# Kant’s Conclusions in the Transcendental Aesthetic

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**Abstract:** In the Transcendental Aesthetic (TA), Kant is typically held to make negative assertations about “things in themselves,” namely that they are not spatial or temporal. These negative assertions stand behind the “neglected alternative” problem for Kant’s transcendental idealism. According to this problem, Kant may be entitled to assert that spatio-temporality is a subjective element of our cognition, but he cannot rule out that it may *also* be a feature of the objective world. In this paper, I show in a new way how Kant’s view (focusing on his conclusions about space) is not subject to this objection, by showing that he does not make the denial about mind-independent reality that he is typically held to make. The argument develops consequences of a new reading of Kant’s expression “*an sich selbst*” (‘in itself’; ‘in themselves’). I argue that “*an sich selbst*” or “*per se*” has a special, judgment-level role, so that this expression does not form new noun-terms adjectivally. It follows that the conceptual unit of Kant’s “Conclusions” in the TA is simply “things” (*Dinge*), since “things in themselves” is not a nominal expression; Kant adopts the Wolffian ontological use of “thing” as the basic kind-term for any existent. The arguments that things *per se* are not in space are arguments that space cannot be a necessary property or relations of things as a *kind*. I show that this does not involve the positive claim about mind-independent reality that inspires the neglected alternative objection.

## 1. Introduction

The arguments in Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic (TA) about space and time are intended to establish conclusions central to the project of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Along with the conclusion that space and time are “ideal,” Kant is traditionally interpreted as arguing that “things in themselves” (*Dinge an sich selbst*) are not in space or time. These claims come in the sections titled “Conclusions from the Above Concepts” (for space) and “Conclusions from these Concepts” (for time). Though Kant’s direct claims about space and time in the TA are certainly controversial, the conclusions about “things in themselves” have always been more embattled. For, since Kant is also supposed to hold a doctrine that we are ignorant of “things in themselves,” it is difficult to see how he could be entitled to an apparent claim about their nature, namely that they are *not* in space and time. It is partially this problem that has inspired the so-called “neglected alternative” (NA) objection to Kant’s arguments in the TA. This objection states that Kant may be entitled to the claim that space and time *are* forms of sensory intuition, but he is not entitled to claim that “things in themselves” are not *also* in space and time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I will show in a new way how Kant is not vulnerable to the NA objection by showing that he does not make a negative assertion about “things in themselves” at all, at least as that phrase is commonly read. Kant is commonly held to argue (with respect to space) that

(1) no things in themselves are in space,

which is typically taken to imply the claim I will call *the Denial*, namely that

(2) no mind-independent reality is spatial.

In contrast, I claim that Kant argues that

(1\*) things are not in space *per se* (or *qua* things),

which, as far as he argues in the TA, is *compatible* with the contradictory of the Denial:

(3) some mind-independent reality is spatial.

If Kant’s position is compatible with (3) (even if he does not assert (3)), his view does not entail the conflict with common sense realism that the NA objector is, in my view, rightly troubled by. For the NA objection seems to rest on the supposition that Kant could only assert claims like “the Sun is larger than the Earth” with the qualification that the Sun and the Earth are mind-dependent appearances, whereas it seems that such a claim is paradigmatic of one that should be true mind-independently. What the NA objector wants to hear is not that *appearances* could really be spatial, but that there are (or at least might be) mind-independent spatial *things*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, commonly interpreted, the Denial entails that this cannot be the case.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If Kant does not make the Denial as commonly understood, then common responses to the NA objection are otiose, for the NA objection does not then arise. Both critics and defenders of Kant believe he makes the Denial, so that no mind-independent reality is spatial. There have been ingenious recent attempts both to explain Kant’s entitlement to such a view and to soften the blow. However, since I am rejecting a key premise in these attempts, I will not focus on criticizing others’ solutions, except in passing; my goal is not to solve but dissolve. A commonly shared assumption among both critics and defenders of Kant is that “things in themselves” is Kant’s term for mind-independent reality. In my view, Kant’s use of “thing” (*Ding*) is sufficient for this purpose, and <thing> is the main conceptual unit of Kant’s arguments. Hence, the question is not whether “things in themselves” are spatial, but merely whether “things” are (or could be).[[5]](#footnote-5) The core of my contribution involves explaining the difference between these possibilities. The key, on my view, is to see that “thing in itself” does not form a standalone nominal expression, even in its first (apparent) uses.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though I clarify the grammatical basis of this in section 3, the translation of “*an sich selbst*” (‘in itself’) as “*per se*,” which reverts the German to its Latin origin, helps make the reading more intuitive.[[7]](#footnote-7) For the claim that things are not in space *per se* is not at all equivalent to the claim that mind-independent reality is not spatial.

If we make my non-standard interpretative assumption about “*an sich selbst,*” we can reconstruct the main arguments in Kant’s Conclusions without yielding the Denial – and without requiring any key assumptions outside the TA itself. Or so I hope to show. Kant himself says that the arguments in his TA “should not merely earn some favor as a plausible hypothesis, but it is as certain and indubitable as can ever be demanded of a theory that is to serve as an organon” (A 46/B64).[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet even commentators sympathetic to Kant tend to look outside the context of the TA in order to vindicate the arguments there.[[9]](#footnote-9) Others rely heavily on similarities to ‘secondary qualities’ that Kant seems to directly repudiate.[[10]](#footnote-10) My aim is to show that we can understand Kant’s denial that things *per se* are in space, reading the text from front to back, sticking close to Kant’s words in the text of the TA.

I begin in section 2 by sketching how I understand Kant’s claim that space must be a form of sensible intuition. I clarify that Kant’s arguments rest just on showing that our spatial knowledge depends on a structure we can call *pure* space (p-space). From here (section 3), I explain the first of Kant’s “Conclusions,” which is that p-space is not a property or relation of things. I defend a weaker reading of this claim than is typical, according to which it is a claim about the identity of p-space, with few implications for the real existence of spatial properties and relations as commonly understood. Section 4 brings me to the main reading of the central denial about “things *per se*.” I argue that Kant’s real denial is a denial that p-space is a constraint on being a thing at all. It is not incompatible with there being real, mind-independent spatial features in the ordinary sense. In section 5, I show that Kant’s key argument depends on the parochiality or “specialness” of human sensibility.

## 2. There is a Pure Intuition Called “Space”

The two “Metaphysical Expositions” of the TA attempt to prove that space and time are pure intuitions, which are also *forms* of outer and inner intuitions, respectively. In this paper, I will not consider arguments for these claims, but proceed as if they are at least defensible. However, there is an issue about what exactly Kant can conclude in these Expositions, so before proceeding, I need to explain how I will construe Kant’s claims.

The main claims of the Metaphysical Exposition about space are these:

1. Space is not an empirical concept. (A 23/B 38)

2. Space is a necessary representation, which precedes all outer intuitions a priori. (A 24/B 38)

3. Space is not a discursive or general concept of the relations of things. (A 24-25/B 39)

4. Space is represented as an infinitely given magnitude. (A 25/B 39-40)

As is commonly noticed, Kant’s claims in the Metaphysical Exposition all concern the *representation* (whether conceptual or intuitive) of space. Not only that, but Kant explicitly states that the aim of a “metaphysical exposition” is to explain what some concept or representation contains a priori (A 23/B 38). One could reasonably wonder: how could Kant draw (positive or negative) conclusions about space ‘itself’ if he only begins from its representation?[[11]](#footnote-11) Or, rather, if Kant will conclude that space ‘itself’ *is* only a representation, is he helping himself to this conclusion on the cheap by only considering representation in the first place?

Everything depends on what Kant is trying to do with these claims. I believe Kant only needs two key points about space to establish his later conclusions. First, he must establish that there *is* a form of intuition (and thus a form of representation) for beings like us that corresponds to the common use of the term “space.” That is, he must hold that the human thinker has, a priori, an intuitive spatial framework, useable for cognitions (including inferences), both concerning geometrical representations and objects of experience, and that such cognitions are not akin to the mere conceptual representation of space. This first claim could be accepted even by someone who did not wish to accept that this was *all* space is. If we grant even this much, we can stipulate that Kant’s claims are about *pure* space (I’ll use “p-space”),[[12]](#footnote-12) leaving open at least the conceptual possibility of some *other* space. Maybe p-space is the only thing that could exist to answer to the common use of spatial predicates. But maybe not.[[13]](#footnote-13) For now, Kant needs only to show that there is something we can call pure space, and that we have the kind of cognitive access to it that he claims. Moreover, what Kant calls “space,” and what I am calling p-space, should be recognizable as close to the ordinary concept. This is why Kant can say that space is “a pure intuition, which bears the *name* ‘space’” (A 27/B 43, emphasis added).

