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Nietzsche's critique of Kant's thing in itself¹

Abstract: This paper investigates the argument that substantiates Nietzsche's refusal of the Kantian concept of thing in itself. As Maudemarie Clark points out, Nietzsche dismisses this notion because he views it as self-contradictory. The main concern of the paper will be to account for this position. In particular, the two main theses defended here are (a) that the argument underlying Nietzsche's claim is that the concept of thing in itself amounts to the inconsistent idea of a propertyless thing and (b) that this argument is a sound one. Finally, I will show that the reading proposed allows a deflationary response to the objection that Nietzsche's will to power is simply a new version of the post-Kantian thing in itself.

Keywords: thing in itself, Kant, will to power, relational vs. intrinsic properties

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die Argumentation, die Nietzsches Zurückweisung des kantischen Begriffs des Dings an sich untermauert. Wie Maudemarie Clark betont, verwirft Nietzsche diesen Begriff als selbstwidersprüchlich. Hauptanliegen des Aufsatzes ist, dies deutlich zu machen. Insbesondere werden folgende zwei Thesen vertreten: (a) dass das Nietzsches Position zugrundeliegende Argument darin besteht, der Begriff des Dings an sich sei der inkonsistente Begriff eines eigenschaftslosen Dings; (b) dass dieses Argument stichhaltig ist. Schließlich wird gezeigt, dass diese Interpretation eine deflationäre Antwort auf den Einwand ermöglicht, Nietzsches Wille zur Macht sei einfach eine neue Variante des postkantischen Dings an sich.

Schlagwörter: Ding an sich, Kant, Wille zur Macht, relationale vs. intrinsische Eigenschaften

¹ Thanks to Tsarina Doyle, Tom Bailey and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper.

0) Introduction²

Although the distinction between the thing “in itself” and its “appearance” was already important in early modern philosophy,³ it was Kant who awarded these two concepts the status of *termini technici*, which nearly all German philosophy was subsequently confronted with. Despite Fichte and Hegel’s swift elimination of Kant’s distinction, other philosophers – firstly the Kantian *sui generis* Schopenhauer – reembraced it in order to build their own systems. In the 1860s, when Otto Liebmann’s call for a return to Kant began to gain support from mainstream German academics, the issue came to the forefront of philosophical debate, particularly with regard to the controversial notion of the thing in itself. However, this did not occur solely among strict Neo-Kantians. Nietzsche, as is widely known, developed his ideas within this philosophical atmosphere: he frequently re-read Friedrich Albert Lange’s *History of Materialism*, projected a dissertation on the problem of teleology after Kant and was interested in the Kantian-framed physiological theory elaborated by scientists such as Hermann von Helmholtz.⁴ Of course, he also became an enthusiastic Schopenhauerian. It is therefore unsurprising that the Kantian distinction between thing in itself and appearance occurs repeatedly in Nietzsche’s works and notes, often playing a key role. In particular, Nietzsche has been often presented as the philosopher who, after having endorsed this Kantian distinction in his previous work, eventually ends by rejecting the very notion of thing in itself and thus overcomes the metaphysical dualism which dominates most of the previous

² I will use the following translations of Nietzsche’s works:

- Human, All Too Human. A Book for Free Spirits, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, introduction by R. Schacht. Cambridge 1996 (=HUH).
- The Gay Science, edited by B. Williams, translated by J. Nauckhoff and A. Del Caro. Cambridge 2001 (=GS).
- Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, edited by R.-P. Horstmann and J. Norman, translated by J. Norman. Cambridge 2002 (=BGE).
- On the Genealogy of Morality. A Polemic, translated by M. Clark and A. J. Swensen. Indianapolis 1998 (=GM).
- The Anti-Christ, in: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings, edited by A. Ridley and J. Norman, Cambridge 2005, pp. 1–67 (=AC).

Where in Nietzsche’s writings “Ding an sich” has been translated as “thing-in-itself”, I have modified it into “thing in itself”. This is because I share the view expressed by Prauss that the “hyphenation” of Kant’s term – which Nietzsche indeed does not use – can be misleading and suggest an incorrect interpretation. See Gerold Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, 3rd ed., Bonn 1989, pp. 24–31.

Quotations from Kant’s first *Critique* are taken from the following translation (page numbers of the A and B editions are provided):

- Critique of Pure Reason, translated and edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, Cambridge 1998 (=CPR).

References to Kant’s *Akademie Ausgabe* (Kant’s gesammelte Schriften, Berlin / Leipzig (now: Berlin / New York), 1900–now, 29 vols.) are given with the abbreviation AA followed by volume (Roman) and page (Arabic) number. When quotations do not refer to English editions, translations are mine.

³ For an overview see John W. Yolton, *Realism and Appearances. An Essay in Ontology*, Cambridge 2000.

⁴ On this last point see Sören Reuter, *An der “Begräbnisstätte der Anschauung”*. Nietzsches Bild- und Wahrnehmungstheorie in *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*, Basel 2009.

philosophical tradition. However, the question of whether he succeeds in substantiating his refusal of Kant's position is anything but clear.

On the one hand, scepticism has been expressed with regard to this point. Rüdiger Grimm, for instance, claims that "the noumenon which Nietzsche rejects as an absurdity is something of an oversimplification and not entirely representative of Kant's position".⁵ In a similar fashion, Kurt Mosser complains that Nietzsche scholars too often tend to settle for a hasty dismissal of Kant's philosophy without taking the trouble to verify whether it fulfils its aim.⁶

On the other hand, some scholars have defended Nietzsche's overcoming of Kantian dualism. Here, the primary concern has often been to argue against the thesis which holds that Nietzsche was unable to relinquish the Kantian frame since his notion of will to power strongly resembles that of thing in itself, particularly the Schopenhauerian version. Jörg Salaquarda's reading offers a good example of this strategy, according to which Nietzsche's philosophy of power should not be seen as a further metaphysically overloaded variation on the theme of the thing in itself, but rather as a hypothetically formulated "*Weltdeutung*".⁷

Yet the problem of how to account, more narrowly, for Nietzsche's rejection of Kant's notion of the thing in itself has been given less attention. An important contribution in this direction is the reading proposed by Maudemarie Clark, whose attempt to make sense of the argument underlying Nietzsche's position has proven seminal. Clark correctly points out that the reason Nietzsche eventually dismisses the Kantian idea of the thing in itself is that he considers it self-contradictory and subsequently tries to account for this claim. However, for reasons which I will explore later, the way she interprets Nietzsche's argumentative strategy is less convincing. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide an alternative reading of Nietzsche's criticism of Kant's notion. In doing this, however, I will share with Clark the underlying thesis according to which Nietzsche provides a sound argument against Kant's conception of the thing in itself.

