

The Transcendental Object, Empirical Cognition, and the Thing in Itself

Abstract: Kant's doctrine of the "transcendental object" has always puzzled interpreters. On the one hand, he says that the transcendental object is the object to which we relate our representations. On the other hand, he declares the transcendental object to be unknowable and identifies it with the thing in itself. I argue that this poses a problem that Kant only in the B edition of the *Critique* solves in a satisfactory manner. According to his solution, we ascribe sensible predicates to things in themselves, but only insofar as they appear.

The notion of the 'transcendental object'¹ is certainly among the most enigmatic terms in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, he says that the transcendental object is "something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general" (A250).² This suggests that the transcendental object is the unknowable, non-spatiotemporal thing in itself. On the other hand, Kant writes that the transcendental object "is that which in general can give all of our empirical concepts relation to an object" (A109) and to which we "can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions" (A494/B522f.). Since this gives the impression that the transcendental object is the object to which we refer our cognition, this has led some readers to assume that the transcendental object cannot be the thing in itself, but must be something else.³

¹ This term is a translation either of '*transscendentales Object*' or '*transscendentaler Gegenstand*'. Since I can detect no difference whatsoever in the meaning of these varieties, I do not note which of them Kant uses in my translations.

² If available, the translations are from the Cambridge edition, though I often modified them without notice; other translations are mine. Quotations are made according to the page numbers of the first and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and with reference to volume and page number of the *Akademie-Ausgabe* for all other works. I use the following abbreviations for work titles: Anth = Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, C = Correspondence, CprR = Critique of Practical Reason, De Mundi = De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis (Inaugural-Dissertation), Gr = Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals, JL = Jäsche Logic, MFNS = Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science, MM = Metaphysics of Morals, M-x = Metaphysics x (lecture), NM = Negative Magnitudes, OD = On a Discovery, OP = Opus Postumum, PM = On the Progress of Metaphysics, Prol = Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Rx = Reflexion x.

³ For instance, Prauss (1974: 120-4) holds that the transcendental object is the content that is thought in a cognition. Allison (2004: 59) thinks that the concept of the transcendental object is the genus to thing in itself and appearance (similarly de Boer 2014: 238-47, although she distinguishes various meanings of 'transcendental object'). And Kitcher (2012: 28f.) claims that the transcendental object is the empirical object outside our mind, to which we, however, can infer only indirectly by the given in intuitions. This is only a small sample of readings – the

I will argue in this paper that there are compelling textual reasons to accept the view that the transcendental object is *both* the thing in itself and the object of empirical cognition, or experience.⁴ Notwithstanding this, we are confronted with the urgent question: if the transcendental object is the unknowable thing in itself, how can we relate empirical cognition to it? I call this the *paradox of the transcendental object*. And although Kant ultimately will find a promising solution to it, I will argue that he does not offer a satisfying account in the first edition of the *Critique*. Despite the disappearance of the expression ‘transcendental object’ in writings after 1781, the paradox that we refer empirical cognition to things in themselves remains; and it is only in the *Prolegomena* and especially the second edition of the *Critique* in which Kant responds to the problem in a satisfactory manner. On this account, we do cognize things in themselves, but not as they *are* in themselves, but only as they *appear*. This allows Kant to make things in themselves the intentional referent of empirical cognition while at the same time acknowledging their unknowability as regards the properties that things in themselves have aside from the way they appear.

My plan for this article is as follows. In section 1, I introduce the paradox of the transcendental object, which means that it is an unknowable thing in itself, but also the object thought in empirical cognition. But as I argue in section 2, Kant does not provide a plausible account in the first edition of the *Critique* concerning how these characteristics can be combined. Section 3 quickly summarizes my view of a core problem of Kant’s transcendental idealism: he both distinguishes between things as they are in themselves and as they appear on the one hand and things in themselves and appearances on the other hand. As I discuss in section 4, this helps to understand Kant’s account of “formal idealism” in the *Prolegomena* and his analogy to traditional secondary qualities. For although we intuit things in the forms of space and time, they are not themselves spatiotemporal. Section 5 shows that the second edition of the *Critique* presents a clear account of empirical cognition that makes use of the secondary quality analogy. Section 6 concludes by considering the relation of my account to a reading of Kant’s idealism in general. An unavoidable caveat is that my paper will be narrowly focused on the paradox: I cannot give a full account of the transcendental object, transcendental idealism, or any other relevant conceptions.

literature is vast (albeit with few contributions recently) and I cannot hope to give a full overview of the debate here.

⁴ This view has been defended by George 1974: 192-4, Willaschek 1992: 287f.n2, Rosefeldt 2007: 203, forthcoming. – Kemp Smith (1923: 204f.) holds that the transcendental object is identical to the thing in itself, but considers this notion a pre-Critical residue that disappears after 1781.

1. The Transcendental Object and its Paradox

Kant begins to discuss the transcendental object in the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding – more specifically, in the sub-section “On the Synthesis of Recognition in the Concept”. Even in this part, the transcendental object plays only a minor role, for Kant focuses on the unity of apperception. While I do not aim to give an account of the complex issues that are involved in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant thinks that the notion of the transcendental object is crucial in this respect. Let us start with a passage that motivates the need of this concept:

And here then it is necessary to make understood what is meant by the expression of an object of representations. We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded in themselves, in the same way, as objects (outside the power of representation). What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object can be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it. (A104)

To give a rough summary of this passage, Kant holds that there must be an object outside our “representations” or “cognitions” that corresponds to them; but this object is only “something in general = X”. While Kant does not use the term ‘transcendental object’ here, he introduces it a few pages later:

All representations, as representations, have their object, and can themselves be objects of other representations in turn.⁵ Appearances are the only objects that can be given to us immediately, and that in them which is immediately related to the object is called intuition. However, these appearances are not things in themselves, but themselves only representations, which in turn have their object, which therefore cannot be further intuited by us, and that may therefore be called the non-empirical, i.e., transcendental object = X. (A109)

Here Kant says that all appearances have an object, and while some of these objects can be other appearances, there must ultimately be objects of appearances that are not appearances, but “non-empirical” objects, which can be only thought as a “transcendental object = X”.⁶ But there is a lot to unpack here and it seems wise to start with some basic points.

⁵ Kant’s claim that representations can be the object of other representations suggests that self-cognition is not directed to a transcendental object. However, I disregard self-cognition in this paper.

⁶ One may think that Kant is defining the transcendental object as the “non-empirical” object of cognition here. However, in general the meaning of ‘transcendental object’ seems to be that of an object that we think in the transcendental use of concepts, that is, through mere transcendental concepts like categories (compare A247/B303f. with A238/B297f.). But Kant usually applies the term in the context of empirical cognition, where we can think the object not through any sensible predicates, but only through transcendental concepts. If my paper

To begin with, Kant states in A109 that all representations, as such, have an object.⁷ This clearly means that the “object” is something outside the representation to which the representation is related; and the object must be distinguished from the content⁸ of the representation by which we think the object.⁹ But before we can turn to that, we have to note that Kant uses the term ‘relation to an object’ in two different ways: First, it can mean a *causal* relation, which is the relation of affection by which the object is the cause of representations. I say more on that later. Second, the relation to the object can be an *intentional* relation. Consider the judgment ‘The stone is heavy’: by judging, the understanding represents something *as* something – in this case, the stone as heavy. Intentionality means that the representation is *about* an object.¹⁰ And the object the judgment is about is the transcendental object:

All our representations are in fact related to some object through the understanding, and, since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a something, as the object of sensible intuition: but this something is to that extent only the transcendental object. (A250)

The “object of sensible intuition” outside the representation is also the object to which we relate a representation “through the understanding”. Here we should remind ourselves of Kant’s famous dictum that cognition consists of two elements, intuition and concept, which only together can yield cognition

were not narrowly focused on the paradox of the transcendental object, this topic would merit further investigation.

