Appearances and Things in Themselves

The understanding, therefore, by assuming appearances, grants the existence of things in themselves also; and to this extent we may say that the representation of such things as are the basis of appearances, consequently of mere beings of the understanding, is not only admissible but unavoidable.  

1. Phenomena and Phenomenalism

We come now to a final and notoriously ambiguous consequence of Kant's formal idealism. Thus far we have been concerned with such questions as whether it is possible to specify pure forms for any experience, whether forms of intuition or forms of the thought of any object; and, on what basis, in what way knowledge of these forms can be said to yield synthetic a priori knowledge; and, how we are to understand the relation between such forms and the material of knowledge. This latter problem has appeared in a number of ways: as the problem of sensation and guidedness, the relation between pure and empirical intuition, the ground of determinate mathematical knowledge, the difference between general and transcendental logic, the origin of empirical concepts, the nature of transcendental judgment for both pure and empirical schemata, and finally as the problem of a comprehensive, formal attempt to demonstrate that pure rules of thought have objective validity. But there is a quite general characterization which Kant himself gives of the relation between the "forms" of experience and "what we experience." His argument is that since all knowledge occurs only as subject to such forms, what we know are only "phenomena," and not "things in themselves."

Stated so abstractly, such reasoning seems quite hasty. It is quite possible to maintain, for example, that an exclusive empiricism, in any significant form, is wrong; that all knowledge originally involves formal principles of organization and discrimination which themselves cannot be derived from experience, without thereby maintaining that what we know by means of these forms is not the "world in itself." Kant's claim to the contrary provides us now with the most detailed opportunity for investigating not only why Kant thinks his transcendental turn has this consequence, but especially what else we might need to say about the objects of human knowledge, and in what way, before his enterprise can be completed.

As the above quotation indicates, this last question, what we must "think about" the objects of knowledge beyond the formal anticipation of the structure of experience, is obviously quite relevant to the kinds of problems developed here previously. That is, Kant's position is not only that the mind has no independent access to things as they are in themselves, and can thus only know nature as subject to our forms of intuition and thought, as phenomena, but also that we are nonetheless "required" to think about such things in themselves in various way, for various reasons, just in order to be able to have coherent, systematic, phenomenal knowledge. Prima facie, this position seems inconsistent. The latter requirement seems to demand that reason, unaided by sensibility, be able in some nonarbitrary, well-grounded way to think about nature as it is in itself, not as it is known through sensibility, nor, theoretically, as it is a priori subject to necessary conditions for experience. This would seem to require a nonformal use of reason, a speculation about the possible material of knowledge which is substantially different from the only possibility for a priori reflection hitherto open to reason—a determination of itself, its own conditions for experience. As we shall see, however, consistently bit quite problematically, Kant denies that this extension of reason's power is what is implied by the "requirement" that in phenomenal knowledge, we must think things in themselves. Aside from the role such reflection plays in transcendental knowledge itself, where the notion of a thing in itself has a wholly negative use—where it merely restates our ignorance of the transcendental realm—the positive function of such reflection is still, once again, understood as a kind of formal legislation by reason to nature; in effect, a discovery by reason of its own formal demands of (or "commands" to) nature. The nature of the "requirement" for what appears to be a transcendental, but remains a formal, subjective, reflection will be the focus for the following. Such is, I shall maintain, the clearest way to approach the age-old problem of how we can be wholly ignorant of things in themselves and yet "know" so much about them, both within transcendental knowledge (they are the "cause" or "ground" of appearances,


2. For the most famous example, as was noted in chapter 3, one could claim that space was a subjective form of our intuition, and yet that it was also a property of things in themselves.
must be assumed to "exist," etc.) and in rational reflection in general where the system of transcendent ideas must be assumed as regulative ideas. Kant's solution to this problem relies deeply on his claim that the latter kind of reflection is, again, wholly formal, and so does not involve an inconsistent, metaphysical leap into transcendent reality. That solution will have its virtues, but it will also share many of the liabilities of such formalism developed thus far. We need first to look at the most prominent negative sense given to the notion of a thing in itself, within critical philosophy itself.

Given Kant's terminological vagueness in stating his position, it is important first of all to state, in some detail, what Kant was not maintaining by claiming that all knowledge is restricted to knowledge of phenomena. His first attempt to clarify why transcendental idealism has this consequence occurs at the end of the Transcendental Aesthetic. It involves a complicated association of the notions transcendental, empirical, idealism, and realism. On the negative side, the "transcendental realist" argues that there is a world of things in themselves and that only knowledge of this world could really count as knowledge. Such a realist is thus quite vulnerable to any epistemological critique, any demand that he explain how we could know such a "transcendent" reality. Under such a conception of reality, it quickly turns out that we cannot explain any such knowledge, and we turn into "empirical idealists," forced to admit that we do not know the real world but only our own representations. If "reality" is defined independently of our possible access to it, then, not surprisingly, when epistemological questions are encountered, skepticism and such idealism (or an indefensible "dogmatism") are the only results. On the other hand, the transcendental idealist admits that knowledge of "reality" can only be explained in terms of some possible experience, and thus while remaining an idealist (interpreting the meaning of claims about reality in terms of our experience) can also be an empirical realist, since the notion of reality involved allows him to assert that we do know the empirical world as it is in itself.

Stated so briefly, much of such a claim seems like an unfair play on how one chooses to define what is "real"; a transcendental idealist is free to call himself a "realist" because he has interpreted reality in a way compatible with a continuing claim that "we only know our own representations." Such of course is only the result of the brevity of such formulations and the fact that they are made before Kant has a chance to explain fully both the necessity for such a restriction and the fuller meaning of such a notion of "reality" (explanations, as we have seen, that both occur in the Analytic). For the moment, it is mostly important to understand that Kant is not claiming that transcendental idealism means to "reduce" all claims about material objects to claims about sense experience. It certainly often seems as if this is what Kant intends, since he does seem to want to explain any claim about objects "in terms of" some possible experience. But we have already seen that this cannot be what Kant intends. For Kant, to argue that claims about tables and chairs really "mean," or come down to, or should be interpreted as, claims about sensations, or about possible sense-data experience, would make no sense. For him, such latter claims are themselves empirical claims about inner states of the subject and are quite different from, not at all equivalent to, claims about objects of outer sense. In the first place, as the contrast with empirical idealism makes clear, such a restriction is not a claim that there are not material objects, just ideas. This the center of Kant's anger over being confused with Berkeley. But in the second place, it is also not an admission that we do know external objects, and then an interpretation of that claim so that it ends up meaning: we know such objects only insofar as we know our own sensory representations. It is still the case that knowing such inner states has a special meaning in Kant; it means knowing objects of inner sense, not outer sense. He does want to restrict our knowledge of outer objects so that such a claim means knowledge of objects of outer sense, and so to certain kind of representations. But, again, these representations are objects of outer sense and are immediately experienced as such. It is thus true to say that Kant's transcendental idealism wishes to interpret all claims about any object (inner or outer) in terms of some possible experience we could have of it, and that this experience is sensory. It is not true, though, that he means to interpret, to reduce, or in any way to understand all claims about outer objects as, when properly analyzed, claims about sensations.

5. Of course, it is true that there are as many different versions of the phenomenalist interpretation of Kant as there are interpreters who maintain it. The best-known version is Kemp Smith's, who follows Vaihinger on most important points. A great deal of the issue of whether or in what sense Kant was a "phenomenalist" comes down to an interpretation of the thesis of phenomenalism, and while I cannot deal with that issue exhaustively here, I shall follow the approach of commentators like G. Bird, in his critique of H. A. Prichard, Kant's Theory of Knowledge, Ch. I, "Phenomena and Phenomenalism" (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), Gerold Fraisse's in chap. 3 of Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich (Bonn: Bouvier, 1971), Henry Allison's in section 2 of his "Things in Themselves, Noumena, and the Transcendental Object," Dialectica 32 (1978): 61-76; and Bernard Rossett's La Doctrine kantienne de l'objectivité, chap. 8 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1968). I shall, however, argue that these interpretations must be supplemented by a consideration of the positive role of reason in Kant's theory.
that is, inner objects. To do so would be to collapse the whole distinction between inner and outer and retreat again precisely to empirical idealism.  

Fair enough, one might respond, but what precisely is it to interpret claims about objects as claims about our experience or possible experience of objects if not to reduce them logically to claims about our (outer) sense experience? The Kantian response must be that while experience of outer objects certainly is intelligible only in terms of sensory receptivity, such experience immediately involves something more than just sense data themselves, that a full explanation of what it means to interpret claims about objects as claims about experience of objects must involve a priori elements essential to any experience, and so an explanation that reveals how any experience at all immediately involves a “reference to objects” and cannot be described in terms merely of the content of sense.

That is, the real force of the phenomenality thesis is not what we would today call phenomenalism, but instead is a consequence for Kant of the theory of the forms of experience. Any experience of objects we could have is immediately subject to such forms. We do have knowledge of external objects, but we can only understand knowledge of such objects in terms of rule-governed synthesis of representations, that is, in terms of judgment and intuition. With judgment as the essential component in all knowledge, the phenomenality thesis seems first of all to come down to a claim that we only know external objects by making judgments about them, based on sensible intuitions in space and time, and that there are a finite number of ways human beings can intuit and judge. Since it is logically possible for there to be other forms of intuition and judgment, we need to realize that we do not know objects in any of these other ways, and so know them only under finite restrictions. We might add, as Henry Allison has recently shown, that even straightforward claims about knowledge of our own ideas and impressions, in Berkeley and Hume, turn out to be transcendentalist realist claims, just because knowledge even of such inner objects is considered by such philosophers independently of our forms of experience.

But this is all only a small first step. It may be that Kant does not intend that his restriction of knowledge to phenomena comes to the same thing as empirical idealism, or what we would understand by phenomenalism. But what then do we do with what he also says about things in themselves? If we can know all experienceable objects as they are in themselves, subject to our forms of experience, why go on to insist that we cannot know how things “really” are in themselves? Almost everyone initially sympathetic to Kant, from Solomon Maimon, the German Idealists, and neo-Kantians to Strawsonian austere reconstructions, has tried to eliminate this nominal dimension to Kant’s theory. Kant himself, however, far from evidencing such tendencies, always seemed to regard the distinction as the pons asinorum of the critical doctrine—a insistence that has created by far the most extensive critical controversy about Kant’s idealism.