The relevance of this problem for Nietzsche's late thought is doubtless. As the section from *Twilight of the Idols* titled *How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable* testifies, for Nietzsche, Kant's notion of the thing in itself is the latest and most subtle incarnation of the idea of a "true world", which transcends the reality we experience. Born under religious semblance, the conception of a "true world" is eventually reshaped by Kant in fully

⁵ Rüdiger H. Grimm, *Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge*, Berlin / New York 1977, p. 57.

⁶ See Kurt Mosser, *Nietzsche, Kant and the Thing in Itself*, in: *International Studies in Philosophy* 25 (1993), pp. 67–77.

⁷ See Jörg Salaquarda, *Nietzsches Kritik der Transzendentalphilosophie*, in: Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (ed.), *Über Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Einführung in seine Philosophie*, Frankfurt 1985, pp. 46–55.

theoretical terms: “God became the “thing in itself”” (AC 17), as Nietzsche writes. Notoriously, this conception is also one of the main programmatic targets of his late philosophy. Therefore, it is important for any interpretation focusing on the controversial topic of Nietzsche’s overcoming dualistic metaphysics to spell out the extent to which he succeeds in substantiating his criticism of such a tenacious version of the idea of a “true world” as the Kantian thing in itself. Indeed, after addressing this issue we will be in a better position to respond to the problem also faced by Salaquarda, namely that Nietzsche sometimes characterizes the will to power in terms that put it in the immediate vicinity of the thing in itself.

The primary aim of this paper being to show that Nietzsche delivers an argument which points to a crucial weakness in Kant’s conception of the thing in itself, I will not consider the philological and historical questions raised by his relation to Kant.⁸ There are two main reasons for doing so. Firstly, a systematic analysis of the sources on which Nietzsche’s statements about Kant are based requires its own investigation,⁹ and would take us away from the problem addressed in the paper. Secondly, even though such a philological undertaking may indeed be very useful for a proper understanding of the issue at stake, my concern here is limited to the argumentative substance of Nietzsche’s criticism of the thing in itself. Thus, my strategy will be more straightforward, and involves discussing Nietzsche’s position toward Kant directly, without focusing too closely on the historical factors which may have contributed to his view.

The outline of the paper is as follows: (1) as the way Clark addresses Nietzsche’s refusal of the notion of the thing in itself is not only accurate, but has also proven influential in recent scholarship, it will be appropriate to start by discussing her interpretation to set the frame for a further analysis. Like Clark, I will claim that only the late Nietzsche provides a sound argument against the thing in itself, by arguing that its very notion is self-contradictory. However, I will show that Clark’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s position is less convincing; (2) I will provide an interpretation of Kant’s distinction between appearances and things in

⁸ The only exception is that I will take into account a small book by Richard Avenarius read by Nietzsche in 1883-1884. The reason for this is that I will comment on some unpublished notes which directly re-elaborate passages taken from this work.

⁹ For an overview of Nietzsche’s reading of and about Kant see Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context. An Intellectual Biography*, Urbana / Chicago 2008, pp. 36–40. With regard to the problem of the thing in itself, the following authors appear to be the primary references for Nietzsche: Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Albert Lange, Afrikan Spir, Gustav Teichmüller, and Otto Liebmann. However, works by, among others, Kuno Fischer, Friedrich Ueberweg, Eugen Dühring, Alfons Bilharz, Maximilian Drossbach and Richard Avenarius have probably also contributed to different extents and in different periods to Nietzsche’s understanding of Kant’s position. The philological and historical problems related to Nietzsche’s sources on the Kantian distinction between things in themselves and appearances are discussed in detail in my book “Der faule Fleck des Kantischen Kriticismus”. *Erscheinung und Ding an sich bei Nietzsche*, Basel 2009.

themselves, defending a version of the so-called two-aspects reading of Kant's position and arguing that Kant fails to substantiate this distinction. This will help to determine whether Nietzsche's case against the thing in itself is convincing; (3) I will suggest a reading of the claim that the thing in itself is self-contradictory, which differs from what Clark proposes. I will examine two different arguments provided by Nietzsche that could be considered to substantiate his claim and show that only one of them works; (4) Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the relation between Nietzsche's famous (or infamous) concept of will to power and the thing in itself, by arguing that we do not need to see the former as just a further post-Kantian metamorphosis of the latter.

1) Clark on the inconceivability of the thing in itself

As early as 1865 Nietzsche viewed the distinction between "thing in itself" and "appearance" as the only starting point for any serious philosophical theory.¹⁰ Later, he returned to this distinction in order to build the theoretical framework of his *Artisten-Metaphysik*, as conveyed in the *Birth of Tragedy*, and then again in order to maintain the epistemological considerations exposed in *Truth and Lie in Extra-Moral Sense*. It was not until the end of the 1870s – in the first book of *Human, All Too Human* – that Nietzsche began to criticise Kant's distinction, while at the same time abandoning the view of art, science and culture that he had defended in the *Birth of Tragedy* and moving toward the more enlightened philosophy of the "free spirit". However, this criticism does not directly challenge the ontological distinction between the thing in itself and its appearance, but rather dismisses it as a mere theoretical question which is ultimately meaningless in terms of our actions in life.