⁷ See also C 11:395. – This at least holds for veridical representations. I do not take Kant to mean that even falsidical representations (like dreams or hallucinations) correspond to an existing object. While I am optimistic that he can deal with falsidical representations adequately, I wish to set this issue aside here.

⁸ I have no strong commitments about the notion of content except that the content is different from the object of representation (unlike what direct realists about intuition hold) and that some kinds of representation (at least intuitions) have content without being intentional. For a recent discussion of Kant’s conception of content with which I agree in important respects, see Tolley 2011.

⁹ However, it is not difficult to find passages in which Kant uses the term of an ‘object’ of representations, intuitions, or cognitions for the content, as opposed to the object that corresponds to representations (see e.g. A20/B34, A27/B43, A48/B65, B73). His terminology is plainly ambiguous.

¹⁰ I cannot provide a detailed account of intentionality in Kant here, but see Pereboom 1988 and Jankowiak 2016 for helpful discussion. One crucial point for my reading of Kant is that intentionality is not object-dependent: we can ascribe properties to objects that they do not in fact have, and perhaps the object does not even exist. In this case, our attempt of intentionally relating to an object remains unsuccessful. This also reveals that intentionality is not really a relation to an object, but rather directedness towards an object.

[*Erkenntnis*].¹¹ Through intuitions objects are “given”, through concepts they are “thought” (A50/B74). I assume that givenness means two things: first, we have intuitions (or at least sensations)¹², second, these intuitions (or sensations) are caused by an object external to representations (that is, the intuitions are not hallucinations or dreams).¹³ Thinking just means to form a judgment. While concepts have content, they are part of an intentional representation only by their connection in a judgment.¹⁴ Since cognitions – or empirical cognitions, at least¹⁵ – are the connection of givenness and thought, and hence of intuition and judgment, we can, as a first approach, define ‘empirical cognition’ as a judgment about an object that is given in an intuition. Therefore, I agree with the emerging consensus in the debate that empirical cognition is different from knowledge, partly in that cognition can be false.¹⁶ (I will sometimes also use the term ‘experience’, which Kant defines as “empirical cognition”.¹⁷)

According to this definition of ‘cognition’, intuition is not cognition because intuition does not meet the thought condition. This seems to conflict with the classification of intuition as cognition in the famous *Stufenleiter* passage.¹⁸ However, Tolley rightly points out that it is not forced on us to read intuition as a

¹¹ See A51/B75f., B146, PM 20:273.

¹² The question how sensations are related to intuitions and what this means for the way intuitions are given depends, among others, on whether intuitions have conceptual content and on whether the understanding is needed to produce intuitions. This is the topic of a vast and ongoing debate, in which I take no side. All what matters here is that intuitions are given in some way.

¹³ This is only a rough sketch of the notion of the “given”; for a recent extended and fruitful exchange, see Watkins and Willaschek 2017a, 2017b, Chignell 2017, Grüne 2017.

¹⁴ See MFNS 4:475n: According to “the precisely determined definition of a judgment in general”, a judgment is “an action through which given representations first become cognitions of an object”. Also see George 1981: 242f., who quotes this passage.

¹⁵ While there is a tendency in the debate about cognition to model all instances of cognition (including practical and analytic cognition) on the basis of empirical cognition (see George 1981, 1982, Chignell 2014, Tolley 2017, Watkins and Willaschek 2017a, Schafer forthcoming), it is not clear that Kant wants to apply the givenness and thought conditions to cognition in general. At one place at least, he appears to exempt practical cognition from these conditions (see PM 20:273). However, in this paper I am solely concerned with empirical cognition.

¹⁶ I am sympathetic to George’s claim though that there is a sense of ‘cognition’ that entails truth and is hence at least close to knowledge (see George 1982: 35). However, most mentions of ‘cognition’ in this paper are not truth-entailing.

¹⁷ See e.g. A124, B147. There may be other senses of ‘experience’ that are not relevant for my purposes, though.

¹⁸ See A320/B376f.

species of cognition: Kant usually does not gloss intuition as cognition, but only says that intuition is an element of cognition, so we could read the *Stufenleiter* in this manner.¹⁹ This approach is also suggested by passages in which Kant denies that intuitions have *any* relation to an object:

If I take all thinking (through categories) away from an empirical cognition, then no cognition of any object at all remains; nothing is thought through mere intuition, and that this affection of sensibility in me does not constitute a relation of such representation to any object.
(A253/B309)²⁰

While I am sympathetic to Tolley's reading, we nonetheless need to find a way to reconcile it with Kant's claim in A108 that all representations, as such, have objects.²¹ I take it that in passages like the above quote Kant only denies that intuitions have an *intentional* relation, but not that they have a *causal* relation through which an object is given.²² So intuitions have an object even if they are not cognitions, and intuitions have content without relating the content to an object as their intentional referent – in other words, intuitions lack aboutness. For example, if I have an intuition that has the content of a heavy stone, I do not intuit something *as* a heavy stone. Thus, cognitions are intentional, while intuitions are not.²³ The sense in which all representations have an object seems to be that they are directed in some way to an object, which can happen either by a causal or an intentional relation.

¹⁹ See Tolley 2017: 16f. For a different view, see Watkins and Willaschek 2017a: 85f.

²⁰ See also A247/B304, MFNS 4:554f., MM 6:211n.

²¹ To be sure, we may need to make an exception for "sensations", of which Kant says, in a phrase that is hard to decipher, that sensation "is merely related [*bezieht*] to the subject as the modification of its state" (A320/B376). (The Guyer/Wood translation of "*bezieht*" with "refers" predetermines that the relation of sensation to the subject is intentional, a view that seems absurd.)

²² One might wonder whether intuitions entertain a third kind of relation to objects: a *perceptual* relation (see George 1981: 243-5). However, in this case one probably would have to assent to George's claim that Kant's account of that relation would be "very much alike" the intentional relation of judgments to objects (George 1981: 244). It is not clear why the objections to the view that intuitions are cognitions should not apply here as well. What is more, the view that intuitions have a perceptual relation to objects (or an intentional relation of any sort) potentially becomes unattractive if this object is the thing in itself (see below). However, even then one could say that intuitions are about things in themselves, but do not represent them as they are in themselves (see Baldner (1990) and Jankowiak (2016) for versions of this view). Hence, my reading that the transcendental object is the thing in itself would not be rendered absurd if intuitions were intentional in some sense.

²³ For such a view see also Prauss 1971: 31, Willaschek 1997: 560. While this view is controversial, it is impossible to defend it in detail here.

So far we have seen that the transcendental object is the intentional referent of an empirical cognition. However, this object is “non-empirical” (A109), and in the continuation of the quote from A250 Kant goes so far to argue that we can know nothing about it:

This signifies, however, a something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general [...], but is rather something that can serve only as a correlate of the unity of apperception for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition, by means of which the understanding unifies that in the concept of an object. (A250)²⁴

But this is a baffling claim – why do we relate our cognitions to objects of which we can know nothing? What is the point of saying: ‘This is a heavy stone’, if we do not know that there is a heavy stone? However, Kant’s account becomes more comprehensible (though no less baffling) when we consider that the transcendental object is the thing in itself. He writes:

The understanding [...] thinks of an object in itself, but only as a transcendental object, which is the cause of appearance (thus not itself appearance) [...]. (A288/B344)

To be sure, what matter is as a thing in itself (transcendental object) is entirely unknown to us [...]. (A366)

Kant also speaks about the affecting object “considered as noumenon²⁵ (or better, as transcendental object)” (A358²⁶) and equates the thing in itself and the transcendental object more implicitly on other occasions^{27, 28}. That the transcendental object is the thing in itself is also suggested by passages in which

²⁴ See also A190f./B235f., A278/334, A379f., A393.

