraterrestrial life in general (KrV, AA 03: 535.02, A825/B853). Heimsoeth, Heinz: *Transzendente Dialektik*, vol. 4. Berlin, 1971, 781f, note 223.

⁷³ KrV, AA 03: 534.36-37, 535.01-02, A825/B853.

Further, for reasons he does not explain, Kant regards his acceptance of the existence of extraterrestrials in the solar system as subjectively sufficient. Kant says he would be willing to bet all that he owned on the proposition that at least one of the planets “that we see” is inhabited if there were a way of determining the matter through experience.⁷⁴ It is common that the same facts or reasoning are sufficient to produce acceptance of a given proposition in one person but not in another. Hence, opinions sometimes differ even among those who are equally reasonable and equally well-informed.⁷⁵ Presumably, the reason for Kant’s firm trust in the existence of extraterrestrial life in the solar system is the result of an argument that not all would accept but which is sufficient to persuade Kant. Similar disagreements for similar reasons are likely found among astrobiologists today.

But Kant’s other examples of doctrinal belief do not concern claims that are empirical but unverifiable under current circumstances. Although we do not have objectively sufficient evidence of God’s existence, Kant says that our reason cannot make sense of the purposiveness of nature without recourse to a wise creator.⁷⁶ This claim rests on Kant’s account of the faculty of reason, which I will discuss later. Kant’s third example regards belief in the afterlife. According to Kant, if we accept that there is such a wise creator, the fact that the excellent capabilities of human beings do not match their short life span leads us to doctrinal belief in an afterlife.⁷⁷

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that Kant makes a number of arguments as to why we must believe in the existence of things in themselves for theoretical reasons. Each of these arguments is subjectively sufficient and objectively insufficient, though Kant does not use these terms to describe them.

V. If We Accept That There Are Appearances, We Must Accept That There Are Things in Themselves

⁷⁴ KrV, AA 03: 535.02-04, A825/B353.

⁷⁵ There is a considerable body of literature on whether or not the disagreement of someone equally reasonable and equally well-informed should be taken as evidence against one’s opinion. See e.g. Feldman, Richard and Warfield, Ted A.: *Disagreement*. New York, 2010.

⁷⁶ KrV, AA 03: 535.19-27, A826-827/B854-855.

⁷⁷ KrV, AA 03: 535.27-31, A827/B855.

Kant argues that if we accept that there are appearances, we must accept that there are things in themselves. He concludes that we must accept that there are things in themselves, suggesting that he takes the existence of appearances for granted. Since the reason we must accept the first premise of his argument rests on a subjectively sufficient acceptance, accepting the conclusion of his valid argument is also subjectively sufficient. I will present the textual evidence and then reconstruct the argument.

According to Kant, defining sensibility requires us to think of non-sensible things. Kant says that

The doctrine of sensibility is at the same time simply the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative understanding, that is, of things, that the understanding *must* think up without this relation to our kind of intuition, therefore not merely as appearances, but rather it *must* think them as things in themselves, but it comprehends about them at the same time in making this distinction that it could make no use of its categories to consider things in this way.⁷⁸

The understanding must set a limit on sensibility, presumably in distinguishing itself from sensibility. Thinking of sensibility in these terms requires thinking of non-sensible things. But this is not the same as cognizing non-sensible things through the categories. Kant repeats that we must think of things in themselves as a limit for sensibility in another passage: “The concept of a noumenon, taken merely problematically, remains nevertheless not only permitted, but also *unavoidable* as a concept for limiting sensibility”.⁷⁹ This is because the concept of a noumenon “is not arbitrarily fabricated, but is connected with the limitation of sensibility”.⁸⁰ The concept of things in themselves is not one that is the result of mere whimsy, but it has a necessary connection to our concept of sensibility.

Since the concept ‘sensibility’ requires us to think the concept ‘thing in itself,’ we must possess the one concept if we fully understand the other. But possession of a concept of a thing is hardly belief that the thing exists. All that Kant means in this and similar passages is that if we are able to entertain the concept of sensibility, then we must be able to entertain the concept of

⁷⁸ KrV, AA 03: 210.03-08, B307-308, emphasis added.

⁷⁹ KrV, AA 03: 212.13-16, B311, emphasis added.

⁸⁰ KrV, AA 03: 211.34-37, KrV, AA 03: 212.01, B311.

there being non-sensible things. In the passage quoted above, this is all Kant is saying. But it does not follow from this that if we were to *accept* that there are sensible things, then we must also *accept* that there are non-sensible beings. We do not always accept the propositions that follow from propositions we accept. Yet we find Kant saying precisely that in other passages.