Secondly, Kant is committed to the claim that any a prioriand intuitive spatial knowledge *we* have derives precisely from p-space. That is, even if space has empirical application, our a priori knowledge of space does not depend on our knowledge of empirical space (whatever that may be), but on the intuitive representational form of pure space. Whether or not there is some three-dimensional reality apart from our forms of intuition, the claims that we can make a priori about the properties of spheres and cubes (for example) do not require acquaintance with *that* other reality (if it exists),[[14]](#footnote-14) but can be achieved non-empirically, on the basis of a form of intuition that precedes all the material of sensation. For example, if we think we know that space is infinite a priori, this must be our knowledge of p-space, a space that is an infinitely given magnitude for intuition. Accordingly, the (for Kant, mistaken) inference that the physical world *must be* infinite in spatial extension derives from the infinity of *pure* space, which is then used in application to real things (cf. A 427/B 455). If we had to wait on a posteriori knowledge of space, no such inference would be intuitively compelling. So, even if there were some other space, it would not provide us with a priori spatial knowledge or belief, which, again, always derives from p-space.

My main motivation in marking the ‘space’ Kant discusses as p-space, however, is *not* to leave open the existence of some other kind of space, which is not numerically identical to p-space. Perhaps using the same terms to refer to some such other thing would be fruitless. My motivation is simply to show that Kant’s arguments need only rely on the determinate properties of p-space; some other respective ‘correlate’ of p-space will just be irrelevant. It is also important to note that Kant’s arguments turn on the ‘identity’ of p-space as a whole – as a singular intuitive framework, designated by a *singulare tantum*.[[15]](#footnote-15) One should not quickly slide between Kant’s claims about what space itself must be to assumptions about what can or cannot be “spatial” (a term that Kant never uses in the *Critique*; see Section 5 below).

## 3. Space is not a Property or Relation of Things

Having set out Kant’s main claims about space in the Metaphysical Exposition, my present task is to consider Kant’s argument for his Conclusion (a):

(C1) Space is not a property of things *an sich selbst* or a relation of them.

Many readers seem to read this claim as implying:

(C1\*) No properties or relations of mind-independent things are spatial,[[16]](#footnote-16)

and thus as contributing to the claim I marked as the Denial above, that nothing is mind-independently spatial at all. If (C1\*) were true, then there could be no such relation as the Sun’s being bigger than the Earth, if the Sun and Earth are mind-independent things. I will argue that (C1) concerns the *identity* of p-space and so does not directly concern the existence of properties or relations that might be properly characterized as “spatial.” Hence, (C1\*) is not a consequence of (C1), and Conclusion (a) does not lead to the Denial.

As I have suggested in the Introduction, I will try to show that we need not frame any of Kant’s conclusions using “things in themselves” as a noun.[[17]](#footnote-17) Framing the expression in this way, I believe, is a source of much trouble. The bare noun “thing” is instead the unit of the arguments. To help one see this, I will render “*an sich (selbst)*” as “*per se*” throughout. This translation is rare in Kant scholarship, but it is well-established that “*an sich*” and related expressions translate “*per se*” in German scholastic philosophy.[[18]](#footnote-18) Even if this translation does not clear up all interpretive difficulties, it helps motivate a different *hearing* of Kant’s usage.

Let us proceed to the argument. In Conclusion (a) about space, Kant writes,

a) Space represents no property of any things *per se* at all, nor in relation to each other [*keine Eigenschaft irgend einiger Dinge an sich, oder sie in ihrem Verhältnis auf einander vor*], i.e., no determination of them that would attach to objects and would remain even one abstracted from all subjective conditions of intuition. For neither absolute nor relative determinations can be intuited prior to the existence of the things to which they belong, and thus not a priori. (A 26/B 42)

Before considering the premises of Kant’s argument, I should explain why it is initially *plausible* to see the relevant term in the argument to be “things” rather than “things in themselves” (and not because “things” is an abbreviation for “things in themselves”). First, it is important to note that, apart from its use in the B-edition Preface, this is the first use of an expression that looks like “thing in itself” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[[19]](#footnote-19) “Thing in itself” is standardly treated as a Kantian neologism, yet one might expect a bit more fanfare if Kant is here introducing an important technical term for the first time.[[20]](#footnote-20) We are primed by a long history of interpretation to pick out these words as a term, but of course the occurrence of the words in proximity is not sufficient to justify this. Indeed, one can also find in Christian Wolff’s works the *collocation* “*Ding an sich*.”[[21]](#footnote-21) But grammatical attention to these passages show that Wolff is not introducing a new term. There are no special grammatical cues to show Kant is doing something different.

Second, it can be made clear from the immediate context that Kant isusing “*an sich*” to help mark a more familiar distinction. The closing of the paragraph speaks of the “absolute and relative determinations” of “things.” This creates a parallelism with the opening sentence, so that:

property of things *per se* [*an sich*] = absolute determination of things

relation of things to each other = relative determination of things

Importantly, we do not here have a paraphrase for the expression “things *per se*” but “property of things *per se*.” In that context, “*an sich*” helps form the contrast between absolute or intrinsic properties and relations.[[22]](#footnote-22) Far from introducing a neologism here, Kant is relying on an entirely standard German scholastic distinction. Compare, for example, these remarks by G.F. Meier,

One can divide all determinations of a possible thing [*Sache*] in a threefold way. First, into *determinations which pertain to it absolutely* [schlechtweg] and those which *pertain to it relatively* [beziehungsweise], which latter are also called relations [*Beziehungen*]. (Meier 1755, § 49, 85) [[23]](#footnote-23)

In his German translation of Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica,* Meier explains relations as “those determinations of a thing [*Sache*] which cannot be represented in it when it is considered in and for itself [*an und vor sich*]” (Baumgarten 1766, § 32). It seems plausible that Kant is using “*an sich*” to describe the way “absolute” determinations apply to things, as Meier similarly does, rather than introducing a new term.

Moreover, the same assumption makes better sense of the parallelism with Kant’s similar argument about time. The conclusion of that argument is: “Time is not something which subsists for itself or is attached to things [*Dinge*] as an objective determination, and thus would remain left over if one abstracted from all subjective conditions of the intuition of [things]” (A 32/B 39). He says in the same passage that if time were “a determination or order adhering to things themselves [*Dinge selbst*] it could not precede the objects as their condition” (A 33/B 39). Here, too, only “things” are at issue; in this first conclusion about time, “things in themselves” is not used at all.

Of course, though these points are not negligible, they are not decisiveevidence in favor of my interpretive claim about “things.” The assumption gets its main vindication from my reconstruction of the arguments. As we return to the argument about space, we will see that we can understand the argument perfectly well without appealing to a supposed neologism. The argument relies on a claim that Kant has just defended: that we have a priori intuitions of properties and relations of p-space, and, furthermore, that we can have these intuitions even if we had no knowledge of real things at all. For example, we might know intuitively that there is a straight line between two given points. But *of* what do we know this? Of points represented in p-space itself, including in the pure imagination of p-space, independent of any empirical cognition. So, we have the general premise:

(1) We intuit properties and relations of p-space without intuiting existing things.

To see the basic structure of the proceeding argument, I will single out the strand concerning “properties” (*Eigenschaften*), since the one for “relations” (*Verhältnisse*) is exactly parallel. Thus:

(P-1) We intuit properties of p-space without intuiting (existing) things[[24]](#footnote-24)

(P-2) No property of some *x* can be intuited unless *x* is intuited

(P-3) No properties of some (existing) thing can be intuited without intuiting that thing (P-2, substitution)

(P-C) Therefore, the properties of p-space (which we intuit) are not properties of things (P-1, P-3)

From here, Kant can validly conclude that p-space is not constituted by the properties or relations of things (= C1), as my exposition will soon show. This rendering leads to a natural reading of the passage without positing a neologism.