2. The “Two Worlds” and the “Methodological” View

There are a variety of ways in which Kant wishes to introduce the necessity for thinking of things in themselves. The first and most controversial is what could be called the exclusively “transcendental” meaning of things in itself. In this context, Kant attempts to formulate a position about all objects considered independently of our forms of knowledge, which position is strictly implied just by critical philosophy itself. He formulates this position with a confusing flurry of terminology—thing in itself, transcendental object, noumenon—which would take a study in itself to disentangle. But the force of that position comes from the meaning of the contrast between knowledge of phenomena and of things in themselves as that contrast is a thesis of transcendental philosophy itself. It involves him in all the famous problems of affection, noumenal causality, “double” affection, and so forth. Second, he introduces a requirement for thinking things in themselves as regulative ideas necessary for science itself. Third, and with the most variations, he introduces this requirement for practical or moral reasons; he wants to open the possibility, and argue for the practical necessity, of thinking of ourselves

6. It is true that Kant proposes a theory according to which “representation of an object” is the “synthesis of representations according to a rule,” but there is no reason to take that to mean that knowledge of external objects is synthesized knowledge of mental items. The representations in question, if the context is representation of an external object, are still representations of outer sense. What Kant means to emphasize by the notion of synthesis is thus that no such knowledge of outer objects can be obtained by one such representation (of an outer object) alone, but must be judgmentally united with remembered or projected representations according to a rule. This is argued for persuasively by Dieter Henrich in the first part of Identität und Objektivität (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1976).


8. Maimon’s attempt is actually quite interesting and is the beginning of what would become the neo-Kantian attempt to construe the thing in itself as a “Grenzbegriff.” For Maimon, the critical concept of a thing in itself was an undetermined concept of an object, an idea of an indefinite synthesis, not a metaphysical concept, or a concept of an undetermined object. He runs into trouble when trying to account for affection and sensation, resorting to a theory he calls the infinitesimals of sensation. See Versuch über die Transzendentalphilosophie, in Gesammelte Werke (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965), pp. 27, 31–32.

9. Three detailed attempts to do so are Allison, “Things in Themselves, Noumena, and the Transcendental Object”; Prauss, Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich; and Roussett, La Doctrine kantienne de l’objectivité.
as moral or noumenal agents, of the world in itself as teleologically ordered, and so on.10 The first two such requirements for thing-in-itself talk are most relevant here for the problem of formality.

What Kant says about things in themselves as a critical philosopher is the hardest to understand. Given many of the things he says, it is impossible to deny that he intended some positive role for the concept, a role most often expressed by his discussion of “thinking” of the “ground” of the appearances. On such a view, for example, with respect to Kant’s theory of empirical affection, it appears that Kant wants to claim that “things in themselves” are responsible for the determinacy of a sensed manifold, and thus for the particular, determinate character of an empirically apprehended spatial manifold, without it being the case that we know anything about such things in themselves. Stated positively, things in themselves can be said to be the “ground” of appearances as we apprehend them, even while, stated negatively, these things in themselves are only noumena, for us meaningful only negatively, beyond our “veil of perception.”

As so stated, the familiar difficulty with this duality is also apparent. Put simply, the positive role that things in themselves occasionally are asserted to play in Kant’s theory of affection (as well as the very fact that they are asserted to exist) does not seem consistent with the negative role assigned to noumena. How is it possible that we know something about things in themselves (that they are the ground of appearances) while at the same time a central result of the critical philosophy is the assertion that we know nothing at all about things in themselves? Looked at in terms of this well-worn paradox (stated by Jacobi very soon after the appearance of the Critique),11 the problems with Kant’s notion of appearance multiply, and paradox can be made to follow non sequitur quickly. The relation between things in themselves and appearances seems to be described often by Kant in terms of causal interaction, yet we know that causality is a condition only for relations between appearances; claims like, “Things in themselves are not in space and time” seem to violate directly the Restriktionslehre; the phrases “outside us” or “independent of our representations” acquire, in the light of these difficulties, hopelessly ambiguous nuances, and so forth.

Of course, had Kant been a skeptic about knowledge of the external world, or a straightforward phenomenalist, and interpreted claims about objects as claims about possible sense ideas, none of these problems would arise. Instead, he claims that knowledge of objects should always be understood in terms of the formal structure of our experience, requiring both intuitions and concepts, that within this structure we do know external objects, not exclusively our own ideas, but that we do not thereby know things in themselves. It is the presence of all these claims taken together which generate all the above problems. And again, even a fairly detailed and sensitive reading of the Critique could easily convince one that, whatever the difficulties, Kant does indeed want to claim that there are things in themselves, but that we don’t know them, and that instead of knowing them, we know only our own representations (“in us”).12 The (for Kant) unusually poetic image which begins his discussion of the distinction between Phenomena and Noumena13 suggests quite strongly that, beyond the safe island of truth we have discovered and charted in the Analytic, there exist other things to be known if we could but make our way through the fog banks and “swiftly melting” icebergs of the Dialectic. Such an image of limits beyond which we may not safely venture sounds like the old “veil of perception,” and is often reinforced by introducing the notion of a being not so limited as us, possessing other kinds of intuitions, who can thus know those things in themselves which we, in our finitude, cannot. On this view, with respect to affection, we have to say that we know only the effects of the interaction between our selves and such things in themselves, although we thus also must admit that such things exist and cause our representations to have the character-

10. Kant himself makes what amounts to this threefold distinction at B385-86 = A308-29.
12. A look at the literature on this issue quickly shows a number of commentators who want to distinguish a proper, truly Kantian sense for talk about things in themselves, and some different sense, either appropriate in another context, or not at all what Kant meant. See for example Bird and “transcendental” and “empirical” points of view, Prauss on the same, as well as an additional distinction between “transcendental-philosophic” and “transcendent-metaphysical,” Allison on a similar set of distinctions, Rolf Meerbote on an “ontological” perspective, and an “epistemological” use of “thing in itself,” in “The Unknowability of Things in Themselves,” Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress, ed. L. W. Beck (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), pp. 414–23; Stephen Barker on “Appearing and Appearances,” in Kant Studies Today, ed. L. W. Beck (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1969), pp. 274–89; and Roussel on “transcendent” and “transcendental” conceptions, La Doctrine kantienne de l’objectivité, p. 171. In a number of these discussions, the crucial point of interpretation is simply whether one thinks Kant is claiming we know things in themselves as they appear to us (but do not know them apart from our forms of experience), or whether we know a different object, mental representations, and not external causes of perception. I am agreeing fully with those commentators cited here who try to construct an interpretation based on the former claim, and who then try to incorporate many of the confusing things Kant says into that interpretation, but I will add that we still need to consider how we are to understand the force of the contrast between phenomena and noumena within that interpretation, and how we should take the positive role of regulative ideas within Kant’s theory.
istics they do have. 14 Such a familiar “two worlds” view of this problem is at least one way to interpret the meaning of the following claim made in the Critique.

How things may be in themselves, apart from the representing through which they affect us, is entirely outside our sphere of knowledge. (B235 = A190)

The nonsensible cause of these representations is completely unknown to us, and cannot therefore be intuited by us as an object. For such an object would have to be represented as neither in space nor in time . . . and apart from such conditions we cannot think any intuitions. (B522 = A494)

And perhaps the most direct confirmation of the “two realms” view:

Now we must bear in mind that the Transcendental Aesthetic already of itself establishes the objective reality of noumena and justifies the division of objects into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding (mundus sensibilis et intelligibilis) . . . For the senses represent something to us merely as it appears, this something must also in itself be a thing, and an object of a nonsensible intuition, that is, of the understanding. (A249)

Even as so stated, however, doubts begin to arise immediately about the correctness of such a view of the Restrictionslehre. For one thing, the last quotation, while it seems to warrant dividing up the world into two sorts of objects, one set of which we cannot know, also seems to define this division in terms of the faculties of knowledge, and so to effect the division methodologically (or, in the terms used here, formally) by considering an object in terms of its accessibility to forms of knowledge. This view of the matter would make possible a theory which, while clearly Kantian, would seem to avoid many of the causality, interaction, and knowability problems which plague the two worlds view. We could now say that there is only one set of objects for knowledge, but these same objects can be considered from two different perspectives; that we can, theoretically, consider a sensed object as the object of a nonsensible intuition and so define this considered object as a “thing in itself,” for us only a noumenon, even though theoretically possible. 15

14. A most valuable introduction to the literature on the problem of affection is provided by Herbert Herring, Das Problem der Affektion bei Kant, Kant-Studien Ergänzungshefte, no. 67 (Bonn: Bouvier, 1953). Building on Vangerow’s interpretation, Erich Adickes has provided one of the most complicated interpretations of this problem, Kant’s Lehre von doppelter Affektion unseres Ich als Schlüssel zu seiner Erkenntnistheorie (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1929). Although a neglected feature of such discussions, it is also important to incorporate what Kant says about inner “affection” into such a discussion. Roussett, La Doctrine kantienne de l’objectivité, tries to do this; p. 178 ff.

15. Moltke Gram, in “How to Dispense with Things in Themselves (1),” Ratio 18 (June 1976): 1–15, has noted this distinction between a “two worlds” and what he calls a “Two Description” Theory. He advances some interesting criticisms of the latter, but his discussion is limited in that within the latter camps he only includes Dryer, Adickes, Paton, Schrader, Bröcker, and Westphal, and for some reason does not consider the much more detailed interpretations of Pruss, Roussett, Bird, Allison, and others. One can only get a hint of a possible response to these interpretations in some final remarks on Meerboote, p. 16n.

16. Cf. note 5. It is also a position one finds attributed to Kant in very recent commentators. Bennett, while he does not make Kant an idealist, does make him a phenomenalist, as on p. 22 of Kant’s Analytic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966): “Kant thinks that statements about phenomena are not merely supported by, but are equivalent to, statements about actual and possible sensory states.” R. P. Wolff attributes to Kant the “double affection” theory which seems to arise when Kant’s alleged phenomenalism is pressed, Kant’s Theory of Mental Activity, p. 168 ff.

which seems to avoid many of the thornier problems implied by the earlier interpretations.