When we *regard* the objects of the senses as cheap and as mere appearances, so we admit *in so doing* at the same time that a thing in itself underlies them, even if at the same time we do not know it as it is constituted in itself, but only its appearance, that is, the way our senses are affected by this unknown something. *The understanding, therefore, by accepting [annimmt] [the existence of] appearances, admits [gesteht] also the existence of things in themselves.* And so far we can say that the representation of such beings that underlie appearances, therefore, are only beings of understanding is not merely permissible, but also *unavoidable*.⁸¹

Here Kant says that accepting the existence of appearances is the same thing as admitting the existence of things in themselves. As the last sentence says, representing appearances requires the representation (presumably to ourselves in thought) of things in themselves. But to represent something to oneself is not to accept its existence. Here is a similar passage from the *Critique*:

Appearances, insofar as they are thought as objects according to the unity of the categories, are called ‘phenomena.’ When, however, I *accept [annehme]* things that are mere objects of the understanding, and likewise, as such, an intuition, even though it cannot be given to a sensible intuition (as *coram intuitu intellectuali*), so these things *would* be called ‘noumena’ (*intelligibilia*). ... When our senses merely represent something to us, *as it appears*, so must this something also be in itself a thing and an object of a non-sensible intuition, that is, of the understanding, that is, a cognition *must* be possible, in which no sensibility

⁸¹ ProI, AA 04: 314.33-36, ProI, AA 04: 315.01-06, emphasis added).

is met with, and which alone has objective reality, through which objects are represented *as they are*.⁸²

Kant says only that if we “accept” that there are such things as things in themselves, then we must also accept a non-sensible intuition that can cognize them. We would only think this if we also thought that if there were an appearance, there would have to be a non-appearing thing that is an object of a non-sensible intuition.

Why does Kant assert that if we accept that there is an appearance, we must accept that there is a thing in itself, and vice versa? As I discussed earlier, the concept ‘appearance’ in its transcendental sense refers to the concept ‘thing in itself’ in its transcendental sense. However, it is not true that we always think or believe propositions entailed by a proposition we think or believe. I doubt, however, that Kant would make such an elementary mistake. Instead, I take Kant to mean that we must think of things in themselves if we think of appearances and what the concept ‘appearance’ entails. Similarly, I take him to mean that we must accept the existence of things in themselves if we accept the existence of appearances and what their existence entails.

But must we accept that there are such appearances? Kant seems to think so. To start with, he takes it for granted that we accept that our intuition is sensible.⁸³ Therefore, we cannot avoid believing that the things we perceive are sensible. If we believe that, then we should also accept that non-sensible things exist. Kant does not say that we get this first assumption from common sense, but only that common sense could make it. The question to be asked is “Why must we accept that some representations do not come from us?” Kant makes no argument for this, but seems to take it for granted. Karl Ameriks says that Kant’s arguments “depend on

⁸² KrV, AA 04: 162.33-36, 163.01-02, 12-18, A248-249, emphasis added. In some passages, Kant uses the verb *annehmen*, while in his discussion of doctrinal belief, he uses *fürwahrhalten* (KrV, AA 03: 532.36, A822/B850). But both of these terms can each be translated as ‘accept.’ It is true that *annehmen* can also mean ‘assume,’ especially if, as in KrV, AA 03: 118.19-22, B149, Kant characterizes what is assumed as an assumption (*Voraussetzung*). In any case, it would make no difference for the purposes of my argument if Kant meant “If we assume that there are appearances, we must assume that there are things in themselves” instead of “If we accept that there are appearances, we must accept that there are things in themselves.” Regardless of how *annehmen* is understood in these passages, they fit Kant’s description of doctrinal belief.

⁸³ Kant defines sensibility as “the effect of an object on the capacity of representation, so far as we are affected by the same” (KrV, AA 03: 50.01-02, A19f/B34).

claims about pure forms of intuition or judgment that are not themselves deduced on an absolute basis.”⁸⁴ I agree. Though Kant does not, to my knowledge, say this explicitly, I think it is likely that Kant takes it to be subjectively impossible for us *not* to accept this distinction for the same reasons Berkeley does:

I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy. ... But whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad day-light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view.⁸⁵

If I am right, then, according to Kant, we must accept that our intuition is sensible. No argument is provided for why our intuition is sensible. Kant simply takes for granted that our intuition is sensible. If he is not being dogmatic and unreflective, then he probably believes that we must accept that our intuition is sensible because it is impossible for us to accept any other view.