²⁵ Since the “noumenon” is the affecting object and things in themselves affect us, I take it for granted that, at least in this case, ‘noumenon’ can be used interchangeably with ‘thing in itself’.

²⁶ See also R5554 18:230. Kant seems to think that the expression ‘transcendental object’ makes clearer that ‘noumenon’ is not meant in the positive sense. Although both concepts have a mainly epistemic connotation (see n. 28), the noumenon (in the positive and the negative sense) is in any case extensionally identical with the thing in itself; so this passage gives further evidence that the transcendental object is the thing in itself.

²⁷ See A361, A372, A390, A393f., A494/B522, A538/B566, A540/B568.

²⁸ Some readers (e.g. Prauss 1974: 126-8, Kitcher 2012: 29f.) think that this textual evidence is counterweighed by Kant’s claim that the transcendental object “cannot be called the noumenon; for I do not know anything about what it is in itself, and have no concept of it except merely that of the object of a sensible intuition in general, which is therefore the same for all appearances” (A253). However, Kant earlier introduces the concept of noumena as “things that are merely objects of the understanding and that, nevertheless, can be given to an intuition, although not to sensible intuition” (A249). Later he introduces another “concept of a noumenon, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of any sort of thing” (A252). This clearly is the

the term 'transcendental object' does not occur. For example, Kant says that the thing in itself is "the true correlate" of our representations (A30/B45).²⁹ All these passages refute the reading that the transcendental object is not the thing in itself. Rather, they give support to George's reading that the concepts 'transcendental object' and 'thing in itself' are intensionally different, but extensionally identical.³⁰ While the former has the meaning of an object that we can think only as an object in general, the latter is that of a thing that exists independently of a relation to cognizing subjects.³¹ But this is really startling, for this means that empirical cognition, or experience, is intentionally related to things in themselves!³²

In summary, Kant claims that the transcendental object is:

- a) the object that is cognized by empirical judgments,
- b) a thing in itself, and

distinction between a noumenon in the negative and the positive sense that Kant makes more explicit in the B edition (see B307, but see already A286f./342f.). It is hard to see how the transcendental object could not be the noumenon in the negative sense; so I take it that what Kant denies is that the transcendental object is the noumenon in the positive sense (see also Willaschek 1992: 287f.n2, Allison 2004: 59).

²⁹ See also A38/B55, A42/B59, A44/B61, B164, A251f., A372, A391.

³⁰ Note that this is not a global claim: I am not saying that all things in themselves are also transcendental objects (God certainly is not an object of empirical cognition), but only that the transcendental object of a cognition is a thing in itself.

³¹ See George 1974: 192-4. However, I disagree with George's definition of these terms. According to him, the thing in itself is the object through which we are affected, whereas the transcendental object is the object of cognition. – Some readers hold that, while in some cases the meaning of 'transcendental object' and 'thing in itself' is different, they are identical in other cases (see e.g. Adickes 1924: 100, Allison 1968: 166). But assuming that the paradox of the transcendental object can be solved, I see few reasons to accept this view and hope that my reading provides a coherent, non-ambiguous account of the transcendental object.

³² It is not easy to reconstruct Kant's motivation for this account – why cannot the transcendental object just be an ordinary spatiotemporal thing? A hint is his view that, since appearances are only representations, they must have an object that is not representation. From this he infers that this object cannot be appearance and must be an unknowable thing in itself (see sect. 3). On this account, the 'real' objects are things in themselves; and cognition of 'real' objects is cognition of things in themselves. But for my purposes it does not matter much why Kant identifies the transcendental object with the thing in itself.

c) unknowable as it is in itself.³³

This list is meant neither as a definition of the transcendental object nor as an exhaustive enumeration of its characteristics. Rather, the list contains the claims that constitute the paradox of the transcendental object. For if the transcendental object is a), how can it be b) or c)? As it seems, either the transcendental object is the intentional referent of empirical cognitions, but then the transcendental object must have empirical properties – for example, when we say ‘This stone is heavy’, the judgment is true only if it refers to a heavy stone.³⁴ Or the transcendental object is spatiotemporal and knowable, but this would run against Kant’s view that cognition is intentionally related to things in themselves. While there is no direct textual evidence that he ever was aware of this problem, we can see how he struggles with it at various points in the A edition, but ultimately reaches at an account of empirical cognition that avoids the apparent dilemma in the B edition.

2. The Paradox of the Transcendental Object in the A Edition

In the A edition of the *Critique*, Kant’s tries to settle the question how we can entertain an intentional relation to the transcendental object by appealing to a merely formal criterion, but struggles as regards the material aspect of cognition. Directly after the quoted passage from A104, he writes:

We find, however, that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object carries something of necessity with it, since namely the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily rather than being determined a priori in a certain way, since insofar as they are to relate to an object our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object.

It is clear, however, that since we have to do only with the manifold of our representations, and that X which corresponds to them (the object), because it should be something distinct from all of our representations, is nothing for us, the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of the representations. Hence we say that we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition. (A104f.)³⁵

³³ As I will argue later, Kant does not think that things in themselves are completely unknowable, but only that they are unknowable as they are in themselves. This opens the door for a solution to the paradox.

³⁴ Kant defines truth as the “agreement of cognition with its object” (A58/B82, see also A191/B236, A237/B296; for related formulations, see A157/B196f., A643/B670, A820/B848), which means that he, at least broadly, accepts the correspondence theory of truth. See Vanzo 2010 for discussion, although he rightly notes that it cannot be based on the nominal definition of truth alone that Kant would endorse a full-blown correspondence theory of truth.

³⁵ See also A109.

Although Kant is not perfectly clear here, the idea seems to be this: Cognitions must meet formal and material conditions. The material conditions are set up by the object.³⁶ Consider the judgment ‘The stone is heavy’ – on the common sense view (that is, if you think that the intentional referent of the judgment is an ordinary stone), this judgment would be made necessary by a heavy stone, as the stone would provide the truth conditions of the judgment. But since the transcendental object is the thing in itself, we have no intuition of the material properties that the object has in itself – the object is “nothing for us”. However, we can determine the formal properties of the cognition a priori. That is, the cognition must agree with itself (it must not have contradictions), and also have “synthetic unity”. This is, of course, the aim of the transcendental deduction: to show that categories are needed for this synthetic unity, which proves their objective reality.³⁷

Nonetheless, even if this strategy of the transcendental deduction should work, Kant’s view that synthetic unity is *sufficient* for cognition (as implicated by the last sentence of the quote) seems problematic. One could understand this claim in two ways. First, it could mean that synthetic unity is sufficient for forming *true* empirical judgments. Second, it could mean that synthetic unity is sufficient for forming empirical judgments as such, regardless their truth. Since truth is the agreement of cognition with its object³⁸, the object must provide material conditions for the content of cognition³⁹, which implies that formal conditions alone are not sufficient for truth. Thus, we should opt for the second reading.⁴⁰ But then the question arises: how do we deal with the material conditions of truth, given that the thing in itself cannot have the sensible properties that form the matter of empirical cognition?

While Kant is committed to the view that empirical cognitions have an intentional relation to things in themselves, we will now see that his answer to the question remains quite vague in the A edition. Consider this passage:

³⁶ Compare this to Kant’s discussion of truth, where he holds that the objects provide conditions for the content of a judgment, whereas logic (both general and transcendental logic) provides conditions as to its form. In contemporary parlance, one could say that the object is the ‘truth maker’. See A58-60/B83-5.

³⁷ See A111f., A119, A125, A130.

³⁸ See n. 34.

³⁹ See A59/B84.

⁴⁰ George adopts this reading, too, and quite aptly remarks that, if ‘cognition’ were truth-entailing, no plausible reading of this passage would be available. See George 1981: 242, 1982: 36.