Kant’s reasoning in this passage rests on quite specific premises about properties and relations and yields a conclusion about what p-space is (not primarily about what things are, or even what their properties and relations are).[[25]](#footnote-25) Along with Allais and Willaschek,[[26]](#footnote-26) I agree that Kant’s view of “intuition” as an immediate cognitive relation to its objects (A 19/B 33) is important to the account. However, what is equally central is the distinctive role of *properties* in the argument. On a contemporary reading of “property” as a kind of Platonic universal, Kant’s argument would seem to be erroneous. For suppose Kant argued that because we intuit *triangularity* a priori, triangularity could not *also* be a property of (a universal applicable to) real things. It is hard to see why this should be so. Instead, I believe Kant is working with an individualized notion of properties (i.e., “tropes”) here, such that an individual’s properties (consistent with the suggested metaphor) belong solely to it. Kant’s term here for property (*Eigenschaft*), was commonly treated as synonymous with the Latin *attributum*, and defined as a determination that accompanies a thing throughout its existence, as a consequence of its essence.[[27]](#footnote-27) Indeed, he speaks of them as being “attach[ed] to objects.” Even duplicate properties are not the same property, since they belong to different things.[[28]](#footnote-28)

With this notion of a property in mind, a little elucidation can show Kant’s P-2 to be uncontroversial, even with an under-theorized concept of intuition. Suppose that you are having a sensory intuition of a house’s blue color. This is a perception of the actual blue color, and not a mere concept. Now pretend (for the sake of simplicity) that the blue is a genuine property (a trope) of the house. It follows that in intuiting the blue color you are *also* intuiting the house at least in part, since the property or trope would not exist apart from the house. A property of a thing is *intuited*, if it is, not as free-standing but given only along with that thing.

Now, Kant’s point in the argument is that intuiting the properties of p-space is *not* like this. If p-space were only given as (or were identical to) the properties of certain existing things, we could only intuit properties of p-space by also intuiting spatial things. But since we *do* intuit specific p-spatial forms apart from intuiting things (= P-1), it follows that those pure spatial forms are not identical to any properties of things. They are not ‘stuck’ to things in the way colors are (at least on our simplifying assumption). So Kant is denying this strong *identity* of p-spatial properties with properties of existing things.

In this account of the argument, the premises involve a definitional claim about what intuition is, but do not otherwise involve unstated assumptions about the reach of a priori knowledge.[[29]](#footnote-29) The last sentence of Conclusion (a) says that properties and relations cannot be intuited prior to the existence of things “thus [*mithin*] not a priori.” That we could have no a priori intuition of a thing’s properties apart from the thing is an *implication* of the fact that we could not intuit its properties prior to an intuition of its existence. Framing it this way means that Kant need not use any more general assumption about what a priori intuition could achieve. The argument requires only the conditional that *if* there were a priori intuition of spatial properties (or relations) of things, there would *also* be intuition of the existing things that have those properties (and relations).

Notice that this claim has implications *only* for the properties of space that we intuit a priori, which are the properties of p-space itself, including imaginary space. It says nothing about, say, the triangularity of the faces of a pyramid or the size of the Sun. For those are *not* supposed to be identical to the properties we can intuit a priori. Hence, Kant has not yet said anything that conflicts with realism about the existence of any angles or sizes of things. His argument only confirms that our a priori intuitions of angles and sizes are not identical to existing angles and existing sizes. His defense of (C1) does not entail (C1\*), and so does not yet imply the Denial.

Thus, in my view, the achievement of Conclusion (a) or (C1) is mainly to consolidate the thesis that p-space itself is not essentially inherent in things or their relations. It does not go far beyond the theses contained in the Metaphysical Exposition. That’s all to the good. By contrast, other commentators see this Conclusion as making a more dramatic move, which rests on their reading “things in themselves” as a separable unit in the argument. Accordingly, many readers are led to claim that the passage relies on strong assumptions about either a priori knowledge in general, or a priori knowledge of “things in themselves” in particular. For example, Desmond Hogan reads the argument as follows:

(ST1) No absolute or relational features of things in themselves can be cognized *a priori*.

(ST2) Some spatial and temporal features of objects of experience can be cognized *a priori*.

(ST) Spatial and temporal features are not features of things in themselves. (Hogan 2009, 356)

As Hogan admits, this argument is sound only if Kant makes strong assumptions about a priori knowledge of “things in themselves” (= ST1): “One of the premises of Kant’s argument for the Subjectivity Thesis denies the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of things in themselves” (Hogan 2009, 368). Other interpreters concur that Kant is assuming something very strong about the nature of a priori knowledge here, or about what could or could not be known about “things in themselves.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Yet it is troubling to suggest that Kant assumes, and hopes his readers will grant him, that a priori knowledge of “things in themselves” can be ruled out from the start (indeed, from the first time the expression appears), especially where this expression is supposed to mean “mind-independent reality.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This is troubling because it seems to beg important questions against any form of a priori metaphysical investigation; whereas Kant’s *Critique* is, presumably, in large part an effort to *explain* the limits of such investigation. Interpreters who ask us to believe that Kant openly *assumes* that a priori knowledge of mind-independent reality is impossible from the start are asking us to believe that Kant’s project is quite uninteresting when it comes toexplaining these limits.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is a bad result indeed.

While this may be a cost to these accounts, it is accepted, presumably, because it is thought that some epistemological premise might be necessary to make sense of Kant’s negative assertion about “things in themselves.” *Prima facie*, though, it hard to see how we could determine something about the way a thing *could not be* based on the way we *know* *something else*: we intuit space a priori, therefore mind-independent reality could not be spatial.[[33]](#footnote-33) Strategies defending this inference, however, are only necessary if Kant really is making the negative claim about “things in themselves” (or “mind-independent reality”) that inspires the NA objection: the Denial. My reconstruction of Conclusion (a) has yielded no such denial, and, so far, does not require any strong assumption about the impossibility of a priori knowledge of mind-independent reality. Kant has only argued that the properties and relations of pure space cannot be *identified* with the properties or relations of real things. My reconstruction is based in an idiosyncratic interpretive assumption – that Kant has not introduced “things in themselves” as a separable term – , but it sticks close to the assumptions Kant defends (or are otherwise plausible definitions). Moreover, making my interpretive assumption should continue to bear fruit.

## 4. Space Cannot Be Predicated of Things *per se*

In Conclusion (b) in the case of each space and time, Kant claims that space and time are “nothing other than” mere forms of intuition. Space in particular is “nothing other than only the form of all appearances of outer sense, i.e., the subjective condition of sensibility, under which alone outer intuition is possible for us” (A 26/B 42). My exposition will pass over the argument for this claim, simply because the paragraphs following Conclusion (b) are more directly relevant to the Denial, and it is especially there that Kant seems to overreach.[[34]](#footnote-34) For it is there that he draws conclusions that seem to refer to “things in themselves” and make assertions about what properties ‘they’ do *not* have.[[35]](#footnote-35) Though (C1) is mainly about the identity of p-space, (C2) says

(C2) Things *an sich selbst* are not in space[[36]](#footnote-36)

This claim may look like an ontological assertion (even if a negation) about entities called “things in themselves.” Yet according to the reading offered so far, Kant has not even used a noun that looks like “thing in itself” in the *Critique* at all (apart from the B-preface). *A fortiori*, he is not going to draw a conclusion about “things in themselves.” As before, I wish to show that simply paying attention to mere “things” in the argument is sufficient.

Some preliminaries may be important. The significance of “things” in the context comes from its role in *ontology* in the sense (i.e., Wolffian or German scholastic) strictly contemporary for Kant.[[37]](#footnote-37) It is worth reminding ourselves of the commitments of this tradition. Ontology in the Wolffian sense is not a study of what exists, or even simply of what it means to ‘be’. Ontology in this sense is the study of the “more general predicates of a being” or “things” (*BM* §4). Such a tradition must suppose that it is plausible to think there *are* such general predicates of all things, which they share simply as things. Accordingly, Wolffian ontology requires the use of “thing” (*Ding* or *ens*) as a *kind term*.[[38]](#footnote-38) In this tradition, even if the term “thing” applies very widely (extending even to *possibilia*), it will not be arbitrary or trivial to call something a thing, since in doing so, we are committed to thinking that that thing has all the generic properties (whatever they may be) that mere things have. And it is in virtue of the shared properties of things, as well as the disjunctive divisions in the concept of a thing (e.g., into “simple” and “composite”), that certain inferences could supposedly be drawn about “things” outside of all experience. What precisely the *content* of <thing> is does not much matter for our purposes. What matters is its *function*: it serves the function of marking out the supposed basic ‘units’ of reality. We presume to encounter these ‘units’ (perhaps indirectly) in experience. The further presumption of ontology is that God, the soul, and the world as a whole share in the same basic *kind* with these things.[[39]](#footnote-39)