Once we have accepted that our intuition is sensible, we distinguish between sensible and non-sensible objects. Kant says one can accept that “the lowest understanding” (*der gemeinste Verstand*) is capable of making the distinction between sensibility and understanding. He makes this distinction as follows:

All representations that come to us without our will (as those of the senses) give to us for cognition objects in no other way than how they affect us. Whereas what they may be in themselves remains unknown to us, therefore, as regards this kind of representation, that the understanding may thereby also may add to it always only by the most strenuous

⁸⁴ Ameriks, Karl: *Interpreting Kant's Critiques*. New York. 2003, 7. Cp. Prauss, Gerold: *Erscheinung bei Kant*. Berlin. 1970, 11.

⁸⁵ Berkeley, George: *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers. North Clarendon, VT. 2000, §§28-29.

attention and distinctness, we can reach merely to cognition of *appearances*, never to *things in themselves*.⁸⁶

So the distinction between sensible and non-sensible objects does not require an argument. And, once this distinction has been made, Kant seems to believe that we must accept the existence of things in themselves.

As soon as this distinction...is made, it follows from itself that one would have to *admit* [*einräumen*] and *accept* [*annehmen*] behind appearances something else that is not an appearance, namely the thing in itself, even if we must immediately admit that, because they cannot ever become known to us, rather always only as they affect us, we cannot tread closer to them, and we can never know how they are in themselves.⁸⁷

To summarize Kant's argument:

10. We accept that our intuition is sensible.

11. If we accept that our intuition is sensible, we must accept the existence of appearances.

Therefore,

12. We accept the existence of appearances.

13. If we accept the existence of appearances, we must accept the existence of things in themselves.

Therefore,

14. We must accept the existence of things in themselves.

This argument is notable because it does not claim to prove the existence of either appearances or things in themselves. Instead, the argument concerns only what we must accept given that we accept that we have involuntary sensible representations and that we are able to

⁸⁶ GMS, AA 04: 451.01-08.

⁸⁷ GMS, AA 04: 451.08, 12-17, emphasis added.

acquire and exposit certain concepts. Therefore, the belief this argument is intended to establish is only subjectively sufficient.

VI. We Must Accept That There Is an Unconditioned Basis of Appearances

Kant makes another argument for subjectively sufficient acceptance of the existence of things in themselves. This argument is founded on a definition of the faculty of reason according to which reason holds that an unconditioned basis exists for every conditioned thing. I will argue that, according to Kant, appearances are conditioned, requiring our positing unconditioned things as their basis. While the concept of the unconditioned is not the same as the concept of the thing in itself, an unconditioned thing must be a thing in itself.

Kant says that reason's logical use is finding the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding.⁸⁸ This takes the form of constructing a syllogism beginning with a particular judgment as the conclusion and ascending to the major premise (a categorical statement) by means of the minor premise (an intermediate judgment).⁸⁹ According to Kant, our reason cannot avoid accepting the following principle: when the conditioned is given, the entire series of conditions is given, therefore the unconditioned itself is given.⁹⁰

Kant states that we must accept this principle: "When a cognition is regarded as conditioned, reason is *compelled* to regard the series of conditions in ascending order as *completed* and as given according to their totality".⁹¹ Kant also says that we necessarily think that the unconditioned is given if the conditioned is given.⁹² This necessity can only be subjective, since it has to do with our peculiar nature, not with any object. Any conclusion that reason so understood leads us to will be one whose acceptance is subjectively sufficient.

⁸⁸ KrV, AA 03: 242.34-35, 243.01-05, A307/B364. Heimsoeth, Heinz. *Transzendental Dialektik*, vol. 1. Berlin. 1966, 20-24.

⁸⁹ KrV, AA 03: 242.26-35, A307/B364; KrV, AA 03:250.33-34, 251.01-09, A321-22/B378. See Rohlf, Michael. "The Ideas of Pure Reason" in Paul Guyer, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge. 2010, 196f.

⁹⁰ KrV, AA 03: 243.01-05, A409/B436.

⁹¹ KrV, AA 03: 256.29-31, A332/B388, emphasis added.

⁹² KrV, AA 03: 284.08-09, A410/B437; KrV, AA 03: 285.04-06, A412/B439.