The non-sensible cause of these representations is entirely unknown to us, and therefore we cannot intuit it as an object; for such an object would have to be represented neither in space nor in time (as mere conditions of our sensible representation), without which conditions we cannot think any intuition. Meanwhile we can call the merely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object, merely so that we may have something corresponding to sensibility as a receptivity. To this transcendental object we can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions, and say that it is given in itself prior to all experience. (A494/B522f.)

Here Kant says that the thing in itself affects us, but we can neither know nor intuit it as it is in itself. For this reason, we can only think it as a transcendental object. Nevertheless, Kant argues that we “can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions” to it. What does this mean? Since he denies that the thing in itself has sensible properties, he arguably cannot mean that we form a judgment like ‘This stone is heavy’. However, Kant gives no alternative account of how we could “ascribe” sensible properties to the thing in itself. And it does not help much that, in another passage, he claims that the concept of a transcendental object is “determined” through sensible predicates:

This transcendental object cannot even be separated from the sensible data, for then nothing would remain through which it would be thought. It is therefore no object of cognition in itself, but only the representation of appearances under the concept of an object in general, which is determinable through the manifold of those appearances. Just for this reason, then, the categories do not represent any particular object given to the understanding alone, but rather serve only to determine the transcendental object (the concept of something in general) through that which is given in sensibility, in order thereby to cognize appearances empirically under concepts of objects. (A250f.)

What could it mean that the concept of a transcendental object, as an unknowable thing in itself, is “determinable through the manifold of those appearances”?⁴¹ In this context, ‘determination’ is the determination of a concept: we start with the undetermined, non-empirical concept of the transcendental object as a something = X and then determine this concept by somehow adding sensible data.⁴² For example, we determine the concept by adding the predicates of a heavy stone. But Kant gives

⁴¹ See also A105, where Kant writes that the “object = X” can be thought “through the aforementioned [*gedachte*] predicates of a triangle”. (Note that he does not say that the predicates are *referred* to a triangle.) I take it that mathematical properties (which are non-empirical) can be referred to the transcendental object because appearances necessarily have the forms of mathematical objects, which makes mathematics applicable to experience (see A46-9/B64-6, A165f./B206f., Prolegomena 4:287f.).

⁴² The term ‘determination’ (and its cognates) has different but related meanings in Kant that cannot be fully analyzed here. With regard to the transcendental object, not the object, but its concept is ‘determined’ (both as a property and an action). According to the “principle of thoroughgoing determination”, “among *all possible* predicates of *things*, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it” (A571f./B599f.). A

no account of how we could intentionally relate sensible predicates to the thing in itself (assuming again that we do not judge that the thing has sensible predicates).⁴³ Although he considers the formal unity of cognition sufficient for relating a cognition to the transcendental object, he holds that cognitions must satisfy the material condition of truth that is provided by the unknowable thing in itself. But as long as Kant just vaguely says that we “ascribe” sensible properties to it, or that we “determine” the concept of a transcendental object through sensible predicates, it remains unclear how this is supposed to work.

In summary, in the A edition of the *Critique* Kant attempts to solve the paradox of the transcendental object by arguing that the formal unity of cognition is sufficient to establish an intentional relation to the object. Nonetheless, his account of how we attribute sensible properties to unknowable things in themselves remains too vague. Fortunately, Kant will find a more satisfying solution in later years.

3. Things in Themselves as They Appear

Before we can talk about Kant’s later views, I have to explain how I read the relation between things in themselves and appearances and why the notion of ‘appearing’ is central. Since I have dealt with that at length elsewhere⁴⁴, I provide only a summary of my views here.

There is a well-known disagreement in Kant scholarship about the relation between things in themselves and appearances: two-world readers hold that appearance and thing in itself are two distinct objects; two-aspect readers, on the contrary, claim that Kant only distinguishes between a way one and the same thing is in itself and a way it appears to us. I hold that he in fact makes both distinctions⁴⁵ and that they are not only compatible, but even condition each other. According to Kant, appearances are always appearances of something that appears – otherwise “the absurd proposition would follow that there is appearance without something that appears” (Bxxvif.). This something cannot itself be appearance:

concept of a thing is determined with regard to a pair of positive predicates and their respective negations if one of them belongs to the concept. The concept of the transcendental object is “undetermined” because it does not contain any predicates aside from those that already belong to the concept of the transcendental object. We determine this concept by adding positive or negative sensible predicates to it. The question then is how this can be done without judging that the thing in itself instantiates sensible predicates.

⁴³ His claim in this passage that we thereby “cognize appearances” (instead of the transcendental object) just adds to the confusion.

⁴⁴ See [REDACTED].

⁴⁵ For the first distinction, see A20/B34, A35/B52, A46/B63, A109, B164, A238/B298, A357, A359, OP 22:19; for the second distinction, see A30/B45, A42/B59, B69, A124, A147/B186, A249, A251, A258/B313, A394, B427, B429.

This was the result of the entire Transcendental Aesthetic, and it also follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing in itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, 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. (A251)

To avoid the "constant circle" (which would more adequately be described as an infinite regress), it is necessary to stop somewhere, so we need objects that are not in turn appearances.⁴⁶ In fact, Kant thinks that it follows analytically from the concept of 'appearance' that the appearing object "is not in itself appearance", but "an object independent of sensibility". This is why Kant holds that things in themselves are required as the "ground" of appearances.⁴⁷ Therefore, although things in themselves are numerically distinct from appearances, they have a way they appear that must be distinguished from what they are in themselves. While my reading is broadly phenomenalist insofar as I hold that, according to Kant, appearances are nothing outside the mind, a crucial difference to more traditional phenomenalist readings is that, as I see it, experience is ultimately experience of things in themselves (the appearing objects), which gives my interpretation a thoroughly realist touch.

The notions of 'appearance' and 'appearing' are difficult to analyze, though. Roughly, appearance is the object that is the content of intuition or experience, and appearing is the process of giving appearances. But there are two kinds of appearances: appearance as intuition (*apparentia*), through which objects are given, and appearance as a concept of a thing that is formed by reflection on intuition (phenomenon).⁴⁸ Correspondingly, there are two kinds of appearing: one is to give us appearances in intuition⁴⁹, the other is to think the given object through the concept of a phenomenon⁵⁰. However, representing an object is not yet cognizing, and even thinking a phenomenon is not cognition of an object as it appears, but rather one way the object appears. We only cognize a thing as it appears when we form a judgment that

⁴⁶ See also Prol 4:314f., 4:355, Gr 4:451. This is essentially the same argument that Kant makes to establish that at least some representations must be related to a "non-empirical" transcendental object (A109, see sect. 1).

⁴⁷ See A49/B66, A350, Prol 4:336, 4:337, Gr 4:453.

⁴⁸ See De Mundi 2:394, A248f., PM 20:269. I thus follow Longuenesse's (1998: 25) seminal interpretation.

⁴⁹ For instance, Kant says that we intuit the thing as it "affects our senses, i.e., as it appears" (B69), and defines 'appearing' as being "empirically intuited and given" (A93/B125). See also A27/B43, A93/B126, A124.

⁵⁰ In the Schematism chapter, Kant first says that "the schema is really only the phenomenon, or the sensible concept of an object, in agreement with the category" (A146/B186), and then that schemata "merely represent them [sc. things in general] *how they appear*" (A147/B186). Thus, phenomena belong to the way things appear.

relates a phenomenon to a transcendental object. Since the appearing things are things in themselves, we can say that we cognize things in themselves as they appear. While I will consider in more detail in section 5 what it means that the “things are only cognized as they appear”, and not “as they are” (A249f.)⁵¹, we can already understand it in a rough outline: when we cognize things in themselves as they appear, this is cognition of the way things in themselves produce intuitions by affecting us and ultimately occasion us to form the concept of a phenomenon.

