

categories and pure forms of intuition under the original synthetic unity of apperception. If we hold that point fixed, then we will be able to construe noumena and phenomena as, correspondingly, two essentially different sorts of objects only in so far as those objects are logically and ontologically parasitic upon two essentially different kinds of *concepts*:

The understanding, when it dubs an object to which it refers a mere phenomenon, at the same time forms, apart from that reference, a representation of an *object in itself*, and hence also represents itself as being able to make *concepts* of such an object, and since the understanding offers nothing other than the categories through which the object [in itself] must at least be able to be thought, it is thereby misled into taking the entirely *undetermined* concept of a being of the understanding (*Verstandeswesen*), as a something in general outside of our sensibility, for a *determinate* concept of an entity that allows of being cognized through the understanding in a certain mode (*auf einige Art erkennen*). (CPR B306–7)

The division of objects into phenomena and noumena and of the world into a world of sense and a world of the understanding is therefore quite inadmissible in the positive sense, *although concepts certainly allow of a division into sensible and intellectual ones*; for one cannot determine any object for [intellectual concepts], and consequently they cannot be put forward as objectively valid. If one abandons the senses, how will one make it conceivable that our categories (which would be the only remaining concepts for noumena) still continue to mean anything at all, since for their reference to any object something more than merely the unity of thinking must be given—namely, a possible intuition, to which they must be applied? Nevertheless if the concept of a noumenon be taken in a merely problematic sense, it remains not only admissible, but even indispensable, as setting limits to sensibility. (CPR A255–6/B311, emphasis added)

Noumenon means (genuinely) at bottom something—namely, the transcendental object of sensible intuition. (This, however, is no real object or given thing, *rather a concept* in reference to which appearances have unity.) (R. 5554; Ak. xviii. 230, emphasis added)

Just to give it a handy name, let us call the view I am proposing the ‘Two-Concept Theory’ of the noumenon/phenomenon distinction. According to it, what Kant is saying about noumena and phenomena is that there are two essentially different ways of thinking or conceptualizing an object of representations—or a generic transcendental object = *X*—relative to pure concepts of the understanding. The first kind of thinking or conceptualizing is by means of pure concepts alone (the transcendent way), and the second is by means of pure concepts plus our specially restricted sensory capacity (the immanent way). Thus the first kind of conceptualization of the *X* allows us merely to think objects and never to cognize them in the strict sense; and we call all and only such objects ‘noumena’, whether they be negatively conceived or positively conceived. The second way of conceptualizing the *X*, however, allows us to cognize *appearances* by means of thinking. This is because the second kind of conceptualizing already includes the restrictive a priori or formal and

a posteriori or material contributions of pure and empirical intuition. The conceptualizing faculty, or understanding, cannot operate on this formal and material sensible information until it has already been supplied by an independent sensible source. Therefore our understanding is

an understanding whose whole capacity consists in thinking—that is, in the act of bringing the synthesis of a manifold, given to it from elsewhere in intuition, to the unity of apperception, which therefore *cognizes* nothing at all for itself, but merely combines and orders the material of cognition, the intuition, which must be given to it by the object. (CPR B145)

So, through its conceptual determination of independently given sensory content, the second kind of conceptualization provides us with direct access to really possible or actually existent objects, the fully determined appearances or phenomena.

Again, more precisely put, Kant holds that every pure concept of the understanding is such that it can be used either (a) merely to think the generic object = X transcendentally as a noumenal object, or (b) to think the generic object = X immanently as a phenomenally possible or actual object via the sensory data contributed by human intuition. Thus noumenal objects logically possibly can have being (but are completely uncognizable), and phenomenal objects really possibly or actually exist (and are indeed cognizable). This is quite consistent with (a*) its not being the case that there exist two disjoint classes of real objects, the phenomena and the noumena (= the denial of the Two-Object or Two-World Theory), and also with (b*) its not being the case that there exists a single class of objects such that every member of it is considered both as phenomenon and as noumenon (= the denial of the Two-Aspect Theory). The Two-Concept Theory retains from the Two-Object Theory the idea that we are compelled by our cognitive constitutions to think (but never cognize in the strict sense) ontologically distinct noumenal objects; yet it also retains from the Two-Aspect Theory the idea that Kant makes only one definite or assertoric ontological commitment. On the Two-Aspect Theory it is in fact unclear just what sort of ontic commitment this will be, but for the Two-Concept Theory it is completely definite: phenomena alone actually exist. On the Two-Concept approach Kant remains consistently and thoroughly agnostic about the existence of noumenal objects,⁷⁰ despite their being logically possible and fully thinkable:

⁷⁰ Kant treats noumenal *objects* and noumenal *subjects* very differently, however. In the third Antinomy, in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, sect. III, and in the second *Critique*, ch. I, he argues compellingly for a compatibilist and dualist solution to the free-will/natural-determinism problem. See Adams, 'Things in Themselves', and Wood, 'Kant's Compatibilism'. So Kant is a Two-Concept theorist about noumenal objects and a Two-World theorist about noumenal subjects.

The concept of the noumenon is problematic—that is, it is the representation of a thing of which we can say neither that it is [really or empirically] possible nor that it is impossible, since we are acquainted with no mode (*Art*) of intuition but our own sensible one and no sort of concepts but the categories, neither of which, however, is appropriate to a non-sensible object. (*CPR* A286–7/B343)

The Two-Concept Theory also retains from the Two-Aspect Theory the idea that there are two essentially different *ways* of thinking about objects—as noumena and as phenomena. But, unlike the Two-Aspect Theory, the Two-Concept Theory holds that these ways of thinking about objects are not *properties* of those objects. Finally, the Two-Concept Theory essentially differs from both of the other two theories in holding that the intentional or representational object that persists through noumenal representations and phenomenal representations alike—the transcendental object = *X*—is no ontologically independent item at all, but rather only a generic cognitive-semantic structure *internal* to the representations used to represent objects.

Question: what is the main philosophical advantage of the Two-Concept Theory, apart from its obvious exegetical value in neatly reconciling many apparently incongruous or even seemingly inconsistent Kantian texts? Answer: above all, it undermines the Moore–Russell objection to the effect that Kant’s theory of the noumenon automatically leads to Cartesian external-world scepticism. The huge problem with the Two-Object or Two-World Theory is that, instead of restricting itself to a concept of the noumenon, it posits the existence of a noumenal Really Real object that by hypothesis simply cannot be cognized. This is what Kant calls ‘transcendental realism’; and it leads directly down a slippery philosophical slope to ‘empirical idealism’, ‘problematic idealism’, or ‘sceptical idealism’: the Cartesian external-world scepticism spelled out in the first two Meditations (*CPR* B274–5, A369; see also *P. Ak.* iv. 293–4). However, if the positive noumenon is merely a problematic representational projection of an *X* via a fully thinkable and thinly meaningful concept, then transcendental realism and its evil twin, external-world scepticism, are both completely avoided. If no object is asserted to be transcendently outside cognition, then no object is such that we human knowers must forever try, and miserably fail, to cognize it. Such objects nevertheless logically can exist, and we thereby problematically entertain the notion that they exist; but the crucial agnostic recognition is that we are never in a position to determine whether they actually exist or not. So external-world scepticism never arises as a serious problem for Kant.⁷¹ On the contrary, Kant’s metaphysical agnosticism has the entirely

⁷¹ Which is not to say that it never arises as an issue. Kant thinks that it is a ‘scandal of philosophy and universal human reason’ (*CPR* Bxxxix n.) that no one has explicitly refuted Cartesian external world scepticism, and consequently offers just such a refutation in the B edition (*CPR* B274–9; cf. A366–80). See also Hanna, ‘The Inner and the Outer: Kant’s “Refutation” Reconstructed’.

anti-sceptical function of promoting the stoical acceptance of our epistemically finite human condition, despite our goading natural desires for cognitive self-transcendence.

The Problem of Outer Affection and the Threat of Inconsistency

There is one remaining big worry about Kant's transcendental idealism, and that is the