Kant also holds that our acceptance of this principle is objectively insufficient. This principle is synthetic *a priori*. It is synthetic because the conditioned relates itself analytically only to another condition, not to the unconditioned.⁹³ It is *a priori* because reason holds it to be true regardless of whether we are able to complete the series of conditions *a posteriori*: “Reason can be totally indifferent as to how far this progression extends itself *a parte posteriori* and whether even the totality of this series is at all possible because it does not need such a series to the conclusion lying before it, in that this through its grounds is already adequately determined and secured *a parte priori*”.⁹⁴

Kant says its derivative principles are transcendent, and I think it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the principle itself is transcendent.⁹⁵ By ‘unconditioned,’ Kant means both the totality of conditions for a conditioned cognition and a member of that totality of conditions.⁹⁶ Kant gives two reasons why no experience of the unconditioned is possible. First, no totality is contained in experience.⁹⁷ Second, there is no unconditioned part of experience.⁹⁸ Therefore, the unconditioned lies outside the bounds of experience, making the principle that contains the unconditioned transcendent. Any transcendent principle is not objectively sufficient.

One might object that I am confounding two different principles that Kant considers.⁹⁹ There is the logical requirement that cognitions be put in a logical form that permits hierarchical ordering of cognitions.¹⁰⁰ And there is also the principle that for every conditioned, there is a series of conditions that either is unconditioned¹⁰¹ or extends to the unconditioned.¹⁰² Kant says that the first principle leads us to assume the second,¹⁰³ though he initially leaves open whether

⁹³ KrV, AA 03: 259.08-09, A308/B365.

⁹⁴ KrV, AA 03: 256.34-37, 257.01, A332/B389.

⁹⁵ KrV, AA 03: 243.15-18, A308/B365.

⁹⁶ KrV, AA 03: 288.15-20, A417/B445.

⁹⁷ KrV, AA 03: 333.21-23, A481/B509; 03: 354.09-12, A517/B545. Cf. AA 03: 347.07-09, A505/B533.

⁹⁸ KrV, AA 03:351.23-34, A513/B541.

⁹⁹ This objection is from an anonymous reviewer.

¹⁰⁰ KrV, AA 03: 241.19-26, A305/B362; KrV, AA 03: 243.26-29, A309/B365.

¹⁰¹ KrV, AA 03: 243.01-05, A307/B364.

¹⁰² KrV, AA 03: 243.18-24, A308/B364.

¹⁰³ KrV, AA 03: 242.26-35, 03: 243.01-05, A307f/B364.

the second principle is justified or not.¹⁰⁴ Kant concludes at the end of the Transcendental Dialectic that the latter principle leads us either to contradictions or outside of the bounds of experience altogether.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the second principle is not objectively sufficient.

Neither Kant nor I am confounding the two principles. They are distinct, and the former principle does not entail the latter principle. However, Kant claims that our reason necessarily leads us to accept both principles. In other words, our acceptance of the principle that the unconditioned is given if the conditioned is given is subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient.

One more question remains to be resolved. What is the relation between the unconditioned and things in themselves? As I mentioned above, by ‘unconditioned,’ Kant means both the totality of conditions for a conditioned cognition and a member of that totality of conditions.¹⁰⁶ Can a member of the totality of conditions be a thing in itself? Yes: in two cases, Kant refers to unconditioned things which are also things in themselves. Kant refers to the original ground of all being both as the unconditioned and as God.¹⁰⁷ And God, if he exists, is also a thing in himself.¹⁰⁸ Kant also refers to “the simple” [*das Einfache*] as a part of a complete series, and this must be a thing in itself.¹⁰⁹ However, Kant also refers to the following non-objects as unconditioned : the beginning of the world, the boundary of the world, and freedom.¹¹⁰ Yet a world that had a beginning or a boundary could be not an appearance, but must be a thing in itself.¹¹¹ Similarly, only things in themselves can be free.¹¹²

Consider Kant’s remark about concepts which concern the unconditioned basis of the conditions of the sensible world. They “have a merely intelligible object, about which it is

¹⁰⁴ KrV, AA 03: 243.15-37, 03: 244.01-05, A308-309/B365-366. See also 03: 256.29-37, 03: 257.01-11, A332/B388f.

¹⁰⁵ KrV, AA 03: 381.03-07, A564/B592.

¹⁰⁶ KrV, AA 03: 288.15-20, A417/B445.

¹⁰⁷ KrV, AA 03: 392.14-24, A584/B612.

¹⁰⁸ Kant says that the concept of God extends further than experience can reach (KrV, AA 04: 75.19-25, A96). This means that God, if he exists, is a noumenon in the negative sense (KrV, AA 03: 209.32-35, B307).

¹⁰⁹ KrV, AA 03: 288.23-29, A418/B445f.

¹¹⁰ KrV, AA 03: 288.23-29, A418/B445f.

¹¹¹ KrV, AA 03: 346.17-25, A504/B532.