There is a crucial difference between my two-aspect reading and the well-known two-aspect readings of Langton or Allais: on their account, the objects do not just appear to have sensible properties, they really have them. That is, a stone has unknowable noumenal properties, but its appearance-aspect consists in the spatial and temporal form and the heaviness and other qualities that make it a stone.⁵² It is tempting for such readers to hold that the paradox about the transcendental object is just a pseudo-problem. For the transcendental object would be an object that has an in-itself aspect, but also an appearance-aspect. And the appearance aspect would make it the case that the cognition ‘This stone is heavy’ in fact is related to an object that is a heavy stone, according to its appearance-aspect.⁵³

But this seemingly easy way out of the dilemma is at odds with the unknowability of the transcendental object. By claiming that empirical cognition is related to a merely transcendental object, Kant argues that this object is “non-empirical” (A109), “can be thought of only as something in general = X” (A104), and is “entirely unknown to us” (A494/B522). The problem for those two-aspect readers is that these passages imply that the whole object is unknowable, whereas they are committed to considering the appearance-aspect to be knowable. Furthermore, one has to wonder what reason Kant would have to emphasize the in-itself-aspect of the transcendental object if the object had a spatiotemporal, empirically cognizable appearance-aspect. He could just say that the cognition is related to the appearance-aspect; and while this would solve the paradox of the transcendental object, there would be no role for the in-itself-aspect left. To be sure, this is not a definitive rebuttal of that kind of two-aspect reading, but shows that it does

⁵¹ See also A27/B43, B69, A277/B333, MFNS 4:507, Anth 7:141. Nonetheless, Kant also speaks of “cognition of appearances” (see Bxxvi, Bxxix, A39/B56, B307), which might seem to contradict my reading that the thing that appears is the thing in itself. But this could either mean cognition of a different kind of object (namely appearances, as opposed to appearing things), or just be a case of terminological instability.

⁵² See Langton 1998: 12-15, Allais 2015: 129-32.

⁵³ Such a strategy is pursued by Willaschek (1992: 23f., 287f.n) and Rosefeldt (forthcoming). But see n. 83 on why I think that this move is not open to Rosefeldt’s dispositionalist approach.

not provide a natural solution for the dilemma. Quite the contrary, it is no less problematic than a reading like mine, according to which the transcendental object has no sensible properties.

4. The *Prolegomena* Account: “Formal Idealism” and Secondary Qualities

Let us now consider how Kant treats the paradox of the relation between cognition and the transcendental object in later works, beginning with the *Prolegomena* from 1783. Unfortunately, there is a complication: Kant no longer uses the term ‘transcendental object’ after the first edition of the *Critique*.⁵⁴ However, even though it might be unclear whether he dispenses with the conception of the transcendental object altogether (and not just with the expression), the paradox of the transcendental object, which consists in the fact that we refer empirical cognition to unknowable things in themselves, certainly does not disappear. As I argue in this section, Kant’s account of “formal idealism” and his analogy with Lockean secondary qualities, which he presents in the *Prolegomena*, makes significant progress in solving the paradox of the transcendental object, although the final solution has to wait for the B edition of the *Critique*. I first present Kant’s account of formal idealism and then return to the paradox.

After having been compared to Berkeley in the so-called Feder/Garve-review, Kant was in search for an alternative term for ‘transcendental idealism’.⁵⁵ In the *Prolegomena*, the perhaps most meaningful expression Kant considered as replacement is “formal idealism”.⁵⁶ This term is contraposed to “material idealism”⁵⁷, which denies or raises doubts about the existence of the matter of cognition (namely the object), whereas formal idealism does not question the existence of the matter at all, but merely denies that the form of cognition belongs to the objects that we cognize.⁵⁸ For this reason, Kant says his idealism insists that “real objects correspond to our representations of outer things”, while “the form of

⁵⁴ See Kemp Smith 1923: 204f., Robinson 2001: 418f. One can only speculate why Kant drops this term. Perhaps the reason is the same why he abandoned the term ‘transcendental idealism’, of which he suspected that it makes him sound like Berkeley.

⁵⁵ See ProI 4:293, 4:375.

⁵⁶ See B519n, ProI 4:337, 4:375.

⁵⁷ See B274, B519n, ProI 4:337.

⁵⁸ “Matter” is not to be understood in a metaphysical sense as that which is connected by forms here, but rather in an epistemic sense as the object that is cognized in a specific epistemic form. See JL 9:33: “In all cognition, one must distinguish matter, i.e., the object, from form, i.e., the way we cognize the object.”

intuition does not attach to the objects, but only to the human mind” (CprR 5:13n).⁵⁹ Consequently, Kant dissociates himself from Berkeley:

Mr. Eberhard’s and Garve’s view that the Berkeleyan idealism is identical to the critical one, which I could more aptly call the principle of the ideality of space and time, does not deserve the slightest attention: for I speak of ideality in regard of the form of representation, but those make of it ideality in regard of the matter, i.e., the object and its existence. (C 11:395)⁶⁰

Since Kant takes Berkeley to deny the existence of outer things⁶¹, the “ideality in regard of the matter” means that the outer object does not exist. Correspondingly, the “ideality in regard of the form” must be that outer things do exist, yet do not have the form in which we cognize them.⁶² Kant thereby distinguishes his formal from material idealism, which he calls the “real” one (Prol 4:289).⁶³ When he polemically opposes to calling his philosophy “idealism”⁶⁴, this is merely directed against traditional forms of it.

“Formal idealism” is sometimes taken to have the anodyne, merely epistemic meaning that the forms of cognition are transcendental conditions of cognizing an object.⁶⁵ This makes it tempting to think that the object of our cognition could be spatiotemporal. However, this understanding of formal idealism does not pay sufficient attention to the way Kant uses the term. A passage from the *Prolegomena*, in which Kant opposes material idealism and defends formal idealism, sheds further light on it:

⁵⁹ Keep in mind that “outer things” do not need to be spatial, but can also be things in themselves. Kant distinguishes between empirically and transcendently outer objects and identifies the former with outer appearances, but the latter with things in themselves (see A373, also MM 6:245). He argues that outer appearances are transcendently in us (see, e.g., A370, A373). One possible interpretation of this distinction – and this would be in line with the account suggested here – is that empirically outer objects are transcendently in us because they belong to the content of our mind, whereas only transcendently outer objects are objects outside our mind. I defend this interpretation elsewhere.

⁶⁰ See also R5653 18:310, R6316 18:621f.

⁶¹ According to Kant, Berkeley declares “things in space for mere imaginations” (B274) and degrades them to “mere illusion” (B70).

⁶² See also R6316, where Kant writes that the object “does not have the same form of space in which we intuit it” (18:621f., 1790-1).

⁶³ For similar designations see Prol 4:293, 4:374, R6316 18:621.

⁶⁴ See Prol 4:289, 4:293.

⁶⁵ See Pippin 1982: 188f., Allison 2004: 35f.

I say in opposition: there are things given to us as objects of our senses existing outside us, yet we know nothing of what they may be in themselves, but are acquainted only with their appearances, i.e., with the representations that they produce in us by affecting our senses. Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are bodies outside us, i.e., things which, though completely unknown to us as to what they may be in themselves, we are acquainted with them through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides us, and to which we give the name of a body – which word therefore merely signifies the appearance of this object that is unknown to us but is nonetheless real. (Prol 4:289)

Although Kant does not literally speak of ‘things in themselves’, it is easy to see that the “things”, or the things “existing outside us”, are things in themselves because he says that the “things” do not have the forms of space and time in themselves. Thus, Kant’s characterization confirms the results from section 3: Things in themselves appear to us, and appearances are only representations of things in themselves by which they appear. We can also see that, despite the disappearance of the term ‘transcendental object’, its paradox remains. For the “thing” meets the three marks that give rise to the paradox of the transcendental object outlined in section 1: it is a) thought by empirical cognition, b) a thing in itself, and c) unknowable as it is in itself.