Such interpretations argue that much of the distinctiveness of Kant's case is lost or confused if many of his claims about appearances are not seen in their proper “epistemological” context. Of particular importance is the difference between two different ways we can consider Kant's claims about appearances: "transcendental" and "empirical." When Kant says, for example, that all our knowledge is restricted to appearances, he does not mean to suggest that we are thus limited in actual, empirical knowledge either to a second-rate kind of knowledge—a knowledge of a “shadow reality,” some pale version of the way things really are—nor that we are limited to a purely "internal" set of objects as the intentional correlates of knowing. Such a confusion is precisely, according to these interpretations, a confusion of transcendental with empirical perspectives. That is, amplifying now the kind of claim made in section 1 of this chapter, empirically considered, viewed in terms of empirical knowledge, Kant is generally quite clear that we can know two kinds of appearances, inner and outer objects, and when we speak of knowledge of outer appearances there is no reason at all to say that we know the empirical world as it is "in itself." There is ample evidence gathered by Bird that in the context of empirical knowledge, Kant was quite concerned lest his position be taken to mean that we cannot know outer objects as appearances of outer sense. The Refutation of Idealism and the General Note to the System of Principles stress such a point repeatedly. On the other hand, looked at "transcendently," we must also admit that we only know these outer objects as appearances, as conditioned by the forms of space and time, and thought only by means of the categories. Such a reflexive, second-level consideration (i.e., a reflection about empirical knowledge) restricts our knowledge to knowledge of objects insofar as they can be known by us (and thus denies us knowledge of these objects considered independently of how they are known by us), but this claim does not imply that, again empirically, we cannot know outer objects.  

There are, further, good reasons for adopting this view of the method—


18. I am provisionally adopting Bird's terminology here, though the point can be made in several ways. See Kant's Theory of Knowledge, chap. 3.

19. I disagree with Bird's statement of what, from a transcendental perspective, we should say about ideas and objects. He argues that, if we consider two claims: (1) that there are external objects of which we have knowledge, and (2) that we are immediately aware only of our own ideas, or representations, then (1) is transcendentally false and empirically true, while (2) is false empirically but true transcendentally. It seems to me that there is an appropriate, transcendental sense in which (2) is false, though not in the same way as such an empirical claim would be false. See above, chap. 2, chap. 3.


22. The position is called methodological because the concept of a thing in itself is considered as a consequence of, or indeed, an elliptical statement of, Kant's methodology,
clear, we are still left with a serious general problem. In the first place, the interpretation seems to have been too successful in explaining a mistaken "transcendental-metaphysical" conception of things in themselves for a correct "transcendental-philosophic" meaning. If the methodological view is correct, we might still ask, What force is there left in the distinction between phenomena and noumena? This can be asked with respect especially to the first two of the three distinctions drawn earlier (p. 193). It does not at all appear that when Kant speaks of things in themselves as the ground or cause of appearances, he always means that question empirically, as the relation between empirical things in themselves and empirical appearances. Affection is still a transcendental as well as an empirical problem and must still be so addressed. Second, and in many ways more important, Kant is quite interested in arguing for the "necessity" for some determinate connection between the thought of things in themselves and phenomenal knowledge itself, as his position on regulative ideals make clear. Some basis for that determinate connection must be laid.

In fact these problems, while formable in different ways, are deeply related. On the one hand, it is true that, transcendentially considered, the concept of a thing in itself should be considered wholly negatively. It is possible to consider any phenomenal object "as it is in itself." The force of doing that is just to emphasize the wholly indeterminate results. When we do attempt to think any such object "noumenally," we end up only with the empty thought of the "transcendental object = X." But there is another type of reflection on things in themselves, whereby we do not consider phenomenal objects as they are in themselves, but we consider types of objects which, by their very definition, could not be phenomenal objects. Such objects are just those defined in the system of Transcendent Ideas, and it is possible to consider them as the "ground" of appearances, although in a very special, indeed "formal" way.

It is this second possibility which the methodological interpretation cannot eliminate and which in fact explains the different things Kant does say about both the negative, or let us say wholly transcendental, meaning of things in themselves, and the regulative function of that same notion. Without the introduction of this regulative meaning for things in themselves and an integration of what Kant says about it with his repeated claims for the necessity of the admission of noumena, not only would a great deal of the text simply look contradictory (instead of, as it does, discussing reflection on things in themselves in the two different senses just defined), but the whole force of the phenomena-noumena distinction would be lost, and that in the following way. If the contrast between noumena and phenomena is to be a true contrast, it must be possible for us to abstract in some way from the whole context of phenomenality and consider, at least theoretically, what knowledge of noumena would be like. To do this the notion of noumena would have to have some meaning independent of its contrast with phenomena. That is, if the concept of noumenon only means a phenomenal object considered independently of any way we could know it, then the supposed contrast between phenomena and noumena is hardly a contrast between what we can know and what we cannot know, but is instead just a difference between knowledge in general and the rather abstract notion of not-knowing at all. If the notion of noumena is indeed meant to express what we can't know, and thus to have a real restricting role in this account, the concept must mean something more than entertaining the sterile suggestion of not knowing anything at all. But herein lies the familiar paradox again, since to establish something about noumena independently of this merely negative contrast with phenomena would violate the very restriction the whole phenomenality thesis is meant to establish. On the one hand, the contrast must involve more than the expression of the difference between knowledge and ignorance. If it didn't, for one thing, later claims about "thinking" noumena would have only the fallacious status of reasoning from ignorance (on the order of: since it can't be proved one way or another, since we are ignorant, we might as well believe there is a God, or "fairies at the bottom of my garden," for that matter). On the other hand, establishing something more than this merely negative contrast involves us in the Hegelian problem of "seeing both sides of the boundary" and so overstepping it, just to set the boundary.

3. How to Think about Things in Themselves

With such an interpretation of objectivity, we thus return to our problem of exactly what role the concept of noumena is supposed to play in the meaning of thing in itself (in that sense often called the transcendental object), and the "regulative-positive" meaning (the "intelligible character" of appearances, or "thing in itself") at B566-68 = A538-40.

23. These terms are Prauss's in *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*.
24. Kant comes closest to distinguishing explicitly the "transcendental-negative"
critical theory. Simply and finally put: If "appearances" do not at all mean a special kind of object of knowledge, but instead mean a way of considering any object which we could know (in terms of some possible experience or other), we still have to ask: Why introduce the notion of that which we could not know by means of any experience? Without that question, the claim that we "do not know noumena" would not at all be a restricting claim on what we can know, but merely a needlessly involved way of insisting that we cannot know what we cannot know.

Of course, we can immediately admit that the negative function of the strictly transcendental doctrine depends heavily on the restricted sense of "know" involved in the claim. The important aspect of the transcendental doctrine, its nontrivial aspect, is first of all clear in its denial of any knowledge other than that gained by experience, or demonstrable in terms of possible experience (as the categories are "known"). Viewed this way, the transcendental claim about not knowing noumena is not only not trivial, it represents the most important aspect of Kant's break with the metaphysical tradition. There are scores of instances in the rationalist tradition preceding Kant where philosophers claimed that the whole notion of knowledge by means of experience was incoherent unless we assumed knowledge not gained by experience alone. Of course, Kant himself seems to say much the same thing in his proof for synthetic a priori knowledge, but he now denies that such a priori knowledge is a knowledge of any special object, beyond any we could experience in sensation, but only of formal conditions for the possibility of subjective (that is our) experience. The restriction of knowledge to phenomena thus does restrict both empirical and philosophical knowledge to a kind of experience and a type of proof which strongly contrasts with previous attempts. Indeed, it is in just this sense that the noumenal is meant to restrict and contrast our knowledge. The contrast in question is not between what we know empirically and what we can establish in transcendental phenomenology and some other domain of objects just outside our grasp. The contrast is transcendental, not metaphysical. It is a contrast between possible theories of knowledge, not a contrast within Kant's theory of knowledge. When the Platonic Socrates argues in the Phaedo that to know equal things in our experience we must already know Equality itself, or when a proponent of the Ontological Argument attempts to establish a necessarily existing being, or when Leibniz attempts an account of the properties objects must have independent of any way we could experience those characteristics, Kant's claim that such thinkers have overstepped the boundary between noumena and phenomena is a claim against the concept of knowledge involved in such accounts. From the viewpoint of transcendental philosophy, it is an illusion to think that reason can know things in themselves not so much because such things must remain forever beyond our knowledge, but because the attempt to know such objects in that way arises from an illusory, and indefensible, conception of knowledge.

However, as has been argued, such a negative function is nowhere near the whole story of the place of the doctrine of things in themselves in Kant's theory. Although he attacks any conception of knowledge which claims knowledge of objects considered apart from our possible experience of them, he does quite clearly continue to assert as an important element of critical philosophy itself, that it is not only possible but necessary to think such things in themselves. What then can such a claim mean, if not a reintroduction of the two world view that causes so many problems? Such a claim about "thinking" directly about objects which could not be experienced in fact opens up a very large topic, and forces one to come up with some interpretation for the many passages in the Critique where so considering the "supersensible substrate" of appearances appears a positive, not merely a restricting or negative, possibility, according to transcendental philosophy itself.

There have of course been many attempts to interpret this clear positive function in Kant. They vary from Kant's allegiance to his "private" metaphysical views, the presence of precritical doctrines in the patchwork Critique, a desire to leave some place for his doctrine of freedom and morality, to simple charges that he was confused, did not think through the implications of his own methodology, or, like anyone else, simply had a few bad arguments for doctrines he should not, by his own account, have held. I certainly would not want to claim that there must be another kind of interpretation here because Kant could not have been careless or mistaken, but I do think there is another explanation for such passages, one based on an internal necessity in critical philosophy itself.


31. Krauss, Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich.
Thus far, I have argued that the contrast between appearances and things in themselves cannot be explained on any two worlds view, one which holds that things in themselves affect our sensory apparatus and remain forever hidden behind the veil of perception. Such a view makes a confusing shambles of much of Kant's transcendental theory, and is unnecessary to explain either affection or objectivity. However, I have further argued that a purely "methodological" view of this doctrine, an interpretation of things-considered-in-themselves, is also incomplete as an explanation of the doctrine. A purely negative view of noumena on such a theory ends up leaving the whole "contrast" at the heart of Kant's _Refriktionslehre_ unexplained, and more important, leaves too much of the actual text unexplained. Some kind of positive role for the doctrine of things in themselves is clearly at work in such passages as Bxvi:

Though we cannot know these objects as things themselves, we must yet be in a position to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears.

For, while we can duly note how careful Kant is in such formulations, reminding us that we cannot know phenomenal objects as things in themselves, and not simply asserting we cannot know things in themselves, we are still left with no positive way to interpret what "thinking" of things in themselves might mean. To anticipate, such a claim doesn't mean thinking of objects other than in terms of their appearances; it seems to mean thinking of appearances in terms which themselves cannot be submitted to empirical scrutiny.