This development in Nietzsche's thought has been described convincingly by Maudemarie Clark. According to her interpretation, by the time of *Truth and Lie* Nietzsche endorses a representationalist theory of perception, which commits him to the idea of things in themselves existing independently of our "cognitive constitution", and consequently to a form of metaphysical realism. Clark also argues persuasively that *Human, All Too Human*, despite offering a *prima facie* critical position with regard to Kant's distinction, still does not rule out the possibility that a "metaphysical world" might exist:

¹⁰ This statement occurs in notes from the period Nietzsche spent in Bonn. See Konstantin Broese, *Nietzsches frühe Auseinandersetzung mit Kants Kritizismus*, in: Beatrix Himmelmann (ed.), *Kant und Nietzsche im Widerstreit*, Berlin / New York 2005, pp. 363–372.

It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off. (HUH I 9)

Noting the affinity between the position of *Human, All Too Human* and that of *Truth and Lie*, Clark defines both as “agnostic”, since Nietzsche explicitly assumes the possibility of things in themselves: “he has not yet found a way to deny the conceivability of the thing-in-itself”.¹¹ While in *Human, All too Human* Nietzsche remains trapped in the net of metaphysical realism, the passage by Clark quoted above suggests how, in her view, Nietzsche may overcome such ambiguity: Nietzsche only discards the thing in itself by showing that its very notion is “inconceivable”. Again, I agree with Clark’s reading. However, my agreement ends when it comes to *how* to interpret Nietzsche’s claim that the thing in itself is “inconceivable”.

Clark’s interpretation focuses mainly on two texts; aphorism 16 of *Beyond Good and Evil* and aphorism 54 of *The Gay Science*. Her strategy involves two steps: firstly (a) showing that Nietzsche holds the very notion of thing in itself to be inconceivable because it is self-contradictory (BGE 16); secondly (b), since BGE 16 provides no argument to motivate this statement directly, making sense of it by considering another passage of his work (GS 54). The first step of Clark’s strategy is indisputable:

There are still harmless self-observers who believe in the existence of “immediate certainties”, such as “I think”, or the “I will” that was Schopenhauer’s superstition: just as if knowledge had been given an object here to seize, stark naked, as a “thing in itself”, and no falsification took place from either the side of the subject or the side of the object. But I will say this a hundred times: “immediate certainty”, like “absolute knowledge” and the “thing in itself” contains a *contradictio in adjecto*. (BGE 16)

This passage clearly states that the idea of thing in itself is self-contradictory, and this can be considered a good reason for claiming that it is inconceivable. However, despite the fact that Clark is correct in pointing out that we need to look elsewhere to understand the reason for Nietzsche’s position – since BGE 16 provides no clues here –, I do not think that GS 54 is the right place to look. In this aphorism Nietzsche writes:

What is “appearance” to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some essence – what could I say about any essence except name the predicates of its appearance! Certainly not a dead mask that one could put on an unknown x and probably also take off x! (GS 54)

¹¹ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, Cambridge 1990, p. 90.

Commenting on these lines, Clark argues that Nietzsche “denies that we have any way of conceiving of such an essence”, since we have no way of cognizing it “except in terms of its appearance”.¹² This interpretation raises some difficulties.

Firstly, GS 54 neither claims that the concept of thing in itself is inconceivable *qua* self-contradictory, nor provides any hints as to how to interpret the somewhat obscure claim made in BGE 16 which Clark is trying to illuminate.¹³ Nonetheless, the aphorism might still affirm that the concept of thing in itself is inconceivable, though for different reasons. So, even if the link to BGE 16 turns out to be weaker than originally supposed, the main point of Clark’s argument would still hold.

Secondly, it seems to me that here Nietzsche is not claiming that we cannot “conceive of” the “essence” of a thing, but rather that we cannot cognize it because we only have access to its phenomenal manifestation: thus, we can only enumerate the “predicates of its appearance”. From the fact that we cannot know the intrinsic constitution of a thing, however, it does not follow that we cannot “conceive of” it. For instance, we would be able to see that a thing is logically possible even if we lacked the cognitive powers to determine its intrinsic properties or even to determine whether it exists, as Kant seems to hold with regard to noumena. The inconceivability seems thus not to be the point of Nietzsche’s aphorism. An alternative reading could be that here Nietzsche is just emphasizing – as in *Human, All Too Human* – that whereas the “thing in itself is worthy of Homeric laughter”, the *Vorstellungswelt*, being the only world we are given, is a “treasure”, “for the value of our humanity depends upon it” (HUH I 16).

To support this less radical interpretation, other aspects can be considered. Firstly, the dream-metaphor that frames the entire aphorism, being a topos of Schopenhauer’s *Traumidealismus*, gives an idealistic nuance to the passage which hardly fits in with Clark’s reading. Secondly, the reading I am suggesting is better suited to other aphorisms of the *Gay Science* that deal with the same topic. I am thinking, in particular, of GS 58:

This has caused me the greatest trouble and still does always cause me the greatest trouble: to realize that *what things are called* is unspeakably more important than what they are [...]: what started as appearance in the end nearly always becomes essence and *effectively acts* as its essence! (GS 58)

¹² Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy, p. 100.

¹³ Clark seems to recognize this point, at least partially.

The *Vorstellungswelt* that we are trapped in, though largely construed on false beliefs, atavisms and errors, is the only one we are given: it is the stage on which we play out our entire life. The appearance is thus “the active and the living itself” (GS 54), the only thing to be found in our world that “*effectively acts*” as if it were its essence (GS 58). Since we “made appearance appear” (HUH I 16), it has been gaining a historical, genetically disclosable consistence, which shapes what we are and what we do. This explains why we cannot consider it just as a “dead mask” placed on something we cannot grasp. This view may well imply that notions such as “metaphysical world” or “thing in itself” are useless, and will eventually lose their appeal even as theoretical paraphernalia; it does not imply, however, an overcoming of the “agnosticism” Clark convincingly ascribes to the Nietzsche of *Human, All Too Human*.