The paradox of the transcendental object was that a) seems inconsistent with b) and c). But Kant’s comparison of formal idealism with Locke’s account of secondary qualities is an important step towards solving it:

That one could, without detracting from the actual existence of outer things, say of a great many of their predicates: they [...] have no existence on their own outside our representation, is something that has been accepted and acknowledged long before *Locke’s* time, though more commonly thereafter. To these predicates belong warmth, color, taste, etc. That I, however, beyond these include (for weighty reasons) also among mere appearances the remaining qualities of bodies, which are called *primarias*: extension, place, and more generally space with everything that depends on it (impenetrability or materiality, shape, etc.) is something against which not the least ground for inadmissibility can be raised [...]. (Prol 4:289)

As Kant summarizes Locke’s distinction, primary qualities exist outside our representations, whereas secondary qualities do not. Kant argues that traditional primary qualities, like extension, should be treated the same way as traditional secondary qualities because the objects that appear to us are not spatially extended.⁶⁶ The quote goes on to make a distinction between “similar” and “conforming”:

⁶⁶ As Allais (2007: 465f.) points out, there is a seeming tension of the *Prolegomena* with the *Critique*, where Kant calls the analogy with secondary qualities “inadequate” to explain the ideality of space (A29/B45). But Kant makes a distinction between an empirical and a transcendental difference between appearances and things in themselves that would allow him to make an analogous distinction between secondary qualities in an empirical and a

I would very much like to know how then my claims must be framed so as not to contain any idealism. Without doubt I would have to say: that the representation of space not only is *perfectly conforming* [*vollkommen gemäß*] to the relation that our sensibility has to objects⁶⁷, for I have said that, but that it is even *fully similar* [*völlig ähnlich*] to the object; an assertion to which I can attach no sense, any more than to the assertion that the sensation of red is similar to the property of cinnabar that excites this sensation in me. (Prol 4:289f., emphases mine)

Just as our representation of redness is not similar to cinnabar, the representation of space is not “fully similar” to the objects, even though the representation “conforms” to them. Since the expressions ‘similar’ and ‘conforming’ lie at the heart of Kant’s secondary quality analogy, it is worth considering them in detail.

In Kant’s day, ‘similar’ and ‘identical’ [*gleich*] have often been used interchangeably.⁶⁸ Since, properly speaking, ‘similarity’ only means imperfect identity, the expression ‘perfectly similar’ was common to indicate complete identity.⁶⁹ Consequently, when Kant says that the representation of space is not “fully similar” to its object (and compares it to traditional secondary qualities), he denies that the object is spatial.⁷⁰ Locke’s term ‘resemblance’ is apparently another term for ‘identity’ in this sense. He says that

transcendental sense. In the empirical sense, phenomena, as physical objects, are things in themselves and opposed to appearances as intuitions; but in the transcendental sense even phenomena are only appearances and representations (see A45/B62). Then Kant could say that colors are secondary qualities in an empirical sense because they do not belong to physical objects, whereas space is a secondary quality in a transcendental sense because space belongs to physical objects, but not to things in themselves. See [REDACTED]; for a similar argument see Rosefeldt 2007: 182f.

⁶⁷ Kant is apparently a bit imprecise in two ways here. First, he says that the representation of space conforms to the *relation* between representation and object. However, conformity is itself the relation between our sensible representations and objects. Second, space, as pure intuition a priori, is not the consequence of affection, but the form of outer intuitions, which are these consequences. It would have been more precise to say that our spatial intuitions conform to things that affect us.

⁶⁸ See the dictionary entry “Ähnlich” in Adelung 1774-86: “In everyday life, however, ‘identical’ [*gleich*] and ‘similar’ are very often used interchangeably.”

⁶⁹ For example, in a discussion of Leibniz’s “principle of indiscernibles” Kant writes that one part of space may be “perfectly similar and identical” to another part (A264/B320, see also A272/B328). It goes without saying that, here or elsewhere, ‘identity’ is not used in the sense of numerical identity, but of type-identity.

⁷⁰ One might find the application of the concept of (qualitative) identity to the relation between representation and object dubious – after all, how could a representation, as a mental item, be red or spatial? But Locke and Kant are clearly referring to the *content* of representation, as distinguished from the representation itself. No

“the *Ideas*, produced in us by these *Secondary Qualities*, have no resemblance of them at all” (Locke 1979: 137). This means that the ideas of secondary qualities are not identical to these qualities.⁷¹ Kant’s account can be read as a radicalization of Locke’s view: all properties of our representations, even space and time, are like secondary qualities; they have ‘no resemblance’ to the object.⁷²

As regards “conformity”, a number of lectures give definitions of the term like the following⁷³:

Conformity [*Conformitaet*] is the relation [*respectus*] of a grounded thing [*rationati*] to the ground [*rationi*], insofar as the grounded thing is posited by the ground. (M-Herder 28:16)⁷⁴

The grounded thing is a consequence of the ground, and that the consequence is posited (or determined) by a ground just follows analytically from the concept of ‘consequence’; for a ground is that by which a determinate consequence is posited.⁷⁵ Hence, every consequence conforms to its ground. Things in themselves are grounds of representations by affecting the cognizing subject.⁷⁶ “Affection” is

representation, as a determination of the soul, is red; when we speak of a red representation, we mean that it has red content.

⁷¹ Note that, for Locke, secondary qualities are not the ideas of red, but their cause. Kant, by contrast, holds that secondary qualities “have no existence on their own outside our representation” (Prol 4:289), so I take it that he identifies colors etc. not with properties of things that appear to us, but with the content of representations. Rosefeldt (2007: 187) holds that Kant uses terms that express secondary qualities in both senses. But I can see no convincing example for a use in a Lockean way.

⁷² For a different account of the secondary quality analogy that treats secondary qualities as “essentially manifest”, but subject-dependent properties of objects that are directly intuited (without representations as intermediaries), see Allais (2007, 2015: ch. 6).

⁷³ In ordinary German, “conformity” is the relation by which one thing meets the conditions set by another thing, which is more general than the technical sense (see Adelung 1774-86: “Gemäß”). It should be noted that Kant’s use of ‘*gemäß sein*’ is slightly different from ‘*sich richten nach*’ (which can also be translated as “to conform”), which occurs in the discussion of the Copernican Revolution, where Kant argues that objects “conform to” [*sich richten nach*] our cognition (Bxviff.).

⁷⁴ See also M-Herder 28:22, M-Volckmann, 28:427, M-L₂, 28:562, M-Dohna, 28:638. Kant follows Baumgarten’s use of ‘conformity’, see Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, §80, 17:22f., §176, 17:52.

⁷⁵ See C 11:35, M-Volckmann 28:401, M-Schön 28:486, M-L₂ 28:549, M-Dohna 28:625, M-Mrongovius 29:806.

⁷⁶ More precisely, objects are *real* grounds of representations, that is, grounds on the level of things. *Logical* grounds are on the level of concepts or judgments, but this clearly does not apply here. For Kant’s discussion of logical and real grounds, see, e.g., NM 2:202, OD 8:195, C 11:35, M-Herder 28:11, M-Volckmann 28:403, M-L₂ 28:549, M-Mrongovius 29:807.

the relation by which a thing is the ground of intuitions.⁷⁷ Thus, intuitions conform to an affecting thing in itself.

With this in mind, we are finally in a position to return to the problem of the relation of empirical cognition to the thing in itself. How much does Kant's account of formal idealism and of secondary qualities help to solve it? Consider first the notion of conformity. In the famous letter to Marcus Herz, dating from Feb 21, 1772, he writes:

If the representation only contains the way in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how it can conform [*gemäß sey*] to the object as an effect to its cause and how this representation of our mind can represent something, i.e., have an object. (C 10:130)⁷⁸

Once intuitions are freed from the requirement of being similar to the affecting objects and conformity is enough to give them an object, there is no problem about their relation to the thing in itself. Thus, the secondary quality analogy is in a position to explain how we can have intuitions of things in themselves. However, conformity is not an intentional relation – intuitions do not represent their object as something – but only a causal one. This means that the notion of conformity is not immediately helpful to understand how things in themselves can be the object of empirical cognition.