It is this latter sense of thinking of things in themselves as the ground of appearances which Kant appears to have in mind in discussing the work of "reason," particularly in its "regulative" use. That is, there are clear indications that he realizes that the notion of the ground or cause of appearances can be taken in (1) an empirical sense, where we adopt a point of view wholly within experience and consider the relation between object and, say, sensation as an empirical relation and investigate the cause of inner objects of perception just as we would any other cause; (2) a wholly transcendental sense, where reflection on some phenomenal object, when considered independently of its relation to our forms of experience, yields only the negative notion of a transcendental object

32. A problem similar to the one raised here for the methodological interpretation — whether it trivializes the negative meaning of noumena — has been raised in a different way by Erik Stenius, "On Kant's Distinction between Phenomena and Noumena," _Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Gunnar Aspelin on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday_ (Lund: C. W. R. Gleerup, 1963), pp. 231-45. See also Allison, "Things in Themselves, Noumena, and the Transcendental Object," p. 60 ff., for a discussion relevant to this point.

33. A252.

= X, or as he says, just the "indeterminate" notion of a "something in general", or (3) a regulative sense, where such reflection can and indeed must somehow issue in "positive" results. This third possibility is discussed frequently throughout the Transcendental Dialectic, but especially in three passages: the entire series of introductory remarks for the Transcendental Dialectic (B350-96 = A293-338), wherein Kant explains his theory of Transcendental Ideas; the explanation of Transcendental Idealism as the Key to the Solution of the Cosmological Dialectic (B518-95 = A490-567), especially the last part of this discussion, beginning at B570 = A542; and the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic (B670-732 = A643-704), wherein Kant discusses the Regulative Employment of the Ideas of Pure Reason and the Final Purpose of the Natural Dialectic of Human Reason.

In a number of passages in these sections, Kant uses the same language he had earlier used at the end of the Analytic, where reflection on nonsensible objects, considered in terms of possible human knowledge, had yielded only the negative notion of a thing in itself. But here he uses that language to stress that, from another point of view, such an object can be considered positively, indeed even when considered the "ground" of appearances.

If, in connection with a transcendental theology, we ask, first, whether there is anything distinct from the world, which contains the ground of the order of the world and of its connection in accordance with universal laws, the answer is that there undoubtedly is. For the world is a sum of appearances; and there must therefore be some transcendental ground of appearances, that is a ground which is thinkable only by the pure understanding. (B724 = A696)

Shortly thereafter, in explaining why we must presuppose such a ground, he says that in doing so we presuppose a "transcendental object," adding yet another, now positive, meaning to that already ambiguous term.

Of course, Kant carefully circumscribes the proper context for such positive reflection on things in themselves, and in doing so points out clearly the different senses of illusion possible when doing so and so the different senses of reflection on things in themselves sketched above. At B352 = A295ff, he reminds us that there is one type of illusion that concerns only the "misapplication" of the categories, an error of the faculty of judgment when not properly curbed by criticism. To correct this error we make use of what has been called here the transcendental notion of a thing in itself. That is, this context is wholly epistemological, and concerns a dispute among possible theories of knowledge, wherein, for example, one may agree that everything which exists has a cause, but
interpret that as knowledge about things in themselves. We correct that theory by means of criticism, an explication and defense of the forms of experience, and so argue that in that epistemological context, discussion of things in themselves is wholly indeterminate. From this Kant distinguishes dialectical illusion proper, wherein we claim to have knowledge of objects which transcends the limits of any experience whatsoever, objects like the soul, God, or the totality of some set of appearances. He goes on to point out, however, that it is not postulation of these objects themselves which is illusory, but a misunderstanding of their use (B761 = A643), and proposes to offer a theory about the proper, "immanent" use even for such transcendent principles.

That theory is his theory of transcendental ideas, sometimes called "concepts" or "maxims" of reason. According to this theory, reason has a particular task to play within the knowledge of appearances itself, a task defined at B365 = A307 as "to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion." It is this unconditioned totality, conceived necessarily as outside or beyond any series of appearances we could apprehend, that constitutes the content of any positive reflection on things in themselves. Kant then goes on to argue that there are a number of specific ways in which such an unconditioned for the series of conditioned appearances can and must be thought, ways he designates "transcendental ideas." These are defined at B377 = A320: "A concept formed from notions and transcending the possibility of experience is an idea or concept of reason." And later,

I understand by idea a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense experience. Thus the pure concepts of reason, now under consideration, are transcendental ideas. They are concepts of pure reason in that they view all knowledge gained in experience as being determined through an absolute totality of conditions. (B383–84 = A327)

The first thing one is struck by in reviewing the passages where Kant describes the meaning of thinking of appearances nonempirically (provisionally interpreted here as thinking of what we do experience in terms of "conditions" which are themselves not derived from nor directly meaningful in terms of actual or possible experience) is the strong "necessity" with which he characterizes the move to this way of thinking. In the Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic, he first makes this point by speaking of a "subjective necessity," which we may misinterpret as objective, but which is still subjectively necessary in some way (B354 = A297). This regulative direction of the understanding is also said to be "indispensably necessary [unentbehrlich notwendig] if we are to direct the understanding beyond every given experience" (B673 = A645, and again at B705 = A679). Many other such passages abound in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic. One of the strongest occurs at B679 = A651.

For the law of reason to seek this [unity] is necessary, because without this law we would have no reason, but without reason we would have no coherent use of the understanding, and in the absence of this no sufficient criterion of empirical truth, and so in respect of this latter we must assume the systematic unity of nature as objective and necessary. [my emphasis]

So far, then, thinking of things in themselves is supposed to mean thinking of appearances in terms of a systematic unity which, while it cannot be itself experienced, nor apparently directly proved to be an indispensable condition of any experience, is nevertheless "subjectively" necessary, especially if we are to direct the understanding "beyond any given experience" or if we are to have a "criterion of empirical truth."

Clearly, two questions arise. What is the nature of this claim for the "necessity" of such a mode of reflection, and what, specifically, is such an assumption of ideas supposed to amount to? The answer to the first question depends on Kant's doctrine of the distinction between the understanding and reason, and especially on the limitations of the understanding in empirical knowledge.

As in many places in the Critique, Kant's neat divisions between various faculties can be more confusing than clarifying, but the general sense of this Verstand/Vernunft distinction is clear enough. The task of the understanding is most often described in terms of the discrimination and unifying of our sensory experience, our experience of sensory particulars. On the other hand, the task of reason is defined in terms of the results of the understanding's labor; Kant often says that while the understanding has appearances as its object, reason has the understanding itself, and its concepts, for its object. 34 Stated very generally, and without a sharp division of faculties, the tasks of our intellectual or conceptualizing grasp of the world is different when we are presented with a sensed particular and must think it together with other objects according to a rule in order to discriminate it conceptually, and when we wish to systematically think together the results of such discrimination in some interconnected system. In the latter case we shift our interest from "understanding" some sensory appearance to "conceiving" the connections among a variety of individual experiences in laws of higher generality. In the Critique of Judgment Kant gives, I believe, a somewhat more satisfactory explanation of such different goals in distinguishing between determinate judgments, which seek to include particulars within universal

34. As at B361 = A305 and B362 = A306.
concepts already possessed, and reflective (in the language of the Critique, "ascending") judgments which, when presented with a variety of particular experiences, seek a universal within which to organize these experiences. Although he is somewhat inconsistent about this latter characterization in the Critique, such a difference between reason and the understanding is clearly present at B394 = A336. We should note immediately that one result of this description is that it seems to lead to the conclusion that such universal-seeking activities as empirical concept formation must themselves be understood as the work of reason and so founded on this "subjective necessity," whatever it turns out to be.

In one sense, then, this distinction is, as Bennett, following Swing, has called it, a difference in degrees of conceptualizing, with reason involving conceptualizing at an "at least fairly high level." But the distinction also involves more than such a difference in degree. Most important, the greater degree of generality demanded by reason creates a qualitative break with the understanding; we now demand some kind of extension beyond the "limits of experience" just in order to have this greater degree of generality. That is, to invoke earlier language used here, it also involves a difference in the source or ground of conceptualizing itself. The basis of reason's attempt to unify experience must be understood differently than the understanding's, a difference most of all visible in the limited kind of "conceptualizing" involved in the understanding.

To make this limitation clear, we need to recall the limitations of the Deduction's proof about concepts. Even if the extension of the Deduction's argument in the Second Analogy goes through, we have only proved thereby that in our empirical investigation of the phenomenal world, we are warranted in looking for causal connections, and that this warrant has a higher authority or "more dignity" than Hume thought it did. In fact, if we did not assume that some distinction could be made between subjectively associated and objectively connected events, experience would be impossible. But the question such a theory raises for the understanding's actual, not merely possible, discrimination of the world is how we know not just that experience stands in some causal order but that it stands in this or that general order. Commentators, and often Kant himself, toss off that "our experience" should answer such a question, but at this point in the explanation, the whole situation is much too underdetermined to allow such a casual appeal. The understanding's pure concept do, perhaps, provide the rules for the unification and discrimination of some manifold, and the schemata for such concepts, perhaps, provide a way of actually applying such concepts, but it still remains the case that the actual system of causal laws and explanations of the physical world can still proceed in any number of internally consistent ways. This indeterminateness is as true of the various ways we can determinately understand our everyday sense experience as it is true of various theories and systems of science. And it is just this indeterminateness that the system of regulative ideals is supposed to help determine.

This point about the limitations of the understanding can be put in the following, familiar way. The Second Analogy, let us assume, has established that, given any singular event, E, it is necessarily the case that E is connected causally to some other event. In some particular experience, however, given this event, E, we must invoke some determinate empirical law and judge ("determinately") that E is caused by, say, the singular event A. Clearly, though, we can make this judgment only if, as Kant had stated in the B679 passage quoted above, we have already "gone beyond any given experience," and formulated ("reflectively") some universal rule along the order of: E-type events are caused by A-type events. What Kant is now arguing by so strongly asserting the necessity for reason's reflective yet immanent role in knowledge is that in order to formulate this rule, we must assume an order and regularity to nature which we cannot experience directly, but which is required for any systematic knowledge. Indeed, consistent with what was said in Chapter 4, the very concept of an E-type event is itself an empirical specification of a presupposed, species unity and so itself evidences the necessary, regulative use of reason.

