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Kant's Transcendental Idealism

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Kant defines transcendental idealism in two places in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in each case he contrasts it with transcendental realism. The first is in the first-edition version of the Fourth Paralogism, where his concern is to differentiate transcendental idealism from the "empirical idealism" associated with Descartes, which allegedly leads to a skepticism regarding an external world. In this context he writes:

> I understand by the *transcendental idealism* of all appearances the doctrine that they are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not things in themselves, and accordingly that time and space are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or conditions of objects as things in themselves. To this idealism is opposed *transcendental realism*, which regards space and time as something given in themselves (independent of our sensibility). (*CPR*, A 369: translations from Kant 1996, 1998, 2002)

The second passage is from the Antinomy of Pure Reason, where Kant defines transcendental idealism as the doctrine that:

> all objects of an experience possible for us, are nothing but appearances, i.e., mere representations, which as they are represented, as extended beings or series of alterations, have outside our thoughts no existence grounded in itself.

In contrast to this, the transcendental realist is said to make "these modifications of our sensibility into things subsisting in themselves, and hence makes *mere representations* into things in themselves" (*CPR*, B 518–19; Kant 1998: 511). Although the first passage emphasizes the transcendental ideality of space and time, while the second focuses on that of the objects given in them, namely appearances, they really come to the same thing, since the ideality of the latter is entailed by that of the former.

At times, Kant also characterizes his idealism as "formal" or "critical," in order to distinguish it from the "dogmatic" or "material" idealism of Berkeley and the "skeptical" or "empirical" idealism of Descartes (Kant 2002: 87–8, 160–3; 1998: 511). As we shall see, this idealism is "formal" in the sense that it is a theory about the a priori "forms" or conditions under which objects can be cognized by the human mind. It is "critical" because it is grounded in a reflection on the conditions and limits of

discursive cognition rather than one on the contents of consciousness or the nature of ultimate reality. In both respects it differs radically from what Kant terms idealisms of the "common sort," which include those of Berkeley and Descartes.

As the subsequent history of Kant interpretation indicates, however, this attempted clarification was of little avail, since critics up to the present day have continued to understand Kant's idealism in at least one of the manners he explicitly repudiated. The root of the problem lies in Kant's identification of appearances with "mere representations." Depending on how this identification is understood, it seems to suggest either a subjective idealism or phenomenalism, which is difficult to distinguish from the allegedly "dogmatic idealism" of Berkeley, a radical skepticism regarding empirical knowledge, which is not unlike the view Kant attributes to Descartes, since it denies the human mind any direct access to the "real," or some combination thereof. Consequently, any putative defender of transcendental idealism is confronted with the daunting task of providing an interpretation according to which it escapes these seemingly unappealing alternatives.

Unfortunately, neither of the two standard ways of interpreting transcendental idealism appear adequate to the task. One is the familiar "two-world" or "two-object" reading, which takes appearances and things in themselves to constitute two ontologically distinct realms of being. Although this may seem to be the more natural reading, it has at least two untoward consequences. First, it suggests that transcendental idealism is to be understood as a form of subjectivism, according to which the mind is acquainted only with its own contents (representations). Second, and perhaps even worse, it requires the postulation of a distinct set of entities (things in themselves) to which, according to the theory, the human mind can have no cognitive access. As one influential contemporary critic, who interprets Kant in this way, has put it, transcendental idealism is the doctrine that "reality is supersensible and . . . we can have no knowledge of it" (Strawson 1966: 16). On this "two-world" reading, then, it may truly be said that transcendental idealism gets the worst of both worlds!

The alternative "one-world" or "two-aspect" reading makes it possible to avoid saddling Kant with the excess baggage of an ontologically distinct, yet cognitively inaccessible, noumenal realm. It also finds strong textual support in the second of the above-cited characterizations of transcendental idealism, where Kant indicates that the identification of appearances with mere representations should be taken to mean that things as we represent them, that is, as spatiotemporal entities and events, have no mind-independent existence, not that the things we represent as spatiotemporal have no such existence at all. This locution implies that the intended contrast is between things as they appear and the same things as they are in themselves, rather than between two ontologically distinct sets of entities. Or, more precisely, the distinction pertains to two ways of considering things: as they appear to us in virtue of the spatiotemporal form of our intuition, and as they may be in themselves independently of our manner of intuiting them. On this reading, then, the distinction is adverbial rather than adjectival, since it characterizes the ways in which things can be considered in a reflection on the conditions of their cognition, not the kinds of thing being considered.