Still, the secondary quality analogy might be used to understand empirical cognitions as well. For the traditional account of secondary qualities not merely holds that, say, the color red does not belong to the cinnabar, but also that the cinnabar has the power to cause red sensations. Now Kant holds that even traditional primary qualities are like traditional secondary qualities. Thus, when we say: “The stone is heavy”, it is tempting to think that, according to Kant, we thereby say that the thing that we cognize has the power to cause the appearance of a heavy stone in us. Since the thing is deprived of all empirical, spatiotemporal properties once we treat traditional primary qualities like secondary qualities, this would explain why the thing is only an unknowable “X” and a non-spatiotemporal thing in itself. On this account, cognizing things in the forms of space and time means to attribute the power of causing spatiotemporal representations to the things – that is, to appear in the forms of space and time.

⁷⁷ See A68/B93, B129, A253/B309. Albeit controversial, I take it that affection is not only a relation of (real) ground and consequence, but also, more specifically, a relation of cause and effect (see, e.g., A494/B522f.). For this reason, I will speak interchangeably of ‘(real) ground’ and ‘cause’ with regard to affection. However, my interpretation does not depend on whether affection is causal.

⁷⁸ Similar passages, next to the one from the *Prolegomena*, can be found in R1676 16:76f. and R6314 18:616.

However, while I will argue in the next section that Kant settles for a similar view in the end, he has not arrived at this point in the *Prolegomena* yet. He just vaguely says that we can conceive of empirical cognition by analogy to secondary qualities, but does not spell this account out. Furthermore, a problem emerges if we reconsider this sentence:

Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are *bodies* outside us, i.e., things which, though *completely unknown* to us as to what they may be in themselves, we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides us, and to which we *give the name of a body* – which word therefore merely signifies the *appearance of this object* that is unknown to us but is nonetheless real. (Prol 4:289, emphases mine)

Kant usually understands “bodies” as spatially extended things.⁷⁹ However, in this sentence he first identifies bodies with mind-transcendent appearing things and then with the appearances of these things. Could this be a slip of the pen, or does this account emerge from the secondary quality analogy? For, just as one might apply the term ‘red’ both to the representation and to the properties that cause this representation, one might apply the term ‘body’ both to the thing as appearance and to the thing that causes the appearance.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Kant in fact had this account. One just should not expect him to use the word ‘body’ in two different meanings in the very same sentence without making the different meanings explicit. As we will see now, Kant’s final solution in the B edition of the *Critique* does not suffer from this problem.

5. Kant’s Solution in the B Edition: Limiting Cognition to the Appearing of Things in Themselves

Kant develops his solution of the paradox in the wake of a discussion of a subtle distinction between appearance [*Erscheinung*] and illusion [*Schein*] that he appends in the B edition to the *Transcendental Aesthetics*:

When I say: in space and time intuition represents both outer objects as well as the self-intuition of the mind as each affects our senses, i.e., as it *appears*, that is not to say that these objects would be a mere *illusion*. For in the appearance the objects, indeed even properties that we attribute to them, are always regarded as something really given, save that, insofar as this property depends only on the kind of intuition of the subject in the relation of the given object to it, then this object as *appearance* is to be distinguished from itself as object *in itself*. Thus I do not say that bodies merely *seem* [*scheinen*] to exist outside me or that my soul only *seems* to be given when I assert that the quality of space and time – in accordance with which, as condition of

⁷⁹ See A7/B11, A342/B400.

⁸⁰ This is Rosefeldt’s (2007: 193-5) view.

their existence, I posit both of these – lies in my kind of intuition and not in these objects in themselves. It would be my own fault if I made that which I should count as appearance into mere illusion.* (B69)

Appearances depend on the way things are given to us in intuition (if the appearance is mere *apparentia*) or thought according to the unity of categories by reflecting on intuition (as phenomenon, see sect. 3). Just having appearances does not mean that we judge something to be the case; and since only judgments can be true or false, there is no error in appearances. This distinguishes them from illusions⁸¹, which exist “only in the judgment about [an object] insofar as it is thought” (A294/B349f.).⁸²

In the *Prolegomena*, Kant has appealed to the secondary quality analogy to show that intuitions are not similar to their objects, which thus can be things in themselves. In the footnote attached to the asterisk in the quote from B69, he uses the analogy again to give an account of how we can relate empirical cognitions to these things:

The predicates of appearance can be attributed to the object itself, in relation to our sense, e.g., the red color or fragrance to the rose; but the illusion can never be attributed to the object as predicate, precisely because that would be to attribute to the object *for itself* what belongs to it only in relation to the senses or in general to the subject, e.g., the two handles that were originally attributed to Saturn. What is not to be encountered in the object in itself at all, but is always to be encountered in its relation to the subject and is inseparable from the representation of the object, is appearance, and thus the predicates of space and of time are rightly attributed to the objects of the senses as such, and there is no illusion in this. On the contrary, if I attribute the redness to the rose *in itself*, the handles to Saturn or extension to all outer objects *in themselves*, without looking to a certain relation of these objects to the subject *and limiting my judgment to this*, then illusion first arises. (B69f.n, last emphasis mine⁸³)

⁸¹ However, in the quote from B69 Kant implicitly distinguishes between two kinds of illusion. The first concerns the existence of objects, the second their properties. Although the first sense is also involved here, only the second sense is relevant for the secondary quality analogy (see the following).

⁸² A difficult point lies in Kant’s contention that illusion is not error, but only leads to it, and nonetheless belongs to judgments. Suffice it here that appearance is distinguished both from illusion and error in that having an appearance is different from judging something to be the case. For the difference between illusion and error, see the classical discussion in Grier 2001: 117-30.

⁸³ My reading of this passage is closely related to Rosefeldt’s (see Rosefeldt 2007, in particular 175f., also forthcoming). There are three notable differences, though. First, although Rosefeldt recognizes that Kant sometimes uses the word ‘appearance’ only for the content of representations (see Rosefeldt 2007: 187), he does not consider its systematic connections to the notion of ‘appearing’. Second, Rosefeldt thinks that the appearance-aspect consists in “dispositions” or “response-dependent properties” (see Rosefeldt 2007: 188-92, forthcoming); thus, things have an appearance-aspect even if they do not actually appear. By contrast, I hold that appearing is the

The secondary quality analogy illustrates how we can avoid illusion by limiting judgments to the relation that the objects have to our senses. Just as redness does not belong to the rose in itself, space and time are not forms of things in themselves, but of their appearances. While “the predicates of appearance can be attributed to the object itself”, we cannot attribute the predicates to things as they are in themselves (which would be an error), but only as they appear.

But how do we limit experience to the way things appear? Apparently, Kant means that empirical cognition, whether explicitly or implicitly, must be given a particular form that differs from common linguistic practice.⁸⁴ Consider first, as an example for traditional secondary qualities, the sentence ‘The rose is red’. Since the rose is not red itself, but only the cause of red appearances (at least if we do not use the term ‘red’ for the properties that are responsible for the red appearances), traditional philosophers reformulate the sentence as ‘The rose appears red’. But on Kant’s account, since there are no sensible properties in appearance that resemble the object (the thing in itself), all we know about the appearing thing is that it is a thing in itself that affects us in a certain way. We are also unable to identify the particular things in themselves that appear to us⁸⁵, and do not even know how many things in themselves appear to us⁸⁶. As a result, we have to say ‘At least one thing in itself (of which we have no further knowledge) appears as *a*’ – e.g., as a heavy stone. The judgment is then about things in

actual process by which appearances are given and produced; hence judgments about things as they appear are not about the potentialities of things to appear in a certain way. (Judgments about possible perceptions that we would have if we were in different perceptual situations are grounded on what is actually given (see A225f./B272-4, A376, A492f./B520f.), so merely possible perceptual states that are inferred from the actually given belong to the way things *actually* appear.) Third, Rosefeldt holds that we can say that a rose (or another empirical object) is a “mind-external object” just because it appears to us as a rose (Rosefeldt 2007: 195, see also 195-8). But this strikes me as false: if being a rose means to have the properties that essentially (or typically) belong to a rose (having spatiotemporal extension, being a plant, etc.), then the things that appear to us as roses – which do not have any of these properties – are not roses; and the word ‘rose’ cannot be meaningfully applied to them.