These brief remarks already show why it would be significant that Kant would draw a conclusion about mere “things.” It is a theoretically loaded concept.[[40]](#footnote-40) This holds even if Kant rejects the substantive content of <thing> as accepted by the rationalists. The term is not in Kant’s context, as some have argued about its English use, a “dummy sortal”[[41]](#footnote-41) nor even a kind of variable for objects of singular demonstrative reference (though it is plausible that “*Sache*” has something like this role).[[42]](#footnote-42) Kant’s original readers would be prepared, I believe, to see the connection between Kant’s use of “thing” and the tradition of ontology. In particular, the dominant contemporary views about space that Kant contests all rely on construing space in terms of “things.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Christian Wolff argued, not that space is a property of individual things, but that space consists in the order of co-existing things: “we must accept *space* as the order of things [*Dinge*] which are simultaneous” (Wolff, *DM* § 46). By contrast, C.A. Crusius argued that space is a concomitant of *existence* (*Existenz*), so that any thing that exists must therefore be in space: “I do not claim that space is a complete thing, but rather only a circumstance [*Umstand*] that can be abstracted from the existence of all complete things [*vollständigen Dinge*]” (1766, § 51). Despite their differences, both Wolff and Crusius believe that we can derive the concept of space from the concept and/or relations of mere “things.” Rather than assuming that it will be clarifying to parse this talk in terms of Kant’s supposed neologism “things in themselves,” it is more natural to assume that the concept of “things” is the already intelligible unit of Kant’s own argument.

Kant has already argued that p-space is not constituted by properties or relations of things. The central argument that follows this is perhaps more important. It concludes that the nature of *things* does not require being in p-space. The separate argument needs to be made, since the converse of the first proposition cannot be assumed. I argued in the last section that Conclusion (a) is silent on the properties and relations that things have, so long as they are not identical to the properties of p-space. Yet it is conceivable that, though p-space is not constituted by things, (some) things and their properties *must* be in p-space.[[44]](#footnote-44) Kant’s central argument against the latter comes in the following passage:

Because [1] we cannot make the special conditions of sensibility into conditions of the possibility of things [*Sachen*], but only of their appearances, then we could well say that [3, 4] [p-]space encompasses all things [*Dinge*] that may appear to us externally, but not all things *an sich selbst*, whether they may be intuited or not, or also by whatever subject one likes. For we cannot judge of the intuitions of other thinking beings at all whether they are bound to the mentioned conditions that restrict our intuition and are universally valid for us. If we add the restriction of a judgment to the concept of the subject, then the judgment holds unconditionally. The proposition: ‘all things are beside each other in [p-]space’ holds under the restriction ‘if these things are taken as objects of our sensible intuition’. If I here add the condition to the concept and say: ‘All things, as outer appearances, are beside each other in [p-]space’, then this rule holds generally and without restriction. (A 26-27/B 42-43)

The key to the argument in this passage is noticing that Kant gives us a clue to its interpretation in its second half. This clue is also important in understanding how Kant uses “things *an sich selbst*” here and elsewhere.

The first part of the passage can be interpreted as making the following argument, corresponding to the numerals I have inserted into the text:

(1) The special conditions of sensibility are not conditions of the possibility of the *F*s[[45]](#footnote-45) that are its objects

(2) P-space is a special condition of sensibility (Conclusion (b))

(3) So p-space is not a condition of the possibility of the *F*s which are the objects of sensibility (1, 2)

(4) Things are objects of sensibility (Assumption)

(5) P-space is not a condition of the possibility of things (3, 4)

Premise 1, which is stated quite closely to Kant’s explicit wording, perhaps requires most discussion. It is supported by two assumptions, what I’ll call *Realism* and *Specialness*. I’ll discuss Specialness in Section 5. But Realism is Kant’s generic commitment to the fact that specifically *sensible* representations depend on the subject of the representation and so do not constitute the nature of what is represented (their distal ‘object’), which must have some properties that are not due to the finite being who is representing it. This Realism stands in generic opposition to idealism of the “dogmatic” sort that Kant clearly rejects. If dogmatic idealism were true, then the conditions of sensible representation – which I take to be those features of a representation which are proper to it *as* representation, rather than to the object represented – would also be constitutive of the objects of representation, whatever they may be.[[46]](#footnote-46) Those objects would be, strange as it may sound, intrinsically sensible. (This, indeed, seems to be what Berkeley wants to claim.) Though Kant’s appeal to Specialness elsewhere in the passage will give us reason to reject this sort of idealism (see my discussion below), initially (1) is just asserted as a principle (“we cannot…”). The argument continues by pointing out that, since p-space has just been shown to be the form of intuition (and thus a form of sensory representation) (=2), Realism demands that it is not constitutive of what is being represented (=3), insofar as that exists outside the representation. Assuming for the moment that we *are* intuiting or representing “things” with our form of p-spatial representation (=4), it follows that p-space is not constitutive of things either (5).

This argument looks to be a good one, but the reader will note that I have arrived at a different way of putting the conclusion than Kant does. So I must show why (5) is equivalent to

(5\*) p-space does not hold of things *an sich selbst*

which I interpret in this context as also equivalent to:

(5\*\*) p-space does not hold of things *qua* things.

Before I defend the equivalence of these claims, it is worth pointing out that my plan to avoid using “things in themselves” as if a complex noun again finds corroboration in the way that Kant expresses the parallel argument in his comments on time. He writes,

[Time] only has objective validity in regard to appearances because these are already things which we assume as *objects of our senses*; but it is no longer objective if one abstracts from the sensibility of our intuition, and thus that mode of representation that is peculiar to us, and speak of *things in general*. (A 35/B 51-52)

The parallel between the two passages suggests that, even if they are not interchangeable, there is a strong similarity between Kant’s use of “things *an sich selbst*” and “things *überhaupt*.” Both of them, in these passages, could be rendered “things *qua* things.”

I must now compress an account I give in fuller detail elsewhere (Wolf 2023), though I believe it also finds strong independent support in the very passage we are considering. I have already claimed that “*per* se” is a good translation for “*an sich selbst*,” but it is important to clarify its grammatical status. According to the reading I defend, “*an sich selbst*” has its basic function as modifying either categorical judgments or clauses, rather than subjects (as an adjective) or predicates (as a standard adverb).[[47]](#footnote-47) (“Necessarily,” “probably,” and “by default” similarly play sentence- or clause-level roles.) In a full sentence of the form ‘S is P *an sich selbst*’ (which, I would argue, expresses the same proposition as ‘S *an sich selbst* is P’), no predicate ‘P *an sich selbst*’ is formed (*mutatis mutandis* for the apparent subject ‘S *an sich selbst*’ in the related case). It follows that sentences that use the collocation “*Ding an sich*” are not using “*an sich*” to form a new complex noun with “*Ding*.” We should not think of “dog necessarily” as a nominal expression common to the two sentences:

A dog necessarily is a mammal.

You love your dog necessarily.

Just so, if “*an sich*” plays a similar grammatical role as “necessarily,” we should not think of “*Ding an sich*” as a nominal expression (or a conceptual unit) at all.

Instead, the role of “*an sich*” (or “*per se*”) can be understood by its role in a whole sentence. I hold that a schema for the basic use of “*an sich selbst*"can be rendered:

S is P *an sich selbst* = S is P, even without adding a further condition or qualification to S

As an analogy, if I tell you that democracy is fair, but not democracy *per se* (= ‘democracy is not fair *per se*’), what I am saying? I am saying something like democracy-plus-X (whatever X may be) may be fair, but democracy-without-X may not be. I am saying that democracy’s fairness (when it exists) is a combined product of democracy and something else (say, a written constitution or rule of law, etc.), and it may not have that feature if one takes away the ‘something else’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

I believe this use of “*per se*,” still very much alive (or rather fossilized) in contemporary languages,[[49]](#footnote-49) is roughly equivalent to Kant’s “*an sich selbst*.” On this rendering, “*an sich selbst*” has the effect of *removing* any additional content that might be implicitly attached to the subject of a proposition, so that the predicate applies to the subject *simpliciter* and without restriction.[[50]](#footnote-50) Importantly, the effect of “*an sich selbst*” will depend contextually on what the subject of the sentence is. If the subject S is a singular term, predicating of S *per se* will tend to connote properties or relations that belong to some S solely as an individual. We saw such a usage above in discussing the properties that would belong to *a* thing *per se* – namely to that thing alone.[[51]](#footnote-51) By contrast, if S is a generic or kind term (e.g., “dogs” or “democracy”), predicating of S *per se* will tend to connote properties or relations that belong to that kind as such. Here, a claim about S being P *per se* is an unrestricted, general claim about Ss or the nature of S.