As has been often pointed out, however, the main problem with this interpretation of transcendental idealism is that it seemingly commits Kant to the view that objects

only appear to us to be spatiotemporal, whereas in reality they are not, or at least that we have no way of knowing whether or not they are. But since by "knowledge" is usually understood the cognition of things as they truly are rather than as they may seem to us under certain conditions, this apparently implies that human knowledge is not really knowledge at all. The point is sometimes made by means of an analogy with the proverbial stick, which appears bent to an observer when reflected in the water, even though it really is straight. Clearly, if this is how the contrast between a thing as it appears and the same thing as it is in itself is to be understood, the distinction is ill equipped to explain the possibility of human knowledge, which is surely one of the essential tasks assigned to transcendental idealism.

Since the first of these ways of interpreting transcendental idealism obviously leads to a dead end, it is worthwhile considering whether the second, which appears to have better textual support, can be understood in a way that avoids the above-mentioned difficulty. One way of attempting such a rehabilitation of this reading is to view it in light of the contrast Kant draws between transcendental realism and transcendental idealism. However useful it may turn out to be, this strategy at least has the virtue of being based on the sound exegetical principle that often the best way to understand a philosophical doctrine is to see what it denies.

Although Kant never discusses transcendental realism in a systematic manner, his cryptic characterizations of it suggest that he understood it to cover any view which regards mere appearances as if they were things in themselves. As such, transcendental realism consists in what Kant considers to be a misinterpretation of appearances, understood as the proper objects of human cognition. In other words, a transcendental realist is someone who either ignores or denies the transcendental distinction between things as they appear and as they are in themselves. If, as the text suggests, this distinction is the defining feature of transcendental idealism, it follows that the epithet "transcendental realism" is applicable to every philosophy except transcendental idealism. Accordingly, the philosophical universe is divided into these two forms of transcendentalism, understood as competing global claims about the objects of human cognition.

At first glance, however, this does not appear to be a particularly promising strategy, since it seems highly implausible, if not artificial, to place all contrasting philosophies in the same bag. Consequently, if this is to prove useful, it must be shown that these philosophies share something in common beside their rejection of transcendental idealism. But, given the scope of transcendental realism, this common feature cannot be a shared metaphysical commitment, such as we usually associate with realism in its various forms. For if the philosophical universe is indeed divided in the way in which Kant suggests, then transcendental realism encompasses a wide variety of metaphysical and epistemological positions, including rationalism and empiricism, metaphysical realism, as ordinarily understood, and Berkeleian idealism, each of which may be said in one way or another to conflate appearances with things in themselves (see Allison 2004).

Nevertheless, there is another candidate for the requisite common feature, one which points to the essential difference between transcendental realism in all its forms and transcendental idealism. Rather than being straightforwardly metaphysical, or even epistemological, transcendental realism is perhaps best characterized as a metaphilosophical or meta-epistemological standpoint. Specifically, it consists in a

commitment (either tacit or overt) to what is sometimes described as the "theocentric paradigm" or model of knowledge. In other words, the defining feature of transcendental realism is its underlying assumption that human knowledge is to be measured and evaluated in terms of its conformity (or lack thereof) to the norm of a putatively perfect divine knowledge. Although not of itself a straightforwardly epistemological thesis, insofar it determines the framework within which the first-order epistemological debate (between rationalism and empiricism) is typically conducted, it may be appropriately characterized as "meta-epistemological."

Moreover, it is precisely because transcendental realism (in all its forms) approaches cognition in light of this paradigm that it may be said to identify appearances (the actual objects of empirical cognition) with things in themselves (the putative objects of divine cognition). Consequently, what unites the various forms of transcendental realism is a normative commitment to a paradigm of knowledge rather than some shared metaphysical assumption.