¹¹² KrV, AA 03: 374.31-37, 03: 375.1-12, A534/B562.

certainly permitted to admit [*zuzulassen*] that it is a transcendental object of which one knows nothing further”.¹¹³ Even though we do not have any justification for accepting that this object has distinct and inner predicates, these concepts “compel” us to “risk this step”.¹¹⁴ That is, even though our acceptance of the existence of a non-sensible object as the unconditioned basis of appearances would not be objectively sufficient, it is subjectively sufficient. The relevant concepts of reason, which Kant refers to in the passage just paraphrased as “cosmological ideas,” compel us to accept their existence.¹¹⁵

We can therefore ascribe the following argument to Kant:

15. There are appearances.

16. Appearances are conditioned.

Therefore,

17. There is a conditioned thing.

18. We must accept that every conditioned thing has an unconditioned ground which is an unconditioned thing.

Therefore,

19. We must accept that there is an unconditioned thing.

20. Any unconditioned thing must be a thing in itself.

Therefore,

21. We must accept that there is a thing in itself.

VII. Objection and Replies

One might object to my thesis as follows: if Kant’s arguments for accepting the existence of things in themselves match his description of doctrinal belief, why did Kant not point this out himself in the *Critique*? I offer three explanations for this. First, Kant rushed through the composition of the final draft of the *Critique* in four to five months, although he had been

¹¹³ KrV, AA 03: 382.01-03, A565/B593.

¹¹⁴ KrV, AA 03: 382.08-10, A565-566/B593-594.

¹¹⁵ KrV, AA 03: 382.08-10, A566/B594.

working on pieces of it for years.¹¹⁶ For this reason, I think Transcendental Doctrine of Method, being tacked on to the end of a long and complicated work, would have been more fully integrated with the rest of the work if Kant had not been so rushed in putting together the final draft of the *Critique*.

Second, the primary aim of the *Critique* is to establish the *a priori* conditions of our cognition of objects.¹¹⁷ While Kant ends up committing himself to many other views on many other subjects, such commitments and his reasons for them do not occupy the focus of his attention in the book. As Kant puts it, the *Critique* is the canon and not the organon of pure reason.¹¹⁸ That is to say, he intends to put forward the standards by which knowledge is to be measured, but not the exhaustive results of applying those standards.¹¹⁹ It should be no surprise that scholars after Kant should find in Kant's texts commitments to matters extending beyond the central task of the *Critique*.

Third, as I have observed in previous sections, Kant never questions the existence of things in themselves, but seems to take their existence for granted. As Erich Adickes said: "For Kant in his entire critical period the intersubjective existence of a plurality of things in themselves was something he never doubted and took to be totally obvious."¹²⁰ I take that to be the reason why he discusses our reasons for accepting the existence of particular things in themselves more than our reasons for accepting the existence of things in themselves in general.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Kuehn, Manfred: *Kant: A Biography*. Cambridge. 2001, 223, 240. See Kant's letter to Christian Garve, 7 August 1783, Br, AA 10:338.13-24.

¹¹⁷ KrV, AA 03: 43.16-29, 03: 44.01-02, A10-12/B24-25.

¹¹⁸ KrV, AA 03: 44.02-23, A12-13/B25-27.

¹¹⁹ KrV, AA 03: 42.29-30, 03: 43.1-29, 03: 44.1-23, A10-13/B24-27.

¹²⁰ Adickes, Erich: *Kant und das Ding an sich*. Berlin. 1924, 4. Cf. *Ibid.*, 3, 16; Adickes, Erich: *Kants Lehre von der doppelten Affektion unseres Ich*. Tübingen. 1929, 2, 33. Cf. Heimsoeth, Heinz. *Studien zur Philosophie Immanuel Kants*. Köln. 1956, 79.

¹²¹ I do not have the space to adequately discuss two cases of Kant arguing that we must accept the existence of a particular thing in itself. In the first case, Kant argues that we must accept the existence of a being that is both supremely real and necessary (KrV, AA 03: 385.19-33, 03: 386-391, 03: 392.01-09, A571-584/B599-612). In the second case, Kant argues that we must accept that there is a creator of the world (KrV, AA 03: 457.03-31, 03: 458.01-34, A695-698/B723-726).

VIII. Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that, according to Kant, our acceptance of the existence of things in themselves is doctrinal belief. That is, our acceptance is subjectively sufficient but not objectively sufficient. This explains why Kant repeatedly states that things in themselves exist while also saying that it is not possible for us to know anything about them except that they are non-sensible. This interpretation removes the apparent contradiction that bedevils metaphysical readings of Kant's transcendental idealism.¹²²

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