It is with this background that we can understand (by way of contrast) Kant’s reference to *restrictions* or limitations on judgments in the very context of the argument:

If we add the restriction of a judgment to the concept of the subject, then the judgment holds unconditionally. The proposition: ‘all things are beside each other in space’ holds under the restriction ‘if these things are taken as objects of our sensible intuition’. If I here add the condition to the concept and say: ‘All things, as outer appearances, are beside each other in space’, then this rule holds generally and without restriction. (A 27/B 43)

Here, Kant is pointing out that we cannot make a true judgment ‘all things are beside each other in space’ unless we add a qualification or restriction to the judgment or add the qualification to the subject ‘all things’ (in which case a relative clause would create a narrower concept). By contrast, a judgment about things *an sich selbst* (i.e., a judgment that things are *F per* se) is precisely one that does not require such a qualification. Thus, the use of “*an sich selbst*” in a judgment with a common noun as its subject has the effect of making the predicate apply to the subject concept *simpliciter* or without qualification, and thus in its full generality.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Accordingly, on my reading, the *generality* of the term “things” in this context is important to understanding the argument. To see this, compare a parallel argument:

(1) Being a pet is a property of dogs in a special relation to owners

(2) So being a pet is a special or contingent property of dogs

(3) Therefore, being a pet is not constitutive of being a dog

(4) Therefore, dogs *qua* dogs (= *per se*) are not pets.

This argument, it seems to me, is completely successful.[[53]](#footnote-53) However, the argument works because dogs are assumed to have common properties or natures. It is because of this common nature that a reference to what holds of “dogs *qua* dogs” make sense. The conclusion is agnostic about whether it is essential to some *individual* dog (or even *every* individual dog) that it is a pet. It is a different judgment altogether to say what is necessary or not for an individual dog. The “contingency” of pethood vis-a-vis doghood is a kind-level contingency (i.e., dogs can be or not be pets).[[54]](#footnote-54) And even if it is true to say that ‘dogs *an sich selbst* are not pets’, we should not say that ‘dogs *an sich selbst*’ *means* ‘dogs, considered not as pets’.

Similarly, if “things” is used to denote a whole kind, then in contexts where Kant is denying that some predicate pertains to things ”*an sich selbst*,” he is not denying a predicate to a certain set of entities (the ‘things-in-themselves’) but denying the predicate to the common nature of that kind: mere things. As Kant puts it in the context, it is a denial that the predicate is the “condition of the possibility” of things – something requisite to being a thing at all. This is clearly a legible move in the neighborhood of German scholastic ontology, which was not interested so much in the intrinsic properties of certain experienced individual things, but precisely the nature of things as such. Notice that it is quite different to deny a feature of the nature of things as such than to deny a feature of the nature of *each* thing, where there is no presumption of a common nature among them. The former denial could be defended, logically, with a well-chosen counterexample. (Though this is not exactly Kant’s method: see section 5 below.) I do not know, by contrast, how one could show of *each* thing that, for some property P, *none* of them have P mind-independently. Yet I do not think Kant’s argument rests on the latter kind of claim.

Kant’s conclusion (C2) is thus weaker, I believe, than it is typically presented to be. Where “*an sich selbst*” is taken as a kind of adjective, forming a new noun with “things,” Kant’s supposed claim that

p-space is not a predicate of all things-in-themselves

is read as having something like this structure

∀ *x* (thing-in-itself (*x*) → ¬ spatial (*x*))

Or: all things-in-themselves are not spatial (or in space).[[55]](#footnote-55) On any such view, we wonder how Kant has earned the right to make such a denial. However, on the view that “*an sich selbst*” modifies propositions or judgments, the structure is rather (and more informally):

*not (an sich* (all things are in space))   
In other words: the claim that all things are in space is not true without qualification (just as Kant explains in the context). And thus: it is possible for there to be non-spatial things. This fits nicely with the kind of claim Kant makes later in the *Critique*, for example, where he says that “our manner of intuition *does not pertain to all things*, but only to objects of our senses, consequently that [the categories’] objective validity is bounded, and *room thus remains for some other sort of intuition and therefore for things as its objects*” (A 286/B 342-43, emphasized). The non-spatiality of things *qua* things means that p-space is not an ontological constraint: a feature necessary to be a thing at all.

## 5. The Specialness of Sensibility

How does Kant know that we cannot attribute the predicates of sensibility, including the predicates dependent on p-space, to the common nature of things? (Compare the question: how do we know that pethood is not in the common nature of dogs?) While this depends partly on the assumption of Realism, it also depends on an assumption that Kant makes explicit throughout the TA: Specialness. According to Specialness, the properties of human sensibility are in some way parochial (i.e., special), so that they would not be shared by the intuition of every other thinking being. That is, for any feature that is attributed by means of our sensitive intuition, the intuition of another thinking being could fail to attribute that feature.[[56]](#footnote-56) Kant affirms Specialness in several ways in the TA:

For we cannot judge of the intuitions of other thinking beings at all whether they are bound to the mentioned conditions that restrict our intuition and are universally valid for us. (A 27/B 43)

We are familiar with nothing but our type of perceiving [objects], which is peculiar to us, which not necessarily every being must have, though every human must. (A 42/B 59)

We cannot say: ‘all things are in time’, because with the concept of a thing in general abstraction is made from every type of their intuition, yet this is the peculiar condition under which time belongs in the representation of objects. (A 35/B 52)

The claim is even clearer in Kant’s *Inaugural Dissertation*, § 4:

In this way, whatever in cognition is sensitive is dependent upon the special character of the subject in so far as the subject is capable of this or that modification by the presence of objects: these modification may differ in different cases, according to the variations in the subjects. (Ak. 2: 393, underlined)

Specialness supports Realism. For if two subjects who differ in their kinds of intuition can intuit the same thing, then that thing must have properties other than those special or peculiar to the intuition of either subject. As Kant also says, “with the concept of a thing in general abstraction is made from every type of their intuition” (A 35/B 52).[[57]](#footnote-57) This means that whenever we want to think of some thing (*as* a thing), we cannot think of it as having properties that are special to our sensible kind of intuition.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Kant’s thinking seems to be roughly as follows. It is at least logically possible that intelligent beings other than ourselves exist, and, if so, it is possible that they enjoy other kinds of intuition than our own. Yet if the predicates proper to *our own* sensible representation of things were also proper to the things *per se* (*qua* things), this alternate kind of intuition should be ontologically ruled out.[[59]](#footnote-59) For in this case, the predicates of our sensibility would be necessary features of things, since it would follow from the nature of things to be sensible-to-us. The relation of things to our sensibility would be built-in to the nature of things themselves. We cannot assume this, for Kant. Hence, we must conclude that the predicates we ascribe to things that derive from our sensible nature are special or contingent.

Kant’s commitment to the Specialness of sensibility is mainstream modern philosophy.[[60]](#footnote-60) It is because the so-called “secondary qualities” derived from the peculiar faculties of human beings that they were thought not to be physical predicates. This common conviction is why Kant can say, seemingly without argument, something like: “Such properties which belong to things *per se* can also never be given to us through the senses” (A 36/B 52). A feature that belongs to things *per se* belongs to them merely as things, and so not due to their contingent relation to human ‘sensers’.[[61]](#footnote-61) So features that depend on our kind of sensibility do not belong to things *per se* or *qua* things. What other thinkers allow in the case of specific sensory properties (such as color or taste), Kant insists on in the case of sensory intuition as a whole, including its spatial and temporal form. The predicates of p-space, since they are derived from the form of sensible intuition, cannot be attributed to things *per se* – or to the common nature of things. The Specialness of p-space conflicts with the supposed generality of ontological predicates.

Where does this leave us with respect to the possibility that some things really are (mind-independently) larger than others, or that some things are roughly spherical? Suppose we know that p-space is not a predicate of things *per se* –does that mean no thing is mind-independently “spatial”?