Let me then briefly recapitulate my position: I agree with Clark that (a) Nietzsche suitably rejects Kant’s concept of thing in itself only in the late 1880s and (b) that his critique – as indicated by BGE 16 – consists in arguing that this concept is self-contradictory and hence untenable. However, as I have tried to show above, I believe that Clark fails in explaining *why* Nietzsche holds this position and *how* he tries to substantiate it. In what follows, I will propose an alternative reading which better illuminates this problem. In my opinion, some *Nachlass* texts offer a much more reliable clue about how to interpret Nietzsche’s claim than GS 54, as suggested by Clark. However, since my aim is also to show that Nietzsche’s critique of the thing in itself proves conclusive against Kant’s position, the next step will be to briefly sketch Kant’s account.

2) Kant on appearances and things in themselves

With regard to Kant’s distinction between things in themselves and appearances, there are two major schools of thought. In the first, the concepts of appearance and the thing in itself are seen as numerically different objects (this position is known as the “two-world-view”). In the second, they are construed rather as different “aspects” of the same object, considered from a different viewpoint in each case. According to the latter interpretation, there is only one object (or better: only one object-realm), while the difference should be regarded as a mere *epistemic* one, i.e. as a difference between two different cognitive approaches to the same object (this position is known as the “two-aspect-view”).¹⁴ This interpretation appears to me to be far

¹⁴ Standard “two-aspect-view” is that of Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, and Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism. An Interpretation and Defense*, New Haven 1983, for example.

more convincing than the first one. I will therefore follow this school of thought, although my own interpretation differentiates in some important aspects from the standard “two-aspect-view”.

In this paper, it will not be possible to substantiate the main thesis of the “two-aspect-view” in full. Instead, I will limit myself to just a few remarks on this subject. As James Van Cleeve has pointed out, a textual basis does not provide a definitive criterion for establishing if either the “two-worlds-view” or the “two-aspects-view” is plausible, since passages can be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to support both positions.¹⁵ This is determined by a certain inaccuracy stemming from Kant himself. I do not believe, however, that every passage carries the same weight, since Kant concentrates *explicitly* on an explanation of the difference between appearances and things in themselves in one particular section of the *Critique*. It can therefore be said that if he has ever provided a reliable illustration of his position, then it is to be found in these pages: since the concepts of phenomena and noumena are directly discussed here, a *lapsus calami* is much more unlikely than elsewhere in the *Critique*.

The account provided by Kant in this section of the work clearly endorses the “two-aspects-view” as Kant claims that we come to differentiate between phenomena and noumena and make a distinction between “the way in which we intuit them [certain objects] and their constitution in itself” (CPR, B306). Here, it is clear that Kant is referring to the same objects. If one finds this unconvincing due to the fundamental ambiguity of the *Critique*, then the *Opus Postumum* delivers unequivocal statements, such as the following: “the thing in itself (*ens per se*) is not another object but another relation (*respectus*) of the representation to the same object” (AA XXII, p. 26).

If the appearance, then, is the same object as the thing in itself, how is the difference between them to be understood? One possible, and indeed very straightforward answer to this question is as follows: the appearance is the object as it occurs in our own experience, i.e. as the object of our knowledge, while the thing in itself is the same object considered as independent from our experience of it. However, this definition is still too vague. As suggested by Rae Langton, observing the difference in terms of properties helps to clarify the situation.¹⁶ As Kant puts it, the object as a phenomenon is defined only through its relations to other things. Its properties are therefore strictly relational ones. In contrast, when considering

¹⁵ See James Van Cleeve, *Problems from Kant*, Oxford 1999, pp. 145–146.

¹⁶ Langton develops such a properties-account extensively. See Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility. Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, Oxford 1998. I could learn a great deal from her very intriguing interpretation of this aspect of Kant’s thought. Indeed, the double equivalence appearance = relational properties / thing in itself = intrinsic properties is quite a straightforward way to put the things. For instance, Van Cleeve adopts it too, even if his interpretation goes a very different way than the one of Langton’s book. See Van Cleeve, *Problems from Kant*, p. 151–155.

the object “in itself”, we focus on its intrinsic, non-relational constitution. This characterisation follows directly from the concept of the “thing in itself”, since to be “in itself” can in no way be determined from outside. As Kant points out, “through mere relations (*bloße Verhältnisse*) no thing in itself is cognized” (CPR, B67). The difference between “appearance” and the “thing in itself” can therefore be explained as follows:

- Appearance = object considered with regard to its relational properties
- Thing in itself = object considered with regard to its non-relational properties

The core of Kant’s transcendentalism is the claim that we cannot know an object “in itself”, but only in its relation to us. This is the case with every empirical object, which is available to us only in the shape imposed upon it by the a priori forms of our sensibility. This implies both that we can grasp only its relational properties and, conversely, that its intrinsic features are beyond our cognitive limits. Nevertheless, Kant argues that we *must* also conceive of empirical objects “in themselves”, i.e. we must attribute to them some indefinable non-relational nature, even if from the outset we are unable to know what it may look like. According to this view, the notion of the “thing in itself” is a necessary, but – as long as considered from a theoretical viewpoint – empty *Vorstellung*.