This does not mean that Kant thought that all philosophies, apart from his own, maintain that the human mind is somehow capable of knowing things in the way in which God supposedly does, that is, nondiscursively by means of a nonsensible and, therefore, intellectual intuition. Although some of the classical rationalists, e.g., Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz, come close to this view, insofar as they suggest that human cognition through "adequate ideas" may approximate and in some cases (typically in mathematics) even attain this ideal, this is not necessary to make one a transcendental realist. On the contrary, on this reading, even empiricists and skeptics such as Hume are dedicated transcendental realists. For while denying the possibility of the kind of knowledge to which the rationalist typically pretends, they share the underlying assumption that this is what genuine cognition would be like, if it were attainable by beings such as ourselves. In this methodological respect, then, they likewise adhere to the theocentric paradigm.

Given the way in which Kant draws the contrast between the two forms of transcendentalism, effectively viewing them as all-inclusive and mutually exclusive alternatives, it follows that transcendental idealism must likewise be seen as a meta-epistemological position, committed to an alternative model of cognition, and not as a competing metaphysical theory. Otherwise they would not conflict with one another in the way in which Kant clearly assumed that they do. Moreover, since the contrast is with the theocentric paradigm, the paradigm appealed to by transcendental idealism must be anthropocentric. In short, the conditions of human cognition, whatever they may turn out to be, rather than the unattainable ideal of a God's-eye view of things, determine the norms of our cognition.

This paradigm shift is equivalent to Kant's so-called "Copernican revolution in philosophy." As Kant famously puts it in what he initially describes as an experiment inspired by the "first thoughts of Copernicus,"

> Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them apriori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition. (*CPR*, B xvi; Kant 1998: 110)

The assumption that all our cognition must conform to its object (in order to count as cognition) is not only the view of common sense, it also expresses the underlying presupposition of transcendental realism. And since it is further assumed that for our cognition to conform to its object is equivalent to its conforming (or at least approximating) to a putative God's-eye comprehension of it, this also amounts to a commitment to the theocentric paradigm.

Clearly, Kant was not the first philosopher to advocate something like an anthropological or subjectivist turn in epistemology. On the contrary, this is characteristic of the empiricists, who, reacting to the more or less overt theocentric paradigm of classical rationalism, insisted upon the importance of focusing on the "human understanding" (Locke), "the principles of human knowledge" (Berkeley), or "human nature" (Hume). Nevertheless, precisely because these philosophies remain committed to the normative status of this paradigm, it is a serious (albeit frequently made) mistake to interpret Kant's Copernican revolution along these lines. What distinguishes Kant's anthropological turn from that of empiricism and qualifies it as a genuine revolution is the explicit rejection of this paradigm, which is what also accounts for its *transcendental* character.

Kant's use of the term "transcendental" is notoriously confusing, since he construes it in a number of distinct ways, at least two of which involve a contrast with "empirical" (see chapter 8 below). One of these is the traditional sense in which it refers to things in general, that is, to all things indiscriminately, quite apart from the question of whether or not they can be objects of human experience. The illicit application of the categories to "objects in general," as opposed to objects of possible experience, is transcendental in this sense. The other, and distinctively "Critical" sense, refers to a second-order reflection on the conditions of the cognition of objects, particularly insofar as this cognition is deemed possible a priori (*CPR*, B 25; Kant 1998: 133).

Kant's idealism is transcendental in the sense that it is grounded in a reflection upon the conditions of the possibility of such cognition. What makes it a form of idealism is the thesis that these conditions, henceforth to be called "epistemic conditions," reflect the structure of the mind rather than the nature of a pregiven reality. Consequently, to assume that objects conform to our cognition is to assume that they conform to the (mind-imposed) conditions under which we can cognize them as objects. Conversely, what makes transcendental realism a form of realism is that, implicitly at least, it regards the conditions of human cognition as determined by the nature of a pregiven reality, which is equivalent to assuming that they reflect the ideal model of God's way of knowing. That is why, from Kant's point of view, transcendental realism cannot account for the possibility of a priori knowledge for beings like ourselves.

Since the notion of an epistemic condition is here intended to aid in understanding the distinctive thrust of Kantian idealism, it is essential to be clear about how it is construed. Put simply, by an epistemic condition is meant a necessary condition for the representation of objects, that is, a condition without which our representations would not relate to objects or, equivalently, possess objective reality. Assuming that there are such conditions, which it is the task of both the Transcendental Aesthetic and Transcendental Analytic to demonstrate, Kant has a ready explanation of the possibility of a priori knowledge, namely, we can know a priori that objects necessarily conform to the conditions under which we can alone cognize them. Otherwise they could not be objects for us.