Indeed, Kant is willing to state the necessity for this involvement by reason in empirical knowledge itself in very strong ways. When characterizing "concepts of reason," he points out that though "no actual experience has ever been completely adequate to it, yet to it every actual experience belongs" (B367 = A310–11). Indeed, he says at B691–A663,

35. Kant, Kritik der Urtskraft, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 5, p. 179. This same faculty, reflective judgment, is called "wit" in the Anthropologische section 42.
37. As already mentioned in the discussion of empirical concepts in chapter 4, one of the best discussions of the limitations of the actual "proof" for the causal maxim can be found in Buchdahl, Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science, especially, pp. 651-65. Paton had already noticed those limitations, Kant's Metaphysics of Experience, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 276. A very clear, though brief, discussion of the point can be found in Melnick, Kant's Analogies of Experience, pp. 89-97. For an attempt to interpret Kant on the problem of induction which makes less use of regulative principles than the above, and more use of the arguments of the First and Second Analogies, see Gordon G. Brittan, Jr., Kant's Philosophy of Science (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 188-208.
38. The distinction between the "indispensability" or subjective necessity for regulative ideas and the role of the categories as necessary conditions for the possibility of experience...
The remarkable feature of these principles . . . is that they seem to be
transcendental, and that although they contain mere ideas for the guidance of
the empirical employment of reason — ideas which reason follows only as it
were asymptotically, i.e., ever more closely without ever reaching them —
they yet possess, as synthetic a priori propositions, objective but indeterminate
validity, and serve as rules for possible experience. [my emphasis]

So it is this restriction on the understanding’s capacity, the fact that the
understanding can only judge by means of concepts, and, strictly speak-
ing, cannot originate concepts, that makes the assumption of organizing
ideas necessary, ideas which in themselves transcend the limits of experi-
ence and legislate comprehensively to experience. That is, such a neces-
sity is, like many other uses of the term in Kant, conditional. That
condition is the desire for a more integrated and unified system of
knowledge than can be provided by the understanding alone. Of course,
Kant also thinks that, in science, particularly in mathematical physics, a
number of specific laws can be determined by “thinking through” the
concept of matter in terms of the categories (basically, again by means of
pure intuition), but it is still true that the organization of these laws into
comprehensive systems of different sciences, and further subdivisions
within the sciences ruled by such prescriptive, a priori principles, are only
possible on the assumption of a certain natural orderliness, an assumption
which amounts to thinking appearances as things in themselves, an
invoking of an idea which transcends any possible experience. Simply
put, we do not experience the order of nature, but without the assump-
tion of such an order, our view of science would have to be one of, say,
statistically correlated relations between individual events, and not one
with generally explanatory theories.

It is this notion of “regulatively” thinking of appearances that appears
to be what Kant means by claiming that there must be a “supersensible”
ground for appearances, that things in themselves can be thought to be
the intellectual substrate of phenomena. Such language refers only to a
regulative way of thinking about appearances, a noncognitive assumption
made for the sake of systematic efficiency and even the extension of
empirical knowledge, but not meant to be description of some factual or
metaphysical relation between appearances and things in themselves.

confirms a point made earlier here: that the categories, as distinct from ideas, are not
“subjectively imposed” on the material of sense, but comprehensively define the only
“objective reality” we could experience. In that sense, we could not wonder if “reality”
were the way our categorical structure required it to be; to stress that this is a nominalist
question is just what the negative meaning of noumena is to do. We can, however, wonder
if reality does conform to our systematic demands, and that is precisely why a “critique” of
teleological judgment is needed in the Kritik der Urtsilkraft. Cf. Arthur Melnick’s discus-
sion of this point, Kant’s Analogies of Experience, pp. 136-64.

Again, this assumption is “made necessary” by the limited role of the
understanding in, especially, science. Kant’s transcendental theory of
experience, looked at closely, really does not go very far toward explain-
ing many of the aspects of knowledge which we would normally be
interested in in a comprehensive epistemology; it particularly does not
explain such things as theory formation in science, the determine
system of empirical concepts (“natural kinds”) used in a science, or the
relation between various theories in different sciences. He appears to
want to discuss many such topics under the heading of “regulative ideas.”

Given that desire, we now need to turn to which regulative ideas are
necessary to assume, why these and no others, and what kind of help they
are supposed to provide (especially since it is described as indispensable
help) in a scientific account of phenomena. The above account, subject to
particular difficulties which we haven’t discussed, is relatively plausible,
and given its apparent commitment to a kind of underdetermination in
the formation of such systematic theories, and the fact that these organizing
ideas and the theories they lead to are much more a result of
pragmatics, logic, and even semantics than induction, might get a sympa-
thetic hearing today. But with these questions, the situation gets much
more murky and much less plausible.

First, Kant sometimes gives the impression that, either as determined
by the three forms of syllogistic inferences or as determined by the three
kinds of relational syntheses (he is just not clear here), there are only
three kinds of regulative ideals which we “must” assume: the mind as a
simple, intelligible substance (the soul); an endless continuity in the
system of appearances (the world); and a highest, self-sufficient, creative,
purposively ordering ground for the totality of appearances (God).
However, all attempts known to me to understand how just these three
organizing principles arise from the limitations of the understanding, or
even how they actually do help organize appearances in useful ways
(particularly the first), have not been particularly successful. What is
more important here is the principle of these ideas in general. However
shaky Kant’s derivation of these ideas may be, they reveal his con-
tinuing allegiance to a “formal” conception of both the origin and role of
such concepts, his notion that such legislation arises from reason itself
and legislates to experience, that the content of such legislation is
supplied secondarily.

Such a formal derivation of these regulative notions is clearly very hard

40. Cf. Walsh’s discussion, Kant’s Criticism of Metaphysics (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
41. Kant himself speaks of a “deduction” of the ideas at B698 = A670, and “tries to
make this clearer” at B700 = A672 ff.
to defend whenever we look at any context wherein they are actually supposed to prescribe some kind of order. If we are in fact "called on" to make assumptions about experience, which assumptions can direct but whose terms transcend such experience, then which assumptions would seem to be much more a result of reflection on the actual, scientific investigation of the world, and the kinds of specific scientific questions asked in various contexts, than on the formal nature of human reason. If in fact this were true, then it would also follow that the more effective such "holistic" assumptions were, especially in increasing actual empirical knowledge, the more inclined we would be to treat such assumptions less as regulative maxims, and more as correct explanations of nature. Following such suggestions through would serve to break down Kant's unnecessarily strict alternative, that reason either "commands" or "begs" in respect to nature, but it would also tend to blur some of the more basic distinctions upon which much of the critical philosophy is based — for example, between the a priori and a posteriori.

To return to the specifics of Kant, it is not difficult to establish that he himself does have a far more flexible view about the assumption of certain ideas. Although he does believe that there must be some foundational rules of reason which tell us, in effect, how to make specific general assumptions, the principle for such assumptions, while the same throughout, allows a wide variety of "reflective" determinations of experience. This breadth and the extent of reason's actual role in science is much clearer in the Critique of Judgment, particularly in the first Introduction, than it is in the architectonically baroque Critique. Freed of such architectonic restraints, Kant's description of the role of reason in theory formation there includes a good deal more.

It is important as well, though, also to emphasize how committed Kant was to his "formal" method of arriving at such determinations. He appears particularly worried, as well he might be, that the subjective source of such principles should be interpreted to mean that, freed from the constraints present in the Deduction for claims about pure concepts, we can simply formulate all sorts of various ways of thinking of appearances as "in themselves." He remarks instead that these concepts of reason are not arbitrarily invented; they are imposed by the very nature of reason itself, and therefore stand in necessary relation to the whole employment of the understanding. (B384 = A327)

He also cautions against regarding these principles as exclusively heuristic devices. If such were the case, of course, we could materially decide which ideas to postulate on the basis of their function, on what results they led to. But, according to Kant,

The formulation of these laws is not due to any secret design of making an experiment, by putting them forward as merely tentative suggestions. Such anticipations, when confirmed, yield strong evidence in support of the view that the hypothetically conceived unity is well-grounded; and such evidence has therefore in this respect a certain utility. But it is evident that the laws contemplate the parsimony of fundamental causes, the manifoldness of effects, and the consequent affinity of the parts of nature as being in themselves in accordance both with reason and with nature. Hence these principles carry their recommendations directly in themselves, and not merely as methodological devices. (B688 = A660)

This requirement leads Kant to claim that such concepts of pure reason must be derived from some kind of a "deduction," "however greatly (as we admit) it may differ from what we have been able to give of the categories." (B698 = A670). This deduction will secure the objectivity of these concepts "but in an indeterminate manner (principium vagum)" (B708 = A680). This insistence on some ground for these concepts is particularly clear at B679 = A651), where Kant remarks:

For with what right can reason, in its logical employment, call upon us to treat the multiplicity of powers exhibited in nature as simply a disguised unity, and to derive this unity, so far as possible from a fundamental power — how can reason do this, if it be free to admit as likewise possible that all powers may be heterogeneous, and that such systematic unity of derivation may not be in conformity to Nature?... Nor can we say that reason, while proceeding in accordance with its own principles, has arrived at knowledge of this unity through observation of the accidental constitution of nature. The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity is necessary.

teleological order, following that suggestion can, I think, lead to the misleading notion of "philosophical fictions." That is just where it led Vaihinger. See also Eva Schaper, "The Thing-in-Itself as a Philosophical Fiction," Philosophical Quarterly 16 (1966): 233-43. A more interesting suggestion occurs in Sellars' discussions of theoretical entities (in principle unobservable) and the thing in itself. Science and Metaphysics (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), chap. 2.