One might now ask *why* empirical objects – “appearances” – must also be considered “in themselves”, i.e. *why* should one necessarily assume that, in addition to the relational properties such objects exhibit in experience, they must be thought of as having intrinsic properties, the more so as we are constitutively unable to determine which properties they might have. Theoretically speaking, do relational features not suffice? Moses Mendelssohn puts this exact question to Kant, who answers in a short work from 1786, entitled *Einige Bemerkungen zu L. H. Jakob’s Prüfung der Mendelssohn’schen Morgenstunden*. I feel that this brief exchange throws some interesting light on this topic, and I would therefore like to examine the more controversial aspects more closely. Mendelssohn’s argument is as follows:

If I tell you how a thing effects or suffers, do not continue to ask what it is! If I tell you how to conceive of a thing then the further question of what this thing is in itself, is meaningless. (AA VIII, p. 153)

Kant’s cumbersome answer to Mendelssohn seems to beg the question and, in doing so, uncovers a premise of his distinction between appearances and things in themselves, which I will now look at:

But if I [...] grasp that we don't cognize (*erkennen*) anything corporeal other than space itself [...], that furthermore the thing in space [...] reveals no other action than movement (place change, thus mere relations), no other effect (*Wirkung*) or disposition to suffer (*leidende Eigenschaft*) than moving force and mobility (modification of external relations); and I invite *Mendelssohn*, or anyone else in his place, to tell me whether I may believe to cognize (*erkennen*) a thing according to what it is if I cognize nothing more about it than *that it is something that exists in external relations (äußere Verhältnisse)* [...], in a word, whether, since I don't cognize anything other than connections (*Beziehungen*) of one thing to another, of which, in turn, I do cognize only the external connections, without the fact or even the possibility that something internal (*etwas Inneres*) is given, whether I may then say, I have a concept of the thing in itself, and whether the question is not legitimate, *what the thing that is the subject in all these relations (Verhältnissen) may be in itself.* (Ibid., pp. 153–154, my italics)¹⁷

Here, the starting point of Kant's argument is that a "phenomenon" shows properties that can always be traced back to spatial determinations; for every action that an empirical object brings about is a movement, and thus relative to the position of some other object. Kant then goes on assuming that, in addition to such relational features, I *must* conceive of the phenomenon *also* as having some intrinsic nature, even though it is a priori impossible to know it. In other words: once we recognize the "bundled" nature of appearances, we are led to assume that they have some non-relational core which bears their external relations ontologically.

This same line of thought informs a very important passage that Kant added to the second edition of the *Critique of the Pure Reason* and to which I have already briefly referred.¹⁸ Here, Kant affirms that "everything in our cognition that belongs to intuition [...] contains nothing but mere relations" and *therefore* does not include "that which is internal to the object in itself" (CPR, B67). Remarkably, Kant finds a supplementary proof of the ideality of empirical objects here,¹⁹ since – he holds – we can consider a mere relational-constituted thing only an "appearance". However, he does not provide any convincing arguments to support the claim that from the mere relational nature of empirical objects one should infer their phenomenal status. Elsewhere he even accounts for the fact that things – "insofar as they are given in intuition" – only show "determinations that express mere relations" on the ground that "these are not things in themselves but simply appearances" (CPR, A285/B341). Thus, the assumption that we must also consider empirical objects as they are "in themselves"

¹⁷ I thank Colin G. King, who reviewed my translation of this terrible passage.

¹⁸ See above, p. ■ (11).

¹⁹ On this point see Van Cleeve, *Problems from Kant*, p. 170. However, I disagree on Van Cleeve's claim that this passage endorses a two-world view.

seems to rest upon a mere *petitio principii*. As Paul Guyer stresses, this claim seems to follow from Kant's "prejudice against the ultimate reality of relations".²⁰

3) Nietzsche's criticism of the thing in itself

In section 1 of the paper, I argued that Nietzsche's only sound objection to Kant's concept of thing in itself is the claim that this notion is inconceivable *qua* self-contradictory, as stated in BGE 16. Then, I showed that Clark fails to explain how this claim is to be interpreted. In this section, I will suggest a different reading of Nietzsche's position. To do this, I will examine two alternative critiques of the thing in itself, both formulated by Nietzsche after the publication of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. I will argue that the second argument is the one Nietzsche probably had in mind when writing BGE 16 and, much more importantly, the only one to work against Kant's position as presented in section 2.

Perhaps the most extensive discussion of the notion of the thing in itself to be found in the works Nietzsche published after *Thus spoke Zarathustra* occurs at the end of aphorism 354 from the fifth book of *The Gay Science*.²¹ Dissociating himself from "those epistemologists who have got tangled up in the snares of grammar", he declares himself willing to leave to them the "opposition between subject and object", as well as the "opposition between "thing in itself" and appearance: for we "know" far too little to even be entitled to *make* that distinction" (GS 354). This argument resembles a familiar criticism of Kant's concept of the thing in itself: the alleged inconsistency is that Kant, placing things in themselves beyond the boundaries of our possible knowledge, deprives himself of the possibility of making any claim about them. Hence, it seems at least plausible to say that this argument could be the one implicit in JGB 16. The case made by Nietzsche is clearly spelled out by Lanier Anderson:

The *unknowability* of things in themselves is part of their very conception: it arises not from some contingent deficiency or incompleteness in our experience or theorizing to date, but from general and inevitable limitations on our cognitive resources, most importantly the lack of intellectual intuitions capable of representing such objects. This means that in attempting to conceive of things in themselves, we outstrip the legitimate realm of our concepts, and therefore stop making sense altogether.²²

²⁰ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Cambridge 1987, p. 350.

²¹ The fifth book of *The Gay Science* was added only in 1887 in occasion of the second edition of the work.

²² See R. Lanier Anderson, *Nietzsche's Views on Truth and the Kantian Background of His Epistemology*, in: Babette Babich and Robert S. Cohen (eds.), *Nietzsche and the Sciences*, Dordrecht / Boston / London 1999, vol. 2, pp. 50–51. Unlike myself, Lanier Anderson finds this argument convincing.