As conditions of the possibility of representing objects, epistemic conditions (if there be any) may be distinguished from both psychological and ontological conditions. By the former is meant a propensity or mechanism of the mind, which governs belief and belief acquisition. Hume's custom or habit is a prime example of such a condition. By the latter is meant a condition of the possibility of the *existence* of things, which conditions these things quite independently of our cognitive access to them. Newton's absolute space and time are conditions in this sense. Epistemic conditions share with the former the property of being subjective in the sense that they reflect the structure and operations of the human mind. They differ from them with respect to their objectivating function. Correlatively, they share with the latter the property of being objective or objectivating. They differ in that they condition the objectivity of our representation of things rather than the very existence of the things themselves.

Clearly, not everything that one might regard as a condition of cognition counts as epistemic in the relevant sense. For example, critics intent on denying any link between conditions of cognition and idealism point to empirical illustrations, such as the fact that our eyes can perceive things only if they reflect light of a certain wavelength. As a fact about our visual capacities, which obviously has analogues in other sensory modalities, this is arguably a "condition" of a significant subset of the perceptual cognition of sighted human beings; but, as these critics note, this hardly has any idealistic implications (Hossenfelder 1990: 468–9).

Although true, this is beside the point. Conditions of this sort are not epistemic in the requisite sense because they have no objective validity or objectivating function. On the contrary, like the Humean psychological conditions, an appeal to them presupposes the existence of an objective spatiotemporal world, the representation of which is supposed to be explained. Accordingly, it hardly follows from the fact such conditions do not entail any sort of idealism that properly epistemic conditions do not do so either.

In fact, the concept of an epistemic condition brings with it an idealistic commitment of at least an indeterminate sort, because it involves the relativization of the concept of an object to human cognition and the conditions of its representation of objects. In other words, the claim is not that things transcending the conditions of human cognition cannot exist (this would make these conditions ontological), but merely that such transcendent things cannot be objects for us. Thus, epistemic conditions are by their very nature normative, since they determine what could count as an object.

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out by more sympathetic critics that this indeterminate concept of an epistemic condition is not of itself sufficient to capture what is distinctive in Kant's transcendental idealism (Ameriks 1992). The latter does not merely relativize the concept of an object to the conditions (whatever they may be) of the representation of objects, it relativizes them to the specific conditions of human cognition. And since Kant repeatedly insists that the distinguishing feature of our, indeed all finite, cognition lies in its discursive nature, it follows that a full understanding of transcendental idealism must await the determination of the unique conditions of such cognition.

Admittedly, it may seem strange to locate something so supposedly momentous as Kant's Copernican revolution in something so apparently noncontroversial as the discursive nature of human cognition. Insofar as such cognition consists in the application of general concepts to sensory data, this hardly seems to be a revolutionary proposal,

involving something like a paradigm shift. Paradoxical as it may seem, however, when seen within the context of classical modern philosophy, this is precisely what it is.

In order fully to appreciate this, we must first stipulate that all cognition requires that its object in some way be given, otherwise it could not be known. This stipulation is noncontroversial because it is made by both transcendental realism and transcendental idealism. Moreover, given Kant's understanding of intuition as the means whereby objects are given, this means that *all* cognition rests ultimately on intuition. This applies even to God's, which is why it has traditionally been viewed as resting on a creative (nonsensible) intuition. But since a human or, more generally, a finite intellect cannot create its own data, it must receive them from without, which for Kant entails that it must be "affected" by its object. The product of such affection is what Kant understands by a sensible intuition.

Since this indicates that sensible intuition is a necessary condition of human cognition, the question becomes whether it is also sufficient. Kant's discursivity thesis denies that this is case. Also necessary (though not sufficient) are concepts through which the sensibly given is thought. This is what makes human cognition discursive as opposed to intuitive. In Kant's oft-cited dictum, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (*CPR*, B 75; Kant 1998: 193–4).