46. Of course, there are several places where Kant does describe such principles as heuristic, but that has nothing directly to do with their derivation, as this passage shows.
Again and again, however, when called on to present this nonempirical ground, Kant retreats to some conception of reason's self-imposed demands. His final explanation of how it is that nature can be said to "fit" or accord with such demands is always an insistence that that occurs because we "dictate" such an order to nature. The clearest statement of this thesis occurs at B576 = A548:

Reason does not here follow the order of things as they present themselves in appearances, but frames for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas, to which it adapts the empirical conditions, and according to which it declares actions to be necessary, even though they have never taken place, and perhaps never will take place.\(^{47}\) [my emphasis]

This most radical extension yet of the transcendental turn claims that it is a misunderstanding to ask how our conception of the order, connectedness, and unity of nature can be confirmed by our experience of nature. Such concepts even "of pure reason" are still said to determine the very sense of nature for us. However, at this point, without the use of the strong sense of "the possibility of experience" to establish this a priori determining role, we face an even more confusing explanation of which rules do we prescribe to nature. Aside from the very general claims that we must seek a parsimonious explanation for a diversity of laws, that simplicity of explanation should be a guide for the relation between empirical laws and other such maxims, once we do attempt a systematic integration of such laws into a whole of some determinate genus-species or theoretical system, the "indeterminateness" of Kant's formal account is quite striking. He seems to assume that, armed with these general "simplicity" and "unity" rules, "nature," as investigated determinately by the understanding, will simply "fall into line," that we will just tend toward some unified, single comprehensive account of the world. The possibility of internally consistent but competing "holistic" explanations does not seem to have occurred to him as a serious possibility. Indeed, such could not occur if his explanation of the formation of theoretical concepts is correct. The legislation by reason prescribes or "commands" to nature a priori and since "pure reason is in fact occupied with nothing but itself" (perhaps the clearest statement of the kind of formality involved in the whole Kantian enterprise), and since there is only one human reason, such conflicts cannot occur. It does not seem to me that developments in science since Kant have tended to confirm this view of either the origin of, or the results of, such a demand for systematic, theoretical unity.

I conclude two things from the above interpretation of the correct relations between appearances and things in themselves: first, that Kant

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\(^{47}\) Cf. also B590 = A562.
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Conclusions: Kant's Formalism

Der Satz, daß das Endliche ideell ist, macht den Idealismus aus. Der Idealismus der Philosophie besteht in nichts Anderem als darin, das Endliche nicht als ein wahrhaft Sein des anzuerkennen. Jede Philosophie ist wesentlich Idealismus oder hat denselben wenigstens zu ihrem Prinzip, und die Frage ist denn nur, inwieweit dasselbe wirklich durchgeführt ist.

G. W. F. Hegel, Wissenschaft der Logik


Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.114, 5.6

1. Form, Mind, and Imposed Unity

Individual arguments in philosophy which purport to establish such claims as the existence of final causes, abstract entities, God, or a nonmaterial substance, or which present and defend some general characterization of being, or the order, harmony, purposiveness or beauty of nature, could be approached "critically" simply on an individual basis. It might be possible to "criticize" such arguments in a way internal to the assumptions of each, to show that even under such assumptions, conclusions do not follow from premises, to offer problematic counterexamples based on similar types of reasoning, or to show that the assumptions necessary for such arguments are internally inconsistent, dogmatically asserted, or treacherously ambiguous. However, such a characterization of a "critical spirit" in philosophy does no justice to the ambitiousness and scope of Kant's critical idealism, a dimension best emphasized, we have argued, by noticing its comprehensive formalism. That is, Kant does not want to assert in isolation that the various arguments traditionally used in philosophy to support such claims as the above simply do not allow us to claim such knowledge of things in themselves, but that they cannot. And

2. As at B16 = A84 ff.
Conclusions

tal inquiry, the subjective forms of experience — from Kant's "theory of knowledge" is to deprive the transcendental turn of its very force, its interest in defending such forms of "our" mental activity as forms of knowledge. In sum, transcendental formalism is a "meta-level" analysis of the modes of knowledge, but must thereby be an account of our way of understanding knowledge of objective reality, and because of this restriction in standpoint, also must include an attempt at some defense of these formal, non-derived rules, as forms of knowledge, as more than merely "our" ways of organizing and discriminating experience. That quid juris question forces any epistemology to show that certain claims about objective reality, when properly understood and delineated, are well founded; to do that, something, however indirectly and subjectively based, must be said about objective reality, just so that we do know that certain kinds of claims are justified; and, for Kant, this demands a comprehensive attempt to determine what can count as experience of objective reality "for us." 3

To accomplish this task, however, raises, as we have seen, endless complications involving the subjective status of our rules for understanding objective reality. If we do attempt to defend some synthetic a priori judgment by appealing in some complex way to how we understand (or even "must understand") objective reality, then, we have asked here in a variety of ways, how do we also establish that these "ways" or forms correctly discriminate, or prescribe an objective order to nature? When the problem is posed in this way, we are naturally led to one of the most familiar interpretations prominent in many commentators who take Kant's notion of subjective forms as seriously as has been done here — that these subjective modes of understanding are "imposed" necessarily on experience, that the mind imposes its own rules of unification on any material contributed by sensory experience.

I have tried to argue that transcendental idealism, when interpreted as formal idealism, is not only a central aspect of Kant's theory, but that the above general arguments for such an "idealism" are quite reasonable. However, I have also suggested that the above "imposition" model is too simplistic to express adequately how Kant wants to argue for the "objectivity" of our "subjective" understanding of reality. These objections to the "imposition" can now be summarized as follows. 4

In the first place, we must be careful in any talk about the structure of the "mind" being imposed on reality, and careful about understanding the relation between forms of thought and intuition and the mind. Kant does want to interpret the formal structure of our understanding of objective reality as "subjective," that is, as defensible only as "human," and so as a restricted mode of understanding. But he does not thereby understand these forms as "mental" dispositions, or structures of the mind. As was clear in chapters 3 and 4, Kant is interested in rules for conceptual activity, the forms of objective judgment, and this interest allows him, so he believes, to be neutral metaphysically about "what it is" which thinks, or about the "metaphysical" status of these forms. Likewise, in chapter 6, it was apparent that when Kant calls the unity of apperception required for any experience "formal" he means to assert only that judgment, or any cognitive activity, and so any experience, would not be possible unless elements of consciousness were brought to a unity. This expresses a formal demand or a "supreme law" for what must be done, and, again, does not express any claim about the mind as some special, perhaps nonmaterial object. A claim about what, intellectually, we do is not the same as a claim about what the mind is, and the forms of such activity are thus not special mental objects, a special mental structure, or dispositions, or psychological laws, but rules, normative restrictions on various activities ("whatever" the mental subject of those activities is). 5

Now, of course, from the Dissertation on, Kant does speak of laws of the mind (Gemäß), but in those contexts he is almost always thinking of the mind just as Spontaneität, as intuiting and judging activity. The Paralogisms supply ample evidence of this desire not to follow, let us say, the Cartesian route in philosophy, where a priori concern with what can and cannot be known ended up as a metaphysical theory about the mind (as mental substance) which knows and about "its" objects. Kant claims to be interested in the structure of knowing, not in the knowing subject. 6

However, it must be quickly admitted that this kind of interpretation and defense of Kant's understanding of subjective forms is quite limited. Some of those limitations were apparent in his account of the formal nature of the unity of apperception, and especially in his attempt to distinguish apperception from self-knowledge. More broadly, however, Kant's account of mental activity must be committed to some claim about

3. In effect, Kant's epistemology thus rejects both strategies open to him as possible responses to the quid juris question: "foundationalist" approaches in the empiricist tradition, and the search for a supreme "guarantor" of some kind of "ideas."

4. I am concerned here with objections to this notion as a correct interpretation of Kant. There are, of course, objections which can be raised directly against the very notion. See J. Bennett, Kant's Dialectic (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 54 ff.

5. The tendency to speak in "mentalistic" terms in interpreting Kant is prominent in Vahinger, Kemp Smith, and Weldon, and is responsible, in part, for nineteenth-century psychologistic Kantianism. These erroneous interpretations are yet another reason to keep the formal nature of Kant's idealism prominent in mind, especially the analogy with the formalism of general logic.

6. This distinction is the central theme of the Paralogisms, particularly as restated in the second edition. See especially his introductory remarks B406-413, B421, and B426-28.
the possibility of such a unique type of activity, and those sorts of claims would necessarily be metaphysical, or substantive. That is, the whole notion of “following” a rule implies an ability to decide which (empirical) rule is to be followed and an ability to understand some empirical situation in terms of some a priori principle. It is hard to see how a number of elements in Kant’s theory could be preserved if, say, a materialist theory of mind, and especially cognitive activity, were true. (It would be particularly difficult to explain the possibility of “judgment,” as it was interpreted in chapter 5.) In other words, while Kant’s theory itself is not, I believe, about the structure of the mind, it is true that some claim about the metaphysical possibility of cognitive activity is assumed by that theory.

The relationship between such assumptions and transcendental philosophy is not, I admit, a straightforward one. There is, though, quite a bit of evidence that Kant himself was at least willing to speculate about that relationship even occasionally to attempt some bridge between the speculative requirements for his transcendental philosophy, and his practical philosophy. That bridge depends on the notion of “freedom” required for the cognitive understanding of Spontaneität to be consistent. I won’t pursue that connection here, except to suggest that even though Kant’s view of the forms of mental activity is intended to be a metaphysically neutral understanding of rules, a complete account would have to include some explanation of the subject of thinking. Moreover, just that requirement alone demonstrates one significant area, quite important for the German Idealists after Kant, where an “epistemological theory” depends on “metaphysical” presuppositions (or is itself a kind of metaphysics).

7. At least, on Kant’s understanding of “following a rule,” however that notion is understood, it is apparent throughout Kant’s account for him the normative dimension to questions of knowledge always prevents a psychologistic (or behavioristic) “reduction” of such questions.

8. Cf. again though some alternative suggestions in Sellars’s “... the I or he or it which thinks ...” Proceedings and Addresses of the APA 44 (September 1971): 11 ff.

9. Such speculation begins at a footnote to B158, where Kant discusses “representing” myself as “Intelligenz.” He continues to argue that man’s capacity for apperception itself establishes that he is “a purely intelligible object” at B575–A547, and recalls the same kind of argument, but again without much development, in the Grundlegung, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 5, pp. 447–48 and especially p. 452. Exactly how Kant wants to make this bridge from his theoretical to his practical philosophy is obscure, and he himself, some commentators argue, drops the attempt by the time of the Second Critique. There is an analysis of the attempt in R. P. Wolff, The Autonomy of Reason (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 9 ff., but Wolff’s account is quite speculative and does not, I think, establish a connection between transcendental apperception and moral freedom.

10. There is a clear link in German philosophy after Kant, especially throughout the work of Fichte and Hegel, established by a common attention to the implications of defining

But the “mind-imposed unity” model is simplistic not only because of the metaphysically neutral notion of intellectual activity at the heart of Kant’s project, but mainly because of the limitations of the “imposition” metaphor itself. Kant’s frequent formulations notwithstanding, it is especially clear from his account of “transcendental judgment,” as interpreted here in chapter 5, and from the second part of the Deduction, as presented in chapter 6, that Kant does not think that subjective rules of unification are imposed on the material of sensation and in any direct or simplistic way determine objective reality for us, “be the real world as it may.” The error of this view was also, I believe, clear from the close attention to what is and is not implied by his appearance/thing-in-itself doctrine, as presented here in chapter 7, and by considering the difference between admittedly “imposed” regulative ideas and the quite different explanations for conditions for the possibility of experience.

What, in general, distinguishes his position on form from that imposition interpretation is a twofold qualification. In the first place, Kant does argue that our understanding of the general structure of phenomenal reality can only be defended as “our” understanding of such reality, but he goes on to show that and why no other possible account of experience could account for the unity of apperception essential to any experience. Kant’s attempt at comprehensiveness, both with regard to our forms of thought and especially our forms of intuition, is an attempt to exclude regarding pure forms of experience as one of many possible ways of organizing experience which we just happen to possess and “blindly” impose. Of course, everything thus depends on how, by appeal to what, he means to exclude the other options as “transcendently” if not logically impossible, and we argued that there were serious problems with that attempt. But his intentions are, at any rate, straightforward. As the B138 passage makes clear, if he can establish not just what “I require” in order to know an object, but what is required for anything to be an object, then it will have been established that such formal unity is not imposed on our experience, but expresses the structure any experience of an object could have. In this sense, if such a comprehensive perspective could be attained, then it could be said that our forms of experience just are the only terms in which “relation to objects” could be established by human knowers. This formal unity is not imposed; it just is the only type of unity we could understand in our experience.

But besides the attempt at comprehensiveness — or more correctly as an important, unique feature of that case — we have Kant’s intriguing man’s rational nature as Spontaneität. It is prominent in Fichte’s early (1794) discussions of Tathandlung and is central to any understanding of Hegel’s notion of Geist. For more on the issue, see W. Janke, Fichte: Sein und Reflexion (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970), p. 69 ff., and Dieter Henrich Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967).
account of judgment (Urteilskraft) as further evidence against the imposition model. I suggested above that Kant intends both transcendental and empirical judgment to account for the application of concepts, and so to distinguish this application from simple imposition. Although Kant's theory of judgment has been quite neglected in commentaries, it not only provides, I have suggested, an attempt at avoiding the "subjectivist" and "constructivist" interpretations of the relation between the form and content of experience, but also reveals a serious instability in the understanding/sensibility distinction so very essential to the Critique. Being able to provide a "schema" for both pure and empirical concepts would establish the relation between concepts and objects in a way based on some view of both objects of intuition and concepts (and thus again would distinguish a "guided" application from imposition). But Kant cannot, I also suggested, carry out this demand without a serious qualification on fundamental presuppositions elsewhere in the Critique. Instead, Kant either reverts to his even more obscure theory of pure intuition (which itself stresses all over again a more constructivist theory of phenomenal unity) or mysteriously hints at a hidden art lying in the depths of the human soul. In short, the schematism and the theory of transcendental judgment should be the center of any correctly Kantian understanding of the subjective status of forms of intuition, and of their application, and it does clearly evidence Kant's intention to avoid the "imposition" interpretation, but it fails to support the weight of so much of the critical edifice. It must be admitted, though, that however much attention to these dimensions of Kant's theory of form can help to clarify his intentions, and establish the proper context for evaluating his results, it also begins immediately to re raise many of the problems which often occurred in preceding chapters. Indeed, a summary look at those problems suggests at least two general, continually apparent difficulties with Kant's formal methodology.

2. Kantian Difficulties

The first set of problems stems directly from Kant's claim about the priority and independence of transcendental philosophy itself. He argues that any individual claim to know, whether in metaphysics or science, is intelligible not only in terms of rules which determine what could count as knowledge or not, that we could not determine truth and error on the basis of evidence and argument except in terms of rules for what counts as evidence in the first place. But in order to know what could or couldn't be known in general, a transcendental foundation for all knowledge must be laid, and the limits of knowledge thereby established prior to, and independent of, actual attempts to know. But conceived in even this abstract way, it is obvious that, somewhere, Kant will have to face the problem of what we do have to "know" in order to specify, with the authority of necessity and universality, the forms or modes for any knowledge claim. Knowing in general both that there are, necessarily, subjective forms of experience, knowable a priori, and knowing determinately what they are, raise the problem of what such knowledge of forms is "based on," what is "appealed to" in order to establish them.

The second problem arises once we accept some provisional version of Kant's formal idealism. If we accept his claim that his idealism is not wholly "constitutive" (in the sense in which Kant himself seems to have regarded Fichte's), but that the forms of experience must be applied to an empirically apprehended "matter," then we need to provide some less metaphorical interpretation of just what this relationship consists in. That is, I have argued, Kant's theory of empirical knowledge is quite an important feature of his transcendental enterprise; or, at least, until we understand it thoroughly, we will not have understood his notion of form.

The first problem is especially important in trying to understand just how "transcendental philosophy" differs from traditional philosophic methodology. After all, Kant claims that the Critique just is an essay on methodology, and its manner of achieving its formal results is intended to be a radical departure from the attempts at synthetic a priori knowledge (and the attempts at an exhaustive denial of the possibility of such knowledge), prior to this attempt. Accordingly, it is even more important to understand, in some general, "strategic" way, how Kant means to establish his "merely" formal a priori results, especially because he still intends those results to answer many of the questions posed by his predecessors. That is, when he says that his transcendental methodology will achieve "more success" in the tasks of metaphysics, he does not only mean that it will place traditional metaphysical questions in their proper "practical" or regulative context, but also that the Critique itself will provide an interpretation directly responsive to many such traditional questions (e.g., the nature of space and time, the problems of substance, permanence, alteration, causality, actuality, necessity, etc.)

In this sense, it could certainly be said that Kant is indeed still interested in providing some general explanation for, speaking quite broadly now, "why things are as they are." Now, to be sure, a good deal


of his most explicit attempts to deal with that kind of a question directly involve him in problems of teleology, but teleology is meant to explain the order and systematic unity of different aspects of part of nature, and Kant is interested as well in explaining or accounting for the formal structure of nature itself, understood as any object of experience, prior to a concern with the systematic unity of various natural laws. To offer such an explanation, however, he argues for a Copernican revolution in philosophy, a transcendental turn to issues of prior importance in methodological terms than had been appreciated by much of the tradition. His theory in this way will present a new type of philosophic explanation, self-consciously different from that offered by, especially, the most important representatives of the two previous modern examples of such explanation, Leibniz and Hume. Simply put, he replaces Leibniz's appeal to God and the Principle of Sufficient Reason as an “explanation” for why, in general, the world is as it is (or is at all), and not some other way. Leibniz had offered that explanation to account for the difference between logical possibility and reality, to account for the difference between how things might have been and how they are. At the heart of Kant's theory, on the other hand, is a more complicated difference between logical possibility and “real possibility,” an a priori determination of what could be possible for us. This formulation of the really possible also counters the antimetaphysical attack of Hume, who had argued that an understanding of nature could only occur actually, in terms of empirical experience alone; that no a priori reflection about the “ground” of nature was possible. In other words, Kant follows Leibniz in denying that our explanations of nature, as philosophers, need be exclusively tied to a theory about the actual apprehension of nature, but he replaces a metaphysical appeal to God, sufficient reason, compositibility, and so forth with this account of what is “really possible” for us.

And of course, all our difficulties have arisen in trying to specify just how this “real possibility” is to be determined and defended. As we have seen, Kant intends to argue that an initial, independent, formal reflection on what could or couldn't be known by humans sets the “limits” of real possibility, and thus by understanding exhaustively the forms of our experience, we are able to understand, at least in some initial way, why nature is as it is, “for us.” We do not know why our forms of experience are as they are, but we do know that understanding such a formal structure is what accounts for such reality (again “for us”); that it does so more satisfactorily than any appeal to a “supreme” ground of all being, and more consistently than any account based on actual experience alone. Kant, in the middle between these two positions, so he thinks, argues that if the forms of any experience can be determined and established as necessary conditions for any experience then no appeal to a metaphysical ground of explanation is needed to counter doubts about the status of these forms, and thus no skepticism results as a consequence of the absence of such an appeal. The possibility of experience, or a rational determination of real possibility, allows us to say that “for us” the conditions for the possibility of experience are at the same time the conditions for the possibility of objects of experience, or, recalling his formulation in “Von einem neuendaruig erhabenen Ton in der Philosophie,” “formae dat esse rei,” where such forms are understood as our forms of experience. Thus, in sum, reflection on what could be known by us, if that is possible, is a determination of what nature or being is like for us, because it can be shown that such forms of experience comprehensively restrict any understanding of nature we could have. A philosophic explanation of what there is can thus be shifted from a “divine” perspective to a human one without falling victim to an empirical skepticism, or some merely pragmatic or conventional explanation for, and defense of, our understanding of nature.

It is this line of argument which raised the question of the “ground” for these forms of knowledge themselves, that to which we appeal to determine (to know) what they are. In general, establishing such forms determinately by appeal to what is presupposed by “experience” always runs a great risk, as we have seen, of begging the whole question of “necessary” conditions by assuming a concept of experience which would presuppose them. Attempting to begin with some minimal notion of “being aware,” on the other hand, runs the risk of ending up maintaining
that all forms of experience require objectivity rules, or forms of knowledge, even experience which is not "knowledge." Finally, any simplistic resort to the imposition metaphor is inconsistent with much of what Kant says about his results.16

But this problem arose in a number of specific contexts as well. We found it hard to understand, for example, just how appeals to "pure intuition" were to establish determinately the legitimacy of any mathematical concept. Kant's commitment to prior-to-experience "constructability" or even intuition, construed broadly, seemed quite abstract and so tenuously tied to some related account of the forms of sensibility as to end up quite an empty explanation. There was in short, no explanation for the source of, or limits for, constructability or intuitability itself. And, I have maintained, such a problem is not, as it is often interpreted, simply a consequence of an archaic Kantian commitment to "sensible picturability" as a criterion for mathematical legitimacy, but must be seen directly as a consequence of the self-imposed limits of his formal methodology itself.