In this way, however, Kant's claim that the concept of a thing in itself is "problematic" – a characterisation that could arguably be used to make the apparent incoherence of his position much more deflationary – is simply bypassed. To better qualify the attack one could stress that the very idea of a thing in itself, regardless of the extent to which its existence is "put in brackets", plainly introduces the notion of a non-empirical causal power, as things in themselves are meant to "trigger" the corresponding experiences in us, i.e. their "appearances". This would therefore seem to contradict the principle thesis of the *Transcendental Analytic*, i.e. that categories, to which causality belongs, can only be applied to empirical objects. As the following note shows, Nietzsche might have had this in mind when writing the passage from the *Gay Science* quoted above:

Kant was no longer entitled to his distinction between "appearance" and "thing in itself" – he had denied himself the right to continue to distinguish in this old, traditional way having rejected as invalid the inference from the appearance to a cause of the appearance – in accordance with his understanding of the concept of causality and of its purely intra-phenomenal validity[.] (Nachlass 1886/87, 5[4], KSA 12, pp. 186–187)

At first, one may not find Nietzsche's critique particularly interesting, as he reiterates a point that has previously been made by many others.²³ What is pertinent, however, is that such a critical assessment appears to endorse a "two-world-view" with regard to Kant's ontology, which, as we have seen in the previous section, is a very controversial interpretation. On the contrary, if we assume the "two-aspect-view" there is no need to postulate a separate realm of entities that cause the experienced phenomena externally, since things in themselves and appearances are numerically identical. Hence, the concept of the thing in itself does not imply that of a non-empirical causation exceeding the boundaries of our experience. In the long run, the strategy outlined in aphorism 354 of *Gay Science* does not appear to take us very far.

A second, stronger argument which may substantiate the charge of self-contradiction raised in BGE 16 can be found in different passages disseminated in the *Nachlass*.²⁴

²³ Actually, I suspect that Nietzsche is taking his argument almost literally from a second-hand source, probably from Gustav Teichmüller, *Die wirkliche und die scheinbare Welt. Neue Grundlegung der Metaphysik*, Breslau 1882, p. 93.

²⁴ It is worth noting that the term "thing in itself" does not appear in Nietzsche's *Nachlass* in the years 1880-1883. The first references we find are from the winter 1883-1884 and are related to Nietzsche's reading of a small book by Richard Avenarius in which the criticism of the thing in itself is of primary importance and to which I will go back later. This notion then appears more frequently in Nietzsche's notes until 1888 (I listed 42 occurrences in the last three KSA volumes).

The “in itself” is even an absurd (*widersinnige*) conception: a “constitution in itself” (*Beschaffenheit an sich*) is non-sense; we always have the concept “being”, “thing” only as the concept of relation (*Relationsbegriff*) (Nachlass 1888, 14[103], KSA 13, p. 280)

The “thing in itself” [is] absurd (*widersinnig*). If I remove all relations, all “properties”[,] all “activities” of a thing, then the thing *does not* remain left. (Nachlass 1887, 10[202], KSA 12, p. 580)

There are two main cases that can be made in support of the claim that the argument outlined in this passage is the one which validates BGE 16. The more obvious and striking case is that the two quoted *Nachlass* notes make exactly the same point as the published aphorism: the thing in itself is “*widersinnig*”, i.e. self-contradictory. The second case is that this argument also occurs in another note dated between Fall 1885 and Fall 1886, i.e. by the time Nietzsche was working on *Beyond Good and Evil*.²⁵ The main question, however, is whether or not the reasoning offered in the *Nachlass* in favor of the claim that the thing in itself is self-contradictory is convincing. In the rest of this section, my aim will be to show that it is.

Nietzsche seems to make two different claims: (a) our concept of “thing” is relational, *since* no empirical object shows any property that is not relational; (b) if we subtract from an object all its relational properties, nothing – no object at all – is left. This two points are made clear in the note written between Fall 1885 and Fall 1886 just referred to: “The properties of a thing are effects upon other “things”: if one eliminates the other “things”, a thing has no properties, i.e. there *is no thing without other things*, i.e. there is no “thing in itself”” (Nachlass 1885/86, 2[85], KSA 12, p. 104).

The first claim (a) is endorsed not only by Nietzsche, but also by Kant – as I have argued in section 2: both share the idea that the things we confront in our experience, i.e. empirical objects, only exhibit relational properties, that our experience is a net of relations, an infinite set of predicates to which no “absolute subject” can be found, as Kant states in the §46 of the *Prolegomena*. However, Kant does not support the second claim (b) made by Nietzsche, i.e. that things have no other (intrinsic) properties over and above the relational properties they possess as empirical objects. Rather, he argues that an empirical object, *since* it shows only relational properties, *has to be* considered as a mere “appearance”, which we are in turn *compelled* to conceive of as also being “in itself”, i.e. as having an intrinsic nature independent from our knowledge of it and of any other relation to further objects. However, as I have attempted to show in the previous section, Kant does not provide a convincing argument for his position, which consequently gives it the impression of a *petitio principii*.

²⁵ See Nachlass 1885/86, 2[85], KSA 12, p. 104. I will come back to this note in a few lines.

Nietzsche has a clear view of this problem, arguing that the fact “that a thing dissolves in a sum of relations does not *disprove* its reality” (Nachlass 1881, 13[11], KSA 9, p. 620). So there is no need to assume that such a “thing” must have a non-empirical intrinsic nature over and above the relational features of it that we can track in our experience.

Let us now return to the claim that the thing in itself is a “*contradictio in adjecto*”. This is much stronger than simply arguing that Kant owes us a justification for his position. How then is it possible to make sense of Nietzsche’s claim? My opinion is that he focuses on the relation between the very idea of “thing” and the concept of thing in itself. Nietzsche’s strategy is *first* to explain how the concept of “thing” emerges genealogically and *second* to show that the notion of thing “in itself” is self-contradictory since it amounts to the idea of a *propertyless* thing.