⁸⁴ Note that this only holds for judgments about things as they appear. There is no reason to think that we could not also make judgments about appearances, but, on my reading, they are just mental content and not the ‘real object’, so Kant is less interested in them (see also n. 31 and 51). Judgments about appearances would not need to be given this peculiar form.

⁸⁵ This results from the fact that we are not directly acquainted with things in themselves, which are only given to us through intuitions.

⁸⁶ According to Kant, intuitions could be the composite effect of a coalition of things in themselves that affect us. See OD 8:209n, also A353.

themselves, though not about what they are in themselves, but how they appear.⁸⁷ What must be emphasized here is that this theory is normative: we ought to formulate empirical cognition in this form, even though it conflicts with common sense “transcendental realism”, i.e., the view that spatiotemporal things are things in themselves^{88, 89}.

This puts us in a position to see how this account solves the paradox of the transcendental object. First, we should note again that, despite the disappearance of the term ‘transcendental object’, the paradox of the transcendental object remains. Consider this passage:

Understanding is, generally speaking, the faculty of *cognitions*. These consist in the determinate relation of given representations to an object. An *object*, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is *united*. Now, however, all unification of representations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and consequently is that which makes them into cognitions and on which even the possibility of the understanding rests. (B137)

Kant still thinks that cognition is the relation of a representation to an object and that the unity of consciousness is sufficient to constitute cognition. And he still thinks that appearances are representations of things in themselves, so he still thinks that the object to which we relate the cognition is an unknowable thing in itself:

However, appearances are only representations⁹⁰ of things that exist without cognition of what they might be in themselves. (B164)

⁸⁷ It goes without saying that having empirical representations is not sufficient for the existence of things that appear to us – when we dream or hallucinate, there is nothing that appears. Still, there would be something to say about how Kant can handle different kinds of perceptual error, and so on. While I think that he has the resources to deal with them, I lack the space to discuss this issue here.

⁸⁸ See A369, A491/B519.

⁸⁹ Some readers might consider the consequence that our empirical cognition is wrong unless we give it that particular form unacceptable. However, it is open to them to embrace a ‘two standpoints’-doctrine: from the common sense standpoint of empirical realism, our common empirical judgments are true; the philosophical standpoint of transcendental idealism (which makes the reformulation necessary) is only of interest for the philosopher. But while this account is arguably compatible with my interpretation, I am not committed to the two standpoints-doctrine.

⁹⁰ The formulation that appearances are representations leaves open whether appearances are intuitions that only have a causal relation to things in themselves, or whether they are empirical cognitions which as such have an intentional relation to things in themselves. But in the section from which this sentence is taken, Kant discusses

So we are again in the paradoxical situation that the object is a) the intentional referent of empirical cognition, b) a thing in itself, c) unknowable as it is in itself. However, Kant has now outlined a way out of the apparent dilemma: Empirical cognition is related to things in themselves, but we do not attribute sensible predicates to them. Rather, we cognize things in themselves by attributing to them the way they appear to us. The things are unknowable in crucial ways – we do not know them as they are in themselves – but we know them as they appear; and this is sufficient not only to make them the intentional referent of empirical cognition, but also to make them cognizable in this respect.

At this point, readers may object that, even if my proposed interpretation is in a position to solve the paradox of the transcendental object, it is based on the unacceptable assumption that we can have knowledge of things in themselves. Does Kant not say time and again that this is impossible? How could it then be legitimate to make judgments about how things in themselves appear? After all, I have listed the unknowability of the transcendental object as one of its characteristics!

However, it would be a misunderstanding of Kant that we can know absolutely nothing about things in themselves. Just consider his claim that we can know that things in themselves are neither spatial nor temporal – whatever his rationale, this is some piece of knowledge that we can have of them.⁹¹ We also know that things in themselves exist: Kant not only says, as we have seen, that appearances without things in themselves that appear would be absurd; he outright states that the understanding “admits the existence of things in themselves” (Prol 4:315) and that “appearances always presuppose a thing in itself and are thus indicative of them [*darauf Anzeige tun*]” (Prol 4:355).⁹² To be sure, Kant does say at times that we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves.⁹³ But if we took this to mean that we can have no knowledge of them at all, this would be inconsistent with his knowledge claims mentioned above. Fortunately, we are not forced to attribute this contradiction to Kant. For he also says that we cannot know the things as they are in themselves, which is compatible with knowledge of them as they appear and other knowledge of them.⁹⁴ Since the contradiction can be avoided on the second formulation, we should take Kant’s claim that we cannot know things in themselves to mean that we just cannot know

how we can have empirical cognition, as opposed to intuition; thus, the “representations” are cognitions of things in themselves.

⁹¹ See A26/B42, A32f./B49, B149.

⁹² See also Kant’s response to Eberhard, where he says that “the objects as things in themselves give the stuff for empirical intuitions” (OD 8:215).

⁹³ See e.g. Bxx, A30/B45, A190/B235.

⁹⁴ See e.g. A38/B55, A43/B60, B164, A277/B333, Prol 4:289.

them as they are in themselves. This is still a very substantial amount of ignorance; there is no need to worry that knowledge of things in themselves as they appear makes them too 'knowable'.⁹⁵

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the dispute about whether the transcendental object is the thing in itself has its roots in the absence of an adequate account in the A edition of the problem how things in themselves could be the object of empirical cognition. Only Kant's later conception of formal idealism and the analogy with secondary qualities puts him in a position to adequately respond to this issue. For, on his mature view, he holds that we cognize things in themselves, but only as they appear and not as they are in themselves.

My account presupposes a broadly phenomenalist reading of Kant's idealism (but where things in themselves add a heavy dose of realism), for which I have not argued in this paper. However, one might also try the other direction: to look whether a solution of the paradox of the transcendental object is only possible if Kant is a phenomenalist of some sort. As I have indicated in section 3, it is not obvious that two-aspect readers lack the resources to account for the paradox (even though the unknowability of the transcendental object is a challenge for them); so this direction would probably be more difficult. Instead of engaging with their views directly, let me therefore highlight what, in my view, makes my reading attractive.

First, my reading is in a position to explain how we can entertain an intentional relation to objects outside the mind that are mostly unknowable. Other readings have to assume either that we can know quite a bit about outer objects (for example because they are spatiotemporal), that the intentional relation does not require acquaintance with the object (if one ascribes externalism about reference to Kant), or that empirical cognition is not about objects outside the mind. None of these assumptions is acceptable. Second, my interpretation does justice to Kant's claim that appearances are only representations and do not exist outside the mind. Many scholars shy away from any reading that is remotely phenomenalist, but to me it is undeniable that, according to Kant, there are no spatiotemporal objects outside the mind. Third, I can also explain why things in themselves are the objects that appear to us. Usually, two-aspect readers solve this problem by identifying thing in itself and appearance, but this annihilates the phenomenalist element of Kant's idealism and makes outer objects more knowable than he seems to allow. Not all interpreters would accept all three of these claims, and those who accept

⁹⁵ For a similar argument, see Allais 2015: 33-6, 65-70, also Rosefeldt 2013, forthcoming.

them might attempt to do justice to them in a different way. Nevertheless, finding a solution to the paradox of the transcendental object is a path that ultimately could lead to a compelling reading of Kant's idealism.⁹⁶

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