In light of this conception of discursivity, it is illuminating to survey, however cursorily, the basic epistemological commitments of rationalism and empiricism. Although the former recognizes an important role for conceptual knowledge, that is, cognition through general concepts, which, as such, may be predicated of diverse particulars, it assigns to it a decidedly second class status. The basic idea, which goes back at least to Plato, is that to know something only in terms of features it shares with other objects is not to know its inherent nature. Consequently, the epistemological ideal for rationalism (as it was for Plato) is an immediate intellectual apprehension of an object in its full particularity, something which is unattainable through concepts. Moreover, since *all* cognition requires that its object be given and no object can be given in such a manner through sensibility, it follows that this rationalist ideal of cognition presupposes a nonsensible or intellectual intuition.

Empiricism, though committed to the same paradigm, is guilty of the opposite error. In other words, the problem with empiricism is not that it affirms the possibility of a kind of cognition that somehow transcends the conceptual variety, it is rather that it denies the very possibility of the latter, at least as such cognition is understood by Kant. Thus, if classical rationalism may be said to be "supraconceptional," classical empiricism is "subconceptual." This finds its overt expression in the empiricist's well known aversion to "abstract general ideas," which are just concepts as understood by Kant. But this aversion itself can be properly understood only in light of empiricism's equally well known tendency to regard what it terms "ideas" as images. In Hume's classical formulation, this means that ideas are pale copies of sensibly given impressions, which themselves provide all the requisite materials of thought. And this likewise rules out discursive cognition in anything like the Kantian sense.

At bottom, this denigration, if not outright rejection, of conceptual representation, which is common to both rationalism and empiricism, stems from the fact that each of them denies at least one of the two essential components of discursive cognition as understood by Kant, namely, concepts and sensible intuitions. Consequently, they

both reject, albeit for quite different reasons, the discursivity thesis, which indicates that the latter is hardly noncontroversial.

Rationalism agrees with Kant that sensible intuition is not sufficient for cognition, but differs from him in also denying that it is necessary. This is not to say that rationalism rejects *any* dependence of human cognition on sensory input; it is rather that it typically limits this dependence to providing an "occasion" or stimulus for thought. Although clearly important, this does not amount to an *essential* dependence, since rationalism does not regard this input as part of the content of the non-empirical cognition at which it ultimately aims. In other words, sensible intuition, on the rationalist account, functions to start the cognitive process, but it does not help determine its outcome.

For present purposes, however, what is particularly noteworthy is that rationalism's assignment of a second-class status to conceptual representation is itself a consequence of its denial of an essential cognitive role for sensibility. Since the proper function of concepts is to bring the sensibly given under universal rules in virtue of which it may be viewed as the representation of a particular of one sort or another, that is, as betokening a type, a form of cognition that purports to dispense with the sensibly given is in a position to dispense with concepts as well. The two go hand in hand.

Conversely, empiricism rejects an *essential* cognitive function for concepts for precisely the opposite reason. Since for empiricism "experience" is not merely the starting point, but the unique source of all the materials of thought, it maintains that the ancestry of all concepts must somehow be traceable to it. For Locke, these materials took the form of "simple ideas," which are passively received "as they are in themselves" (in Kant's sense). Consequently, unlike Kant, Locke did not view conceptualization as itself a necessary condition of the possibility of experience. This does not rule out any role for concepts, but it limits it to a subordinate one, since it presupposes that experience is possible prior to, and independently of, their application.

On Locke's account, then, it is only subsequent to the reception of simple ideas, that is, to the commencement of experience as he understood it, that the understanding comes into play. Its function, which Locke termed the "workmanship of the understanding" (Locke 1975: 415), is to combine the simple ideas into complex ones. Among the most important of the latter are sortal concepts produced by the understanding on the basis of observed similarities. Although hardly trivial, this function is far from the one Kant assigns to the understanding, when he claims that, through its categories, it prescribes laws to nature (Kant 1998: 261). An indication of the extent of this difference is Locke's insistence that these sortal concepts determine merely what he terms the "nominal essence" of things as distinguished from their "real essence." Moreover, since the real essence is supposedly cognizable only by God (Locke 1975: 417, 439), this lends further support to the contention that Locke, like all empiricists, was committed to the theocentric paradigm.