As Nietzsche states in a note from the *Nachlass*, “the psychological deduction of the belief in *things* prevents us from talking about “things in themselves”” (Nachlass 1886/87, 5[11], KSA 12, p. 188). A developed attempt of this strategy can be found in a sequence of notes written by Nietzsche while reading a short book by Richard Avenarius, *Philosophie als Denken der Welt gemäss dem Princip des kleinsten Kraftmasses*, published in 1876.²⁶ Avenarius’ arguments take a position that Nietzsche himself often supports, whereby the very concept of “thing” depends, on the one hand on the distinction between subject and predicate operated by the language, and on the other hand on our proclivity to personification, to ascribe to all external things an “energetic-active” nature. Here, the notion of “thing” emerges gradually as the idea of a substratum separated from the multiple “accidents” and is conceptualized as bearing them. Following this line of thought, Nietzsche then quotes a later passage from Avenarius’ book, which directly addresses the problem of the thing in itself:

In the development of thought the moment had to come when it became clear that what were referred to as properties of things were sensations of the sentient subject: thus, properties ceased to belong to the thing. What remained was the “thing in itself”. (Nachlass 1883/84, 24[13], KSA 10, pp. 649–650)²⁷

Here, Avenarius is clearly referring to the historical trend in modern philosophy, going from the thesis that secondary qualities are merely subjective, as Locke maintains, for instance, to Kant’s more radical claim that all properties, including physical and primary qualities, are

²⁶ In KSA’s commentary to these notes there is no reference to Avenarius. See however KGW IV 2, pp. 665–670. In literature on Nietzsche, the only discussion of his commitment to Avenarius’ book that I am aware of is in Rüdiger Schmidt, *Nietzsches Drossbach-Lektüre*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 17 (1988), pp. 465–477.

²⁷ See Richard Avenarius, *Philosophie als Denken der Welt gemäss dem Princip des kleinsten Kraftmasses*. Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der reinen Erfahrung, Leipzig 1876, pp. 63–64, § 111.

such. As Kant considers all qualities that one could possibly experience as not pertaining to the objects, but rather as dependent on our cognitive dispositions, the concept of “thing” we are left with is one that includes only relational properties. Empirical objects are no longer conceived as substances: the “thing” is now nothing but a “complex of sensations” lacking an intrinsic nature, to use a formula which is typical for the Neo-Kantian epistemology Nietzsche was well acquainted with. From this point of view, the notion of “thing in itself” seems then to be the remnant of a naive and discredited ontology that still postulates an ontological core to which empirical properties must inhere. Even more: Nietzsche holds that this very notion is “*widersinnig*” since the idea of a thing “in itself” is that of a thing deprived of all its relational properties and thus, all cognizable properties being relational, that of a *propertyless* thing – something of which we can make no sense at all.²⁸

The genealogical reconstruction suggested by Avenarius also helps uncover what Nietzsche views as the fancy metaphysics which sustain the idea of things as possessing an intrinsic nature. This kind of “folks ontology” is rooted in our self-perception as agents who dispose of causal powers, an image we then transfer to all other “things”. According to Nietzsche – and also to Avenarius –, this self-interpretation is mistaken, in the same way as the grammar-based distinction between subject and predicate:

The distinction between things in themselves and the thing for us based on the old, naïve perception which attributed energy to the thing: but from the analysis it emerged that the force is also invented (*hineingedichtet*), and similarly – the substance. [...] The thing in itself is no problem at all! (Nachlass 1883/84, 24[13], KSA 10, p. 650)²⁹

From this it is now possible to gain a better understanding of another, almost incidental dismissal of the *Ding an sich*, this time from the *Genealogy of Morality*. For also in this passage the rejection of the “thing in itself” – together with the concept of atom – follows from the criticism of folks psychology, which, “under the seduction of language”, “understands and misunderstands all effecting as conditioned by an effecting something, by a “subject”” (GM I 13).

²⁸ Even if here, following Avenarius, Nietzsche seems to understand relational properties as mind-dependent properties, I do not think we should conflate the two concepts. My opinion is that his argument against the thing in itself works fine for relational properties in general and thus for mind-dependent properties in particular. I share Richardson’s view that Nietzsche’s most basic concern is about the *ontology* of power, which – I argue – is better grasped in terms of relational properties. Only at a second stage Nietzsche draws *epistemological* conclusions about the mind-dependent status of *some* relational properties (perspectivism). See John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System*, Oxford 1996, p. 11. On the mind-dependence of object qualities with regard to the problem of things in themselves see also Kevin R. Hill, *Nietzsche’s Critiques. The Kantian Foundation of His Thought*, Oxford 2003, p. 139. I thank Tsarina Doyle for pressing me on this point.

²⁹ See Avenarius, *Philosophie als Denken der Welt*, p. 64, § 112.

In conclusion, it is now possible to differentiate between two different degrees in Nietzsche's critique regarding the notion of thing in itself. Firstly, according to him, Kant's postulation of an intrinsic and subject-like substratum as the necessary complement to relational properties is unsubstantiated. Secondly, the concept of "thing in itself" is not only deduced on the unfounded assumption that something defined only by external relations must have the second-rank ontological status of "appearance", but also turns out to be identical to the self-contradictory notion of a *propertyless* thing. Nietzsche contrasts this with the view that we may well conceive of a strictly relational world – after all, the empirical world given to us is just such a world, as Kant himself maintains.

4) "Thing in itself" and "will to power": some brief remarks.

In conclusion, I would like to make some remarks about a standard view of Nietzsche's commitment to the notion of the thing in itself. Many interpreters have argued that this notion, despite having been rejected, is nonetheless present in the core of his philosophy in the guise of the will to power. At the beginning of the 20th Century this view was already quite established. One can read in Rudolf Eisler's *Dictionary* that on the one hand Nietzsche "discards the concept of a world constituted by things in themselves of unknown quality", but on the other hand considers "the in-itself of the things as the "will to power"". ³⁰ More recently, Stephen Houlgate – although he provides a much deeper account of this topic – again argues that Nietzsche could not completely do away with the notion of the thing in itself, as his perspectivistic theory of knowledge involves the idea of an ontological "correlate" to which all different interpretations – so much disaccording as they might be – must necessarily refer. ³¹ This correlate would therefore represent the ultimate core of reality. Finally, the same case is also made by Rolf-Peter Horstmann in his *Introduction* to the new Cambridge edition of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Even if it is conceded that Nietzsche never really elaborated his concept of the "will to power" sufficiently, it does not appear to be one of his more attractive ideas. The reason for this is that it purports to give us insight into the essence of nature, what nature is "in itself", but this does not square well with his emphatic criticism, put forward in *BGE* and elsewhere, of the very notion of an "in itself". ³²

³⁰ Rudolf Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 3rd ed., Berlin 1910, vol. I, p. 240.