This problem about the origin of specific forms was even clearer in the case of empirical concepts. Given Kant's understanding of formality, such an explanation could establish the general legitimacy of, say, the use of the concept of cause or substance in the formal organization and explanation of the empirically apprehended world, but the situation is quite indeterminate and confusing beyond that. This particular issue raised quite well the overall problem of where to "stop" in "giving an account of" (a "by what right" defense of) our "modes of knowledge." Kant seems to think that a philosophic explanation is adequate when the general rules for any concept-acquisition are given, but, as I tried to show in chapter 4, too many other issues are involved for that limitation to be reasonable. In that discussion particularly, there was a difference between understanding the role of some rule of recognition in our knowledge and understanding why any particular rule should count as a rule for knowledge of the empirical world. Such a "warrant" for legitimate entry into the conceptual order seemed to require a more extensive explanation than Kant's formal discussion of categories and regulative ideas allows. Many of the problems he himself raises are inadequately dealt with if he "stops" his account of "our mode of knowledge" at such a formal level.17

16. I think, but cannot here demonstrate, that similar kinds of problems in transcendental reasoning occur in more contemporary versions of "what must be the case arguments," e.g., the private language argument, or various transcendental arguments in Strawson and Shoemaker. For a general discussion of some of these problems (although a discussion weak on Kant and his idealism) see Ross Harrison, What There Must Be (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), especially the first two chapters, pp. 1-50.

17. L. Wittgenstein, Blue and Brown Books (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), suggest a solution to this problem. He writes at p. 5: "The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object coexisting with the sign. (One of the reasons for this mistake is again that we are looking for a 'thing corresponding to a substantive.') Indeed, Wittgenstein's whole attempt in this section of the Blue Book is to deny that explaining "following a rule" (of language) requires any prior image or intermediate entity or "seeing" that which allows us to formulate the rule. Following a rule is thus something we do, and is not like applying something. So, the notion of rule is not meant to account for such a standard; it is just meant, if correctly understood, to show how senseless asking for such a standard is.

But it doesn't seem to me that this is what we have done. We have not made the mistake of looking for the "use" of a rule as if it, or the rule itself were "a substantive." We have asked instead for an explanation of the ground for the rule's acquisition (and use) and an explanation of this rule's relation to judgment. Neither question confuses a rule's use with a substantive; both just ask how that use can be explained without such a substantive. Further, it has been shown that (at least) Kant's own case for rules cannot go through without such an explanation. The use of rules in Kant occurs in judgment and it is this, above all, which requires some account of how rules for such judgments are (nonarbitrarily) acquired and how we explain their possession and application. For more on the relation between Kant and Wittgenstein, see Hubert Schwyzer, "Thought and Reality: The Metaphysics of Kant and Wittgenstein," The Philosophical Quarterly 23 (1973).
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though, appreciate the force of the whole problematic presented here by noticing, in conclusion, the philosophic legacy left by Kant's enterprise and the persistence of those limitations.

3. Kant's Legacy

"The Father of Modern Philosophy," it is said, is Descartes. To a large extent, such a characterization is meant to express the influential, indeed founding role of Descartes in the "epistemological turn" so overwhelmingly influential since his time — the turn to epistemology as the center of philosophy itself, or to a theoretical philosophy everywhere determined and restricted by prior, independent reflection on what is or could be known. Descartes's obvious distaste for scholastic dogmatism led him to philosophize one step earlier, methodologically, than much of the tradition, with a prior concern for the nature and possibilities of knowledge itself. However, as was apparent at a number of points in the preceding discussion of Kant's similar interests, such a concern, precisely because it originates in a radical doubt, or uncertainty about what can be known, immediately itself faces the problem of securing some foundation for its results. To claim that we cannot know final causes, or the nature of the soul, and not just that the various arguments thus far presented in philosophy do not establish such conclusions, means that some formal determination of the nature of knowledge itself must be presented, and some defense offered for claims about what, in general, can be known. Descartes's inability to complete the "epistemological" turn systematically is obvious at just that point however. Depending on how one interprets his sincerity, he either had to appeal to God to support such claims as knowledge of continuing existence, the external world, or even the veracity of the criterion of knowledge itself, clarity and distinctness (an appeal which clearly reissues the issue of by what right we can claim to know God's existence and his goodness, and thus the impossible circularity problem), or he must appeal to noncognitive "reasons" for the adoption of certain standards for knowledge and no others, wholly practical reasons, based on the teachings of nature and not the lumen naturale.

It is Kant who attempted the resolution of the problems implied by any insistence on "epistemological priority," and who thus richly deserves Hegel's description as "the Enlightenment made methodical." The foundation for our modes of organizing and discriminating the world


could be sought in the discoverable requirements for any experience whatsoever. In this sense it could fairly be said that Kant’s most influential legacy to philosophy is just the problematic of critical philosophy itself.

By problematic, I mean that any conception of methodology which considers itself initially critical, which begins with an independent attempt to determine the forms of our knowledge, the limits on possible meaning in discourse, must face many of the same problems faced by Kant. More specifically, such enterprises must offer some independent reasons for accepting some account of our modes of intellectual activity or speech as modes of possible knowledge or meaningfulness if some general restriction about what can and cannot be known is to be established. Indeed, the same problematic emerges in the most prominent contemporary manifestation of Kant’s transcendentalism, the “Linguistic Turn,” where the questions shift to a determination of the possible meaning of discourse. There too, at least if we want to avoid merely describing various standards for various types of discourse, or the difficulties now well known in verificationist defenses for theories of meaning, or conventionalist theories of such standards, or pragmatic, wholly noncognitive, Carnapian defenses of such external criteria, then we again face the problems of formalism and comprehensiveness apparent at so many crucial points in Kant. The broad problem at stake in all such critical enterprises is how to determine in general proper “account-giving” in philosophy, and indeed in all knowledge or discourse. To make such a determination implies some sort of comprehensive perspective on what can or cannot be said, or known; to know that is quite a different thing from knowing any one element in terms of some standard for knowledge or to say any one thing meaningfully by virtue of some criterion for meaningfulness. I have suggested that, however important and interesting many of Kant’s reflections on the problem of form are, this comprehensiveness is not attained. This is true with respect to the large-scale strategy of the Deduction as well as with respect to his attempts to argue for what could and could not be known through sensation, a determination of the ground of intuitive knowledge in mathematics, his theory of empirical concepts, and in other specific arguments.

Now, certainly, none of this means that it follows that, given the difficulties of establishing such formal limits, it must be possible, a fortiori, to know what Kant said we couldn’t — God, an infinite series, the soul, and so forth. In fact, many of Kant’s most persuasive arguments in the Transcendental Dialectic, while they refer to his notion of the limits of experience, are often based on a direct consideration of arguments for the soul or God, and it would still be true that any claim in philosophy to know anything would still be subject to the same type of internal “criticism.” More important, though, it would also not follow that, given the problem in Kant’s attempt at a formal delineation of the structure of all human experience, such an attempt at “comprehensiveness” itself should be abandoned. It is still the case that the intelligibility of any one element of our experience or discourse is so only in the light of, if you will, “intelligibility” as such, and for philosophy to lose sight totally of “the whole” structure of possible intelligibility in this or any other sense, would be quite indefensibly myopic.

At least, that guiding assumption about the necessity for some such account of the comprehensive features of experience has been quite prominent in another tradition in philosophy heavily indebted to Kant. Thus far, the major Kantian element identifiable in post-Kantian (and especially Anglo-American, or analytic) philosophic methodologies has been the assumption that a determination of what could or could not be a meaningful assertion could, in advance as it were, let us know what could or could not be a legitimate philosophical, moral, religious, or scientific question. I have suggested, though hardly demonstrated, that many of the problems encountered here with Kant might develop as well, in different ways, in attempts to determine formally and comprehensively such Kantian-like limits. However, there were several attempts, mostly in the European tradition after Kant, to deal with this problem directly, and to transform the Kantian methodology at its foundation in order to deal with it.

For example, although a great many of Hegel’s claims about “Absolute Knowledge” are often taken to be claims for a knowledge of some God-like “Absolute Spirit,” it seems to me that many of those formulations can better be seen as an intensification of Kant’s problem, as developed here, with an “absolute standpoint,” a point of view, or perspective, by virtue of which intelligibility itself could be uncovered and defended, and from which the unity of all forms of “spiritual” activity could be understood. Hegel’s enterprise could thus be seen as a direct attempt to solve many of the problems of “formalism” in Kant’s enterprise, both by arguing for a different, more intimate connection between the speculative role of reason and the analytic function of the understanding than did Kant, and by trying to solve the problem of the “ground” of form by the introduction of the broader notion of “negative activity” (Hegel’s version of Spontaneität) or finally the “history” of spirit as a way of accounting for the origin, determinancy, and extent of such forms.

21. I have tried to indicate the relevance of these problems in Kant to the Linguistic Turn in my “Critical Methodology and Comprehensiveness in Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 9 (1978): 197–211.

22. Ibid., 208 ff.

23. The relation between Hegel and Kant is of course much more complicated that can
But such suggestions about the persistence of Kant’s problematic can at this point only serve as proposals for further interpretation. While the problem of formalism is, I think, by far the most important in understanding German Idealism, and especially in helping to establish the legitimacy of its idealistic concerns, no such detailed demonstration can be given here. I’ve wanted to establish how important the problem of form is in correctly understanding the nature of transcendental philosophy, how difficult that notion has proven to be in Kant, and how difficult it can be in successors working directly in the tradition of his Copernican revolution. Finally, that is, I think it can fairly be said that Kant’s theory of form, and especially the limitations of that theory, simply set the agenda for any philosophy influenced in any way by his extraordinary turn to the activities of the transcendental subject as the proper object of philosophic reflection.

be indicated here. I have tried to spell out that connection in more detail in my “Hegel’s Phenomenological Criticism,” and have tried to suggest how some of Kant’s problems linger on in Hegel’s Science of Logic in my “Hegel’s Metaphysics and the Problem of Contradiction,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 16 (1978): 301–312.

The best treatments known to me of Hegel’s “formalism” occur in Dieter Henrich, “Hegels Logik der Reflexion,” in Hegel im Kontext (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 95 ff, and Peter Rohs, Form und Grund (Bonn: Bouvier, 1969). Finally, the problems inherent in any attempt at a comprehensive understanding of the “whole” of human experience are self-consciously taken up by Heidegger when he distinguishes between “ontological” and “ontic” concerns. The obvious ancestor for such a distinction is Kant on “transcendental” and “empirical.”

24. It is also the issue which informs much early discussion in phenomenology about a “material” a priori, particularly in Scheler, Lask, Reinach, and, of course, Husserl.

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