The relevance of these epistemological reflections for the understanding of transcendental idealism may not be apparent, but it becomes so when considered in light of the analysis of transcendental realism and the associated conception of an epistemic condition. To begin with, as we have just seen, the denial of the inherently discursive nature of human cognition is already transcendentally realistic in Kant's sense, because it presupposes (perhaps unknowingly) the theocentric paradigm to which both rationalism and empiricism are committed.

Equally significant, it enables us to distinguish Kant's transcendental idealism not merely from the forms of idealism he explicitly rejects, but also from the indeterminate sort that is entailed by the conception of an epistemic condition. The point here is that, as discursive, human cognition must be seen as governed by two distinct kinds of epistemic condition, each of which plays a normative role. In other words, it is not merely that the human mind imposes its own (epistemic) conditions on what is cognizable, that is, on what can count as an object for it, but it does so through sensibility as well as through the understanding. Accordingly, even though it does not of itself yield cognition, as it does for empiricism, sensibility, for Kant, places its own conditions on the data for cognition, which precludes the kind of non-empirical cognition aimed at by rationalism.

Kant terms these sensible conditions "forms of sensibility," and the central task of the Transcendental Aesthetic is to demonstrate that, at least in the case of the human mind, space and time are such forms. This is to be contrasted with the traditional view, according to which they are either themselves self-subsisting things, properties of such things, or relations between things that hold independently of their epistemic relation to the human mind. Kant characterizes the demonstration of this thesis as a "direct proof" of transcendental idealism (*CPR*, B 534–5: Kant 1998: 519), In his analysis of the antinomies Kant also provides what he terms an "indirect proof" by arguing that the contradictions into which reason unavoidably falls when it endeavors to think the world as a whole stem from an implicit commitment to transcendental realism and do not arise for transcendental idealism (*CPR*, B 535: Kant 1998: 519).

Unfortunately, it is impossible to pursue here either of these arguments, which are among the most important and controversial in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see Allison 2004). For present purposes, it must suffice to note that the key Kantian conception of appearance is to be understood in light of his attribution of a transcendental function to sensibility, something which no previous philosopher had done. Thus, even though Kant takes the term "appearance" in the traditional sense as referring to what appears, that is, what is given to the mind in sensory experience, he understands this givenness in a completely new way. Rather than being given as it is in itself (as it is for empiricism), what appears and provides the data for cognition is mediated by the mind's own forms of sensibility (space and time). Although these forms do not of themselves order the data, that being the work of the understanding, by giving these data a spatiotemporal form they ensure that the latter are orderable, that is, amenable to thought. That is what renders these forms epistemic conditions.

Given this conception of appearance, to claim that a discursive intellect cognizes things only as they appear, is to claim that it has access to objects only by way of its forms of sensibility. If the understanding could of itself cognize things, it would do so independently of these forms and, therefore, as they are in themselves. In fact, from Kant's standpoint, to consider things as they are in themselves just is to consider them as some pure understanding might think them, that is, in a way that bypasses the contribution of sensibility. Although the discursive nature of our cognition clearly rules out the possibility of fully *cognizing* objects in this manner, it allows for the possibility of so *thinking* them, because the conditions of thought (the pure concepts) are independent of, and more extensive than, the conditions of sensible intuition.

This also enables us to understand Kant's transcendental distinction in a way that underscores its difference from the traditional appearance–reality distinction with which it is frequently confused. Since the conditions of sensibility govern the way in which raw sensory data can be given to thought, they do not transform what might otherwise be genuine cognition into something less. On the contrary, these conditions make such cognition possible in the first place. Moreover, since the human understanding of itself cannot cognize things at all, it can hardly cognize them as they are in themselves. That would require that it be transformed from a faculty of concepts into a faculty of intellectual intuition.

The main lesson to be learned from this is that Kant's transcendental distinction, as well as the consequent limitation of human cognition to things as they appear, results from a reflection on the conditions of discursive knowing rather than on the ontological status of what is supposedly known. Consequently, it opens up the possibility of an essentially nonontological interpretation of transcendental idealism, one which allows it to be viewed as a true counterpart to transcendental realism. On this view, human cognition for Kant is not a pale copy or distorted, finitized version of the divine variety, but a genuine alternative to it. In fact it is precisely the latter that is problematic, not because we are unable to attain it, but because we cannot determine whether the putative epistemic condition of such cognition, namely, a nonsensible, intellectual mode of intuition, is even possible.