³¹ See Steven Houlgate, Kant, Nietzsche, and the "Thing in Itself", in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 22 (1993), pp. 115–157.

³² Rolf-Peter Horstmann, Introduction, in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, edited by R.-P. Horstmann and J. Norman, translated by J. Norman. Cambridge 2002, p. xxvi.

Actually, Nietzsche frequently seems to refer to the “will to power” as to the very nucleus of reality, defining it for instance as the “essence” of the world (BGE 186). In this sense, he appears to vary on Schopenhauer’s theme, reintroducing the idea of the will – to power, in Nietzsche’s case – as the “thing in itself”, as the metaphysical core which lies beyond the realm of appearances.

Indeed, the way in which Nietzsche presents the concept of the will to power is very ambiguous, as the controversial interpretation of the aphorism 36 of *Beyond Good and Evil* testifies. One can find passages both in the published works and in the *Nachlass* which seem to endorse the claim raised by Eisler, Houlgate and Horstmann, such as the aforementioned passage in BGE 186. I also find that a certain tendency toward a metaphysical conception of the will to power occurs repeatedly, particularly during his work on *Beyond Good and Evil*. With regard to the notion of thing in itself, a supplementary and quite pervasive problem is that Nietzsche conflates different uses of this notion, and fails to differentiate in particular between Kant’s original concept and Schopenhauer’s rather unorthodox understanding of it. On this occasion, however, I do not intend to analyse this issue further.³³ Rather, I would like to suggest a way of interpreting the will to power which does not collide with Nietzsche’s criticism of the thing in itself. Again, I will mostly refer to his unpublished notes to support this interpretation.

As I have already shown, Nietzsche’s critics of the thing in itself correspond with the claim that empirical objects are constituted only by their relational properties. From this starting point, the concept of will to power can thus be seen as a way to account for such a “relation-world (*Relations-Welt*)” (Nachlass 1888, 14[93], KSA 13, p. 271). In other words, my proposal is that the will to power *expresses* the essential interconnectedness of things.³⁴

As many scholars have pointed out,³⁵ Nietzsche does not conceive the will to power as an all-embracing metaphysical entity, which transcends the plurality of empirical phenomena. The will to power – unlike Schopenhauer’s will – does not require the *principium individuationis* in order to become a multiplicity, since it is plural from the outset. Indeed, describing the most basic ontological level of reality, Nietzsche often refers to “*Machtquantä*”, power-centres embedded in a net of mutual relations and therefore exposed

³³ On this see Riccardi, “Der faule Fleck des Kantischen Kriticismus”, ch. 5.

³⁴ A similar hypothesis is also formulated by Peter Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, Oxford 1995, p. 111. However, later in this work (ch. 6.2) Poellner claims that this conception leads Nietzsche to an incoherent ontology.

³⁵ See e. g. Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, *Nietzsches Lehre vom Willen zur Macht*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 3 (1974), pp. 1–60.

to the re-constitution and re-adjustment that such an interaction requires. He describes them in terms of “dynamical”, process-like entities, “whose essence consists in their *relation to other quanta*, in their “action” upon these” (Nachlass 1888, 14[79], KSA 13, p. 259). The crucial feature of *Machtquanta* is therefore their relational nature, since they are determined only by the actual power-constellation they are in. They should not be isolated from this interaction-field, whereas – as Nietzsche repeatedly claims – their nature can be measured only by the “resistance” they are countervailed with.

From this point of view, it appears that plurality too well turns out not to be the decisive feature of will to power. One may consider multiple entities as still being ontologically independent, thus sketching an ontology which is completely different from Nietzsche’s one. A good example would be Leibniz’ monadology, which postulates a multitude of intrinsically-determined substances, where no “windows” allow interaction with other monads. Monads suffice both ontologically and epistemically as their actions as well as perceptions can only be caused by internal powers and affections. It is therefore no surprise that Kant took them to be “things in themselves”. Hence, as Leibniz’ theory illustrates, plurality is not enough to exclude the idea of an ontological basis of stand-alone substances. The concept of relation thus seems much more appropriate in attempting to grasp the fundamental feature of Nietzsche’s conception of will to power, since it highlights the intentionality³⁶ at the core of it.

To conclude, Nietzsche’s ontology of power can be understood as an attempt to account for the strictly “relational” nature of reality, in which objects come to have the shape they actually owe only by means of their reciprocal correlations: “there is no “essence in itself”, relations first constitute essences” (Nachlass 1888, KSA 13, 14[122], p. 303). On this reading, his ontology of power would be a theory which explains the world as it is given to us – the “empirical” world, in the Kantian sense. Nietzsche endorses this interpretation by challenging the lawful picture of the world provided by physics with the alternative view that reality is constituted by power relations. Both are designed to account for the same world, for the same “nature”, for the same “set of appearances” (BGE 22). Nietzsche consequently presents his doctrine of the will to power as – literally – an “interpretation” which does not aim to transcend the empirical “text” (ibid.), but rather to make sense of it immanently.³⁷ We therefore have good reason not to view the will to power as the post-Kantian *Ding an sich* reloaded.

³⁶ Here I understand intentionality standardly as directedness toward something.

³⁷ On this point, the interpretation defended here is similar to the one proposed by Salaquarda (see above, p. ■ [3]), as both endorse a deflationary strategy with regard to the problem raised by the notion of will to power.