It is worth noting that, though most discussions of the TA, and the neglected alternative in particular, pose the problem in terms of whether things could be *spatial* (and accordingly spherical or sizeable), Kant himself never uses the term “spatial” (*raümlich*-) in the first *Critique* (nor in the *Prolegomena*). It is not immediately clear what place it would have in his arguments as reconstructed above. Kant asks whether p-space *is* some property of things, or whether p-space is a predicate of things *per se*. His answer of ‘no’ to these questions does not obviously bear on what we think of as the ‘spatiality’ of things, if that includes their being spherical or sizeable. On the contrary, he refuses to say that things in space (what we perceive as bodies) merely *seem* to be so (B 69-70). He says that space has “reality” and “objective validity” for whatever comes before us as an object (A 28/B 44). And he says we must necessarily represent them to be such (unlike secondary qualities, which we *can* coherently and even necessarily represent things as *not* having *per se*) (A 48-49/B 66). To be sure, since p-space itself is a form of representation, it cannot be identical to any thing or property of a thing – that would be to make things (*Dinge*) into nonentities (*Undinge*), as Kant repeatedly warns (cf. A 39/B 56, B 71, B 274). Nothing (apart from creatures of our geometrical imagination) literally exists *in* p-space, for that would be to exist within our form of representation. Yet it seems to me fully consistent with Kant’s view that p-space is nevertheless a *veridical* representation, in its application to the things we meet in intuition.[[62]](#footnote-62) By this, I mean that spatial predicates and relations attributed to these things may, for all Kant says in the TA, hold of them mind-independently. It may be that a pure relation of ‘smaller-than’ is scrutable a priori, merely in pure imagination. That does not prevent the perceptual representation of a mouse as (mind-independently) smaller than an elephant from being veridical, and mind-independently so. My view allows us to say this (utterly banal!) thing on behalf of Kant with a clean conscience, unlike readings that require that “spatial features” can never be mind-independent. And if this possibility is open, Kant’s view does not have the intuitive repugnance to common sense realism that inspires the NA objector.[[63]](#footnote-63)

It might now be objected that my reading makes Kant’s view either trivial or “anodyne.”[[64]](#footnote-64) The view is not a trivial one for Kant, if for no other reason than that it directly contradicts views he considered worthy of refutation. As we saw, Crusius, a philosopher Kant greatly admired, argued that space *is* an ontological constraint: a concomitant of existence itself (Crusius 1766, § 48). For this reason, Crusius considered that even God must be in space or that space is an abstraction of God’s existence (§ 51; § 356).[[65]](#footnote-65) Kant explicitly responds to this implication in the B-edition of the *Critique* (B 71-72). Yet Crusius’ implication follows not if some things can be mind-independently “spatial” but if space is a condition on things *per se*.[[66]](#footnote-66) It is the latter that Kant must argue against. Kant also repeats the charge throughout his work that “Spinozism” results if one takes space as a thing *per se*.[[67]](#footnote-67) This charge does not seem to stick if what is at issue is the mere spatiality of some mind-independent things. It *does* make sense if Kant is worried about p-space being a condition on the nature of things as such. For then the infinity of p-space would be itself an infinite thing. Hence, a claim that space is not an ontological constraint is no idle or trivial one in Kant’s philosophical context.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Is my account otherwise overly anodyne? Much depends on where we expect the offense to come from Kant’s philosophy, and I cannot satisfy all comers in this regard. But the offense does not need to come from what Kant says about the things that come to be objects of our experience (the so-called “affecting objects”).[[69]](#footnote-69) After all, Kant was horrified to learn that some early readers took him to be denying the full reality of the things we call bodies.[[70]](#footnote-70) Instead, Kant’s denial that p-space is an ontological constraint is mainly shocking by its further implications. It implies that principles that apply to things in virtue of their spatiality (or temporality) cannot be true just in virtue of their being things. Instead, the apparent universality of these principles is restricted by our sensibility. This includes ontological principles like that of causality, as Kant will explore in the Analytic. One might think that a restriction of the principle of causality to “spatio-temporal objects” is *not* a restriction that involves any kind of human-centric bias.[[71]](#footnote-71) Yet if p-space and p-time are forms of human intuition, the a priori principle that things *in space and time* must have a cause is a principle that stems in part from the peculiar human faculty of sensibility: it does not apply to things *qua* things. The parochiality of the senses, Kant will argue, entails the parochiality of metaphysics. By showing that p-space is a sensory framework and so not one for things *per se*, Kant gains a premise that is crucial for his arresting thesis of the limits of metaphysical reasoning.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that Kant’s denial that things are in p-space *per se* does not entail, as it is usually held to do, that there are no mind-independent spatial features (in the coarse sense of real sizes and shapes). This result enables Kant to avoid the NA problem altogether. I have wanted to show that we can achieve this outcome by making a crucial adjustment in our grammatical understanding of the collocation “*Dinge an sich selbst*,” while otherwise sticking close to the text of the TA. Though I have occasionally drawn on texts outside the TA, I take it to be an advantage of my reading that it does not *need* to do so, to show what Kant can validly conclude. I fully admit that this focus raises new questions about Kant’s positions and arguments outside the TA. One could think that I have flattened the rug at one end, only to see it bunch up in another. This cannot be ruled out in advance, but I hope to have given some reason to expect that my assumptions could yield a fresh solution to problems elsewhere.[[72]](#footnote-72)

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Wolff, Christian. 1985. (=*DM*). *Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt*. (*Gesammelte Werke* I, 2). With an introduction/apparatus by Charles A. Corr. Hildesheim: Georg Ohms. (1751, 11th ed.).

1. Kant’s works will be cited from the *Akademie Ausgabe* (Kant 1900ff.). English translations generally follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, though are often modified or altered. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited by the standard A/B pagination. Where a German text is cited without an available English translation, the translation is my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For recent reviews of the NA problem, see Rosefeldt (2016), Shaddock (2019, section 1), and Jauernig (2021, 240-44). It happens even outside of Kant scholarship that something like “neglected alternative” objection is mentioned. For example, Mohan Matthen (2014), who otherwise offers a sympathetic contemporary appreciation of Kant’s theory of spatial perception, writes, “I shall not be concerned here with another closely associated position that [Kant] articulates in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*: the idea that because it is known *a priori*, space is a *mental* template, and does not characterize things in themselves. My general attitude is that this is a *non sequitur*” (2014, 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An account like that of Jauernig (2021, 155 ff.), for example, which says that “objects” (though completely mind-dependent appearances) really have spatio-temporal determinations would not seem to satisfy the NA objector. Jauernig’s reading involves a full-blooded ontological phenomenalism (even fictionalism) about these “objects.” Regarding “appearances” see note 74 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Guyer, who is critical of Kant’s argument, says he “clearly implies that no *things* other than our representations can have spatial or temporal properties” (Guyer 2014, 78). By contrast, Rosefeldt, who defends Kant, nevertheless agrees that Kant claims “that things in themselves do not have spatio-temporal properties and do not stand in spatio-temporal relations to each other” (2016, 184). Rosefeldt, along with many others, frequently substitutes “mind-independent reality” or “world” for “things in themselves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I am making a different claim here than, say, Buroker (2006, 60), who says that Kant “typically reserves ‘things’ for things in themselves.” That would make “things” an abbreviation of “things in themselves,” so that the latter would still be analytically primary. Greenberg (2001) emphasizes the independent significance of “things” more than any other account I am aware of, but he does not analyze the expression “thing *an sich selbst*” in terms of “things”; indeed, he sees “thing in itself” as a distinct concept from “thing” (2001, 37 ff.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It’s worth noting that Kant does not use the expressions in such a way that would obviously suggest he is forming a single complex term. Compare the many variations on the supposed expression to be found in the TA alone: *Dinge an sich* (A 26/B 42); *Dinge an sich selbst* (A 27/B 43); *Dinge, wenn sich die Vernunft an sich selbst erwogen werden* (A 28/B 44); *an sich…Objekt* (ibid.); *ein Ding an sich selbst* (A 29/B 45); *Sache an sich* (A 30/B 45); *die Gegenstände an sich* (ibid.); *Dingen überhaupt* (A 35/B 51); *die Dinge*…*nicht an sich selbst* *sind, wofür*… (A 42/B 59). This variety does not make it obvious that Kant is working with one conceptual unit or technical term. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See note 18 for examples and references. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also A 490-921/B 518-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Allison (2004, 122) draws attention this tendency, especially to appeal to the synthetic character of geometry. Though Kant does add the Transcendental Exposition in the B edition, I follow Allison’s view (ibid., 117-118) that this addition is not meant to be Kant’s argument *for* the transcendental ideality of space. Hogan (2009b) appeals to Kant’s practical philosophy, or theory of freedom, to defend Kant’s arguments. Allais (2010; 2015) relies heavily on Kant’s remarks on intuition from the *Prolegomena.* Shaddock (2019) turns to the transcendental deduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., Allais (2007; 2015) and Rosefeldt (2007; 2016). Kant himself repudiates using “examples” of secondary qualities to illustrate his position at B 45 (a point well-known to Rosefeldt and Allais). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Guyer 1987, 347-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I follow Jauernig (2021, 135) in treating pure space as a proxy for Kant’s general use of “space.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Allais (2015, 198) and Willaschek (1997, 555) for a strategy along these lines. Buroker (2006, 64) and Jauernig (2021, 243-44) critically discuss a similar proposal. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Allison (2004, 125). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Rosefeldt (2016, 190). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, e.g., Rosefeldt (2016, 184, 187-88); Hogan (2009, 356). Allais suggests a weaker reading of (C1), according to which Kant is focused on what space *represents*, but still claims that it implies that “our representations of space and time do not present us with mind-independent features of reality” (2015, 198). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It has been suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer that this point seems to apply only to two-world readings of Kant’s transcendental idealism, which tend to see “things in themselves” as a certain kind of thing. It is true that this view is most obvious way to read “thing in itself” as a nominal expression. However, I find a lack of grammatical clarity among “one-world” readers (with which I am in broad sympathy). Do they read “things as they are in themselves” or “things in terms of their intrinsic properties” as a countable (“quantifiable”) expressions? If so, they are using the collocation as a noun phrase, and they fall within my criticism. Arguably, even Prauss (1974), who introduced the adverbial reading of ”in itself,” seemed to fold this expression into a more complex noun phrase: “things as considered in themselves.” In addition, many one-world readers treat “things in themselves” as a synonym for mind-independent reality, in which case they implicitly treat it as a noun phrase as well. However, some one-world readers might take my grammatical account below (see Section 4) as a clarification of something they think already – they can think of the proposal as a friendly amendment. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See the entry under “an” from Grimm & Grimm 1854, vol. 1, 287. An important example of this equivalence comes from Baumgarten: “Whatever is possible considered in itself is POSSIBLE IN ITSELF(intrinsically, absolutely, *per se*, simply)” (*BM* § 15). The relevant expressions were translated “*an sich*” or “*an und vor sich*” by Meier, Baumgarten’s translator (1766, § 15). See also the following passage from Kant’s lectures on metaphysics, where he treats the expressions as equivalent: “Ein Quantum, in welchem ich die Theile bestimme, ist *discretum*, nicht aber *per se*, an sich selbst” (Ak. 28: 561, Metaphysik L­2, PM.51). For discussion of “in itself” as “per se,” see Oberst 2015, 56-57, Stone (n.d.), and Wolf 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Allison (2004, 118-19). Some believe that Kant does not formally introduce the term because it is not a technical term, and comparable to the way someone like Locke refers to the mind-independent nature of things (see Allais 2015, 34). Oberst (2015, 56) suggests that the term was “accessible to every competent German speaker of Kant’s day,” though the reasons for this are not quite clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. By contrast, Kant has just previous made a conclusion appealing to “things”: “Space is not a discursive or, as is said, general concept of relations of things in general [*Dinge überhaupt*], but a pure intuition” (A 24-25/B 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For example, “Hingegen, da einfaches Ding an sich untheilbare ist (§ 75)… [On the other hand, since a simple thing is in itself (= *per se*) indivisible…]” (*DM* § 113). “Da nun ferner das Wesen eines Dinges an sich unverändlich ist (§ 42) [Now, since furthermore the essence of a thing is in itself unchangeable]” (*DM* § 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This may recall Langton’s (1998) claim that a “thing in itself” is a thing in terms only of its intrinsic or non-relational properties. See also Oberst (2015, 57). However, as my remark above indicates, I am not paraphrasing the expression “thing in itself” here, but rather “property of a thing *per se*.” The notion of a property is not hidden in the use of “in itself” but is an explicit addition in this passage. As I argue below (see note 55), “in itself” does not *mean* “intrinsic” or “non-relational.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See also Wolff, *DM* § 307, and Crusius 1766, § 28, for a similar dichotomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Though the A-edition does not explicitly state that we intuit *Eigenschaften* of space, this is stated in the added Transcendental Exposition of B (B 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This distinguishes my account from Allias’ (2015, 195), which focuses on the intuition of “objects.” I take the argument to rest heavily on the properties and relations Kant discusses. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Both Willaschek (1997, 544 ff.) and Allais (2010) make the role of intuition central to their account of the arguments as well. They appeal to what they see as externalistic (Willaschek) or direct-realist (Allais) aspects of Kant’s view of intuition. A benefit of my approach is that it does not rely on such accounts, which have been convincingly criticized by Stephenson (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, e.g., Wolff (*DM* § 44); Baumgarten (1766, § 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The commonly used term “feature,” it seems to me, is ambiguous between being a universal or a singular trope. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Nor even a priori intuition, as Allais (2010, 63) and Willaschek (1997, 548) believe. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. Allais (2010, 49), “The idea that a priori knowledge of mind-independent reality is unintelligible seems to be assumed rather than argued for.” And Guyer (1987, 343): “… *a priori* knowledge of the properties of objects as they are in themselves is impossible…” Guyer also holds that Kant’s argument depends on “an additional assumption about the *necessary truth* of propositions about space and time” (346). It is also an advantage of the above account that it does not require using such an assumption, which Kant does not suggest is necessary for Conclusion (a). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Hogan certainly notices this. Given the views of like Wolff, Crusius, and Kant’s earlier self, he writes, “The Aesthetic’s unargued exclusion of all such knowledge is thus especially striking” (2009, 358). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. Willaschek (1997, 540). See Allais (2015, 199) for a response. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Rosefeldt (2016, 186) for a similar objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Even sympathetic readers of Kant seem to think that Kant does not provide us with all the materials we need to support a conclusion of the strong kind he seems to make (see note 9 above). Allison writes, with respect to the claims about space that Kant tries to establish in the Conclusion, “No such argument [for them] seems forthcoming, however, which is precisely what has led so many interpreters to conclude that Kant’s real argument must be based on the synthetic *a priori* character of geometry” (2004, 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, e.g., Guyer (1987, 333); Falkenstein (1995, 292). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See A 26/B 42, quoted below in its fuller context. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See also Allison (2004; 2006). De Boer’s (2020) recent study also places the Wolffian tradition at its center, though she does not consider the TA at length. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Allais also says that to understand Kant’s view we should begin with a notion of things “understood neutrally” (2015, 35) before making the distinction between appearances and things as they are in themselves. My reading differs in emphasizing “things” as a kind term, so that there is a presumption that things so understood would share some common nature and thus certain properties. Without this presumption, there is no reason to expect that any one “thing as it is in itself” would have something in common with another “thing as it is in itself” (apart from being mind-independent, etc.). The views Kant criticizes depend crucially on this presumption of commonality. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. de Boer (2020, 24-25; 98; 111). However, de Boer sees a strong separation between the way Kant uses “thing in itself” and his references to things as “affecting objects” (ibid., 103-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For a recent account of “thing/*Ding*” in Kant, see Stang (2022). (My own account is in progress.) [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See, e.g., Lowe (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. By contrast, Stang (2022, 306-7) sees “*Ding*” and “*Sache*” as interchangeable. As far as I can tell, this difference should not be decisive for what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Here I draw from the helpful summary of the debate in Messina (2015, 431-38), though I have also consulted the relevant texts (and provided translations). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Indeed, Messina (2015, 454) seems to argue that this is Kant’s view. However, he would undoubtedly qualify this by saying that it applies only to phenomenal things. I think Kant’s argument requires us to deny that p-space is the ground of the existence of *any* thing. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. I am here treating the initial use of “*Sachen*,” which is also translated “things,” as a potentially broader, quasi-variable use of that term. If the meaning of “*Sache*” and “*Ding*” is closer than this, then premise (4) would be folded into (1). While this would make the new premise a stronger one (since it would be an explicit principle about *Dinge*), it would not affect the essentials of the argument for my purposes. For this reason, I won’t insist on any particular reading of “*Sache*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. I recognize that some readers will think that such Realism is precisely the view Kant rejects in the *Critique*, since, when Kant uses “object” in a merely epistemic sense, he *would* agree that sensible conditions are necessary for there to be “objects of experience” at all. As I will argue, however, for Kant, we cannot substitute “thing” for “object of experience” here. Our kind of sensibility is precisely *not* necessary for there to be things at all. For a similar defense of the “object” and “thing” distinction, which emphasizes that “object” is usually a relative term (“object of…”), see Stang (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. It is important to note that the analysis I provide differs substantially from the adverbial one offered by Prauss (1974), which I criticize in Wolf 2023. Briefly, whereas Prauss’ view requires “*an sich selbst*” to modify an (often merely implicit) verb, mine does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The reading here bears a similarity to the one offered by Marshall (2013). The crucial difference is that Marshall treats “in itself” as if it were *adding* some property to a concept (“qua-in itself”), whereas in my view it is crucial to see it as either subtracting a property or indeed leaving the original concept alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. “It’s not a pyramid scheme. … It’s not even a scheme *per se*” (Michael Scott, *The Office* (US), Season 2, Ep. 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. In other contexts, Kant gives the adverb “absolutely” as a synonym for “*an sich selbst*,” so that S is P *an sich selbst* means something like “S is P absolutely.” He writes: “The word ‘absolute’[*absolut*] is now more often used merely to indicate that something is valid of a thing [*Sache*] considered *in itself* and thus *internally*” (A 324/B 381). Note also: “When used absolutely [*schlechtin*], the copula designates the predicate as a characteristic mark of the subject” (Ak. 2: 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Notice that (outside the special context in which we are discussing the properties that belong to an individual thing *per se*) there is no need to associate this use of “*per se*” or “absolutely” with intrinsic properties, especially in contrast to relations or relational properties. Recall note 23 above. This is a central difference from Langton (1998), as well as the emphasis on generality. Thus, on the reading I defend, there need be no contradiction in things’ being ‘*per se*’ relational (just as, e.g., democracy is *per se* a form of government, and hence a relation). This is an advantage, as it has been argued against Langton that Kant must allow relations among “things in themselves.” See, e.g., Ameriks 2003, 149-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Further corroboration of this reading of the expression comes from a different (but, apparently, grammatically identical) use of “*an sich selbst*” in the nearby context: “Yet because all representations, whether they have external things as their objects or not, nevertheless *an sich selbst*, as determinations of the mind, belong to the inner state…” (A 34/B 50). The claim here is: All representations *an sich selbst* [= *per se*] belong to the inner state. And, here, “as determinations of the mind” is a good elucidation of “*an sich selbst*” because representations *qua* representations are determinations of the mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The argument doesn’t require an example that is a relation. One could similarly show that “being a poodle” is a special condition of being a dog, so that dogs *qua* dogs are not poodles. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. It is worth pointing out that kind-level contingencies and necessities are not easily rendered in modern predicate logic, since they are not reducible to claims about individuals (i.e., uncles must be brothers, but it does not follow that every individual who is an uncle must be a brother in all possible worlds). This kind of claim requires either a plural logic or, indeed, a syllogistic logic of the kind that Kant himself used. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. It is perhaps more naturally read, on this approach, as: ¬ (∀ *x* (thing-in-itself (*x*) → spatial (*x*)), with the negation having a wide scope (‘it is not the case that all things-in-themselves are spatial’). See Hogan (2009, 373, 375). However, this reading raises the problem (for those who do not accept my analysis of “*an sich selbst*”) of why Kant cannot accept that *some* “things-in-themselves” might be in space. See note 71 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. An anonymous reviewer has rightly pointed out that the same thing could seemingly be said of a divine or intellectual intuition. We don’t have that kind of intuition, so not every thinking being does – does that mean Specialness applies to intellectual intuition too? Though I cannot resolve this question satisfactorily here, much seems to hang on the claim that a divine intuition would attribute something like the same properties that a divine *understanding* would do – this is why such intuition is “intellectual” (cf. B 308; A 286/B 342). And Kant frequently assumes that the understanding (in contrast to sensibility) represents things as they are (*simpliciter*), not merely in a parochial way. See note 62 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Kant reports in the *Prolegomena* that it “never came into my mind” to doubt “the existence of things” (Ak. 4: 293). Thus it seems reasonable to think that Kant assumed a realistic attitude toward things in the *Critique*, including in its first edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See again Kant’s argument in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, § 25, speaking of “subreptic” axioms that use predicates belonging to sensibility: “This [sc. sensitive, including spatial] cognition, since it does not necessarily attach to every cognition of the same object, cannot be asserted universally of a given concept of the understanding” (Ak. 2: 413). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Kant assumes in general that intuition is an immediate cognitive relation to its objects, so that if the nature of things were somehow indexed to our form of intuition, no extra-human cognitive relation to those things could be intuition. This is why Kant says elsewhere that if there were other forms of intuition, there would have to be things to match it (see A 286/B 342-43). Hence, while the mere existence of other beings with other forms of intuition could not be ruled out by denying Specialness, their enjoying *intuitions* of the same things would be. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. This is how Kant represents the situation in the *Prolegomena*, referring to what was accepted “long before *Locke*’s time” (Ak. 4: 289). For example, consider Galileo’s *Assayer*: “Thus, from the point of view of the subject in which they seem to inhere, these tastes, odors, colors, etc., are nothing but empty names; rather they inhere only in the sensitive body, such that if one removes the animal, then all these qualities are taken away and annihilated” (Galileo 2008, 185, *The Assayer* § 7.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. It may be useful to point out that Specialness occupies a structurally similar place in my argument as “Receptivity” plays in Langton 1998, though with a different result. Langton argues that merely from the receptivity of our sensory knowledge, it follows that we do not know the intrinsic properties of individual things. I claim that from the specialness of our intuition it follows that we do not know the common nature of things. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Later in the *Critique*, Kant writes, “By contrast, our transcendental idealism allows [*erlaubt*] that objects of outer intuition really are just as they are intuited in space, and all changes in time [are] just as they are represented in inner sense” (B 520/A 492). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Even if this claim is successful in the TA, one might worry that an allowance for the reality of spatial features of things will lead to the contradictions of the Antinomy. Though I do not have space for a fully convincing response to this, the contradiction in the First Antithesis position depends precisely on understanding infinite, singular p-space “for itself” as a thing (A 432/B 460). It does not result from there being veridical representations of some things as (e.g.) spherical. Similarly, in the Second Antithesis, the claim that things must be infinitely divisible depends on their having the *identical* property of p-space, which is an indivisible representation (A 440/B 468); yet a thing could be spatial (have size and shape) without having this feature of spatial representation. In short, the contradictions of the Antinomy depend on claims that are stronger than the ones I am allowing. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern, which deserves a separate consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Cf. Oberst (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. On Newton’s similar view, see Friedman (2012, 250). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Hogan (2009) puzzles over this connection, noting that Kant seems to assume “that spatiotemporal form must apply to *all* things in themselves if it applies to any such things.” See also Guyer 1987, 353. The any/all connection here is difficult to explain if we think Kant is quantifying over “things in themselves.” For it seems intelligible to think that certain properties could pertain to some “things in themselves,” while others do not. But notice that if a property pertains to *a* dog *qua* dog, that *is* just to say that it applies to *all* dogs *qua* dogs. So the any/all inference Hogan notices (but cannot explain) is accommodated in the present view. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Kant writes, “[T]he hypothesis of Spinozism actually consisted in this, that one took space and time for things *per se* and for properties of God” (Ak. 29: 977). See also Ak. 28: 567; 28: 666; 29: 1008-9. Relatedly, see Ak. 4: 291-92. The details of this connection are beyond the scope of the present article. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. The case of Wolff is a bit more complicated, but also within the scope of Kant’s argument. Though Wolff does not believe that *all* things are in space, he thinks that space supervenes on a property of things as such, such that if things are in a certain order and simultaneous, then space results. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. More needs to be said about the metaphysics and epistemology of affecting objects on my reading than I can do justice to here. To put it briefly, the interpretation I favor is something like an indirect realism. Kantian “appearances” are (as he often says) merely our representations, but they are *of* things that are not mere representations. Things “are” appearances only in the sense that healthcare “is” the topic of an article in the *New York Times.* Trivially, these things are not known apart from the way we represent them; non-trivially, they are not known apart from *sensibility* and thus not as they are *per se*. My reading of “things” helps make this view more plausible than it has been traditionally, since it no longer requires the affecting objects to be *non*-spatio-temporal. This view comes close to the epistemic phenomenalism defended in Oberst (2015), though because it does not need to identify appearances with things of any kind, it is not ontologically phenomenalist. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See, e.g., Ak. 4: 290-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Cf. Friedman (2012, 251-52) on the uniqueness of this view in Kant’s context. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Thanks to Bill Bristow, Luigi Filieri, Phil Mack, and Caleb Reidy for comments and discussion on this paper, and to Yoon Choi and Michael Olson for comments on ancestral versions of it. I would also like to thank the two referees for this *Journal* for their detailed feedback, which led to many changes and improvements. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)