Thus, in sharp contrast to both the tradition he opposed and the views of many of his critics, Kant rejected the appropriateness of the theocentric paradigm in epistemology. Moreover, this rejection first makes possible a radically new kind of epistemology, one grounded in the revolutionary idea that human cognition is governed by its own autonomous set of norms. As already indicated, this is precisely how Kant's Copernican revolution is to be understood.

What makes this so puzzling and difficult to grasp is that the theocentric paradigm continues to have a strong hold on us. In an effort to loosen this hold, it may prove useful to examine a familiar metaphysical conundrum in light of it, namely, the problem of fatalism. Traditionally, this problem has been linked to the issue of divine foreknowledge. If God is omniscient he must know what I will do before I do it. But in that event the question naturally arises: How can I avoid doing it and, if not, how can I be held responsible for my deeds?

Typically, philosophical theologians attempt to deal with this problem by reinterpreting the concept of divine foreknowledge. Rather than knowing what I will do literally *before* I do it, which would entail fatalism, it is claimed that God grasps all things immediately in a timeless manner through a single intellectual intuition. Whether this provides an adequate basis for dealing with the problem, or even for interpreting omniscience, remains an open question. What is of interest here are the implications of such a move for understanding the nature of time.

To begin with, these implications cast grave doubt on the viability of a transcendentally realistic account of time, since they suggest that, insofar as transcendental realism affirms an atemporal conception of divine cognition (as it must, if it is to preserve omniscience), it is forced to conclude that time is not fully real, that objects and events only *appear* to be temporally successive. In other words, it is transcendental realism (not transcendental idealism) that is confronted with a dilemma: it must either deny

divine omniscience, which is philosophically difficult (though not unheard of), or deny the reality of time, that is, it must admit that occurrences merely *seem* to be successive but in reality they are not, which is to reduce experience to illusion.

The problem does not arise for transcendental idealism because of its sharp distinction between empirical and transcendental reality. This enables Kant to preserve the empirical reality of time – its reality with respect to all human experience – at the modest cost of its transcendental ideality, that is, its lack of reality with respect to things when considered as they are in themselves. Otherwise expressed, by considering time as an epistemic rather than an ontological condition, transcendental idealism ensures the "objective reality" of time with respect to appearances, while also leaving conceptual space for a radically distinct atemporal perspective constituting the God's-eye view of things. Consequently, only transcendental idealism allows for the possibility of affirming both the essential temporality of human experience and the conceivability of an atemporal, eternalistic perspective on things.

Against this, however, it may be argued that whatever virtues such a version of idealism might possess, it cannot be attributed to Kant, because *his* idealism, whether construed in the "two-world" or "two-aspect" manner, is inherently metaphysical in nature. In the words of one recent critic, "On that [epistemic] reading there is still no reason to think the nonideal has a greater ontological status than the ideal." But this, it is further claimed, is incompatible with Kant's deepest philosophical commitments, which concern "the absolute reality of things in themselves with substantive nonspatiotemporal characteristics" (Ameriks 1992: 334).

Since the present account of transcendental idealism clearly entails the denial of a superior ontological status to the so-called "nonideal," this objection must be addressed. And having just discussed the issue of fatalism, it seems appropriate to consider the matter in light of the related problem of freedom, where the ontological question is most pressing. Given Kant's understanding of freedom as an independence from the causality of nature, an ontological reading is confronted with only two alternatives: either we really are free and only appear to be causally determined, or we really are causally determined and merely think (erroneously) that we are free. From a strictly ontological point of view, there simply is no way to claim that we are both at once – that is, there is no place for "compatibilism," as it is traditionally understood. Or, more precisely, there is no place for it if we wish to preserve the core Kantian conception of freedom. But neither remaining alternative is attractive: the former because it undermines Kant's empirical realism, and the latter because it effectively denies the reality of freedom. Consequently, the question is whether there is any viable alternative to the ontological reading, one which would allow for the possibility of affirming, as Kant clearly intended to do, both causal determinism and freedom.

What seems to foreclose the latter possibility is the difficulty of surrendering the assumption that there must be *some* context-independent "fact of the matter," a difficulty which may itself be seen as a consequence of the continued hold that the theocentric paradigm has on us. Again, it seems obvious that either we really are free or we are not. We may not be in a position to determine which alternative is correct, and in that case we remain agnostic about the free will problem, but that is beside the point.

Nevertheless it is precisely this assumption, which appears so obvious for a transcendental realist, that transcendental idealism calls into question. It does this by

relativizing each of the claims to a point of view. For transcendental idealism there are only the opposing points of view and no higher, context-independent standpoint from which one might properly raise the seemingly unavoidable question: Are we *really* free? Moreover, since the assumption that there must be such a standpoint or point of view (the terms are here used interchangeably), even if we are incapable of attaining it, is a defining feature of transcendental realism, it follows that the ontological interpretation, which appears to make transcendental idealism so implausible, is a product of the very view to which Kant opposes his idealism. It is little wonder, then, that critics who approach transcendental idealism from a transcendentally realistic perspective find it so perplexing.

We can at least begin to understand this difficult notion of relativization to a point of view, if we consider it in light of Kant's conception of an "interest of reason." According to his analysis of the antinomial conflict, each of the parties to the dispute is motivated by a distinct interest, which may be termed an interest of reason because it represents some ultimate value or principle that is thought to be threatened by the opposing view (*CPR*, B 500–1; Kant 1998: 496–503). Kant characterizes these points of view as Epicureanism and Platonism (*CPR*, B 499; Kant 1998: 501). They represent respectively a radical empiricism and a kind of rationalism ("dogmatism"), which affirms the validity of non-empirical principles as requirements of pure thought.

In the case of the third antinomy (the conflict between freedom and causal determinism), the deterministic position, representing empiricism, is clearly *epistemologically* privileged in Kant's view, since it questions the legitimacy of claims that transcend the bounds of possible experience. But it is not thereby also *ontologically* privileged, as it must be for transcendental realism. Moreover, even though Kant clearly wished to salvage its conceivability, the indeterministic position is likewise not ontologically privileged either, since it rests upon an interest of reason rather than a presumed insight into the nature of ultimate reality.

What makes it possible for transcendental idealism to reconcile these competing interests is the division of labor between the two points of view. The empirical point of view is assumed for the purpose of explanation. Since the concern is to locate the motive causes of human actions, in terms of which they are alone explicable, there is clearly no room for freedom. By contrast, the main concern of the non-empirical (libertarian) point of view is the evaluation and imputation of human actions. Here Kant's claim, a deeply controversial one, is that from this point of view freedom (in an indeterminist sense) must be presupposed, even though its reality cannot be demonstrated or its possibility understood.

The basic point can also be made by noting that the difference between the two points of view is normative. As one would expect, the empirical point of view is governed by epistemic norms, that is, by what have here been termed epistemic conditions. Conversely, since the opposing point of view is concerned with evaluation and imputation, it is governed by practical norms, which stem ultimately from the nature of practical reason. And what allows the latter a place at the table is precisely the distinction between epistemic and ontological conditions. Given this distinction, which is essential to transcendental idealism, these two standpoints each retain their normative force, though neither is ontologically privileged. In fact, it is precisely because the latter is the case that the former is possible.

Against this, it might still be objected that Kant occasionally speaks in a Platonic fashion of the idea of freedom, or the consciousness of the moral law, as giving us *entrée* to an intelligible world or higher order of things, quite distinct from the sensible world of experience. Nevertheless, it is clear from the context of these remarks that the superiority of the former is to be construed in axiological rather than ontological terms. In other words, what we supposedly become aware of is a higher set of values and a vocation (*Bestimmung*) to pursue them, not of our membership in some higher order of being. Kant's insistence, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, on the primacy of practical reason in relation to the speculative (*CPrR*, 5.119–21; Kant 1996: 236–8) is a case in point (see chapter 17 below). It must be understood as asserting that our practical interest, in morality and the conditions of its possibility, is entitled to override our speculative interest in avoiding ungrounded claims and that the latter must therefore submit to the former. Once again, then, there is no thought of any access (cognitive or otherwise) to an ontologically superior order of being. Consequently, transcendental idealism is best viewed as an alternative to *ontology*, rather than, as it usually is, as an alternative *ontology*. This is precisely what makes its interpretation and evaluation so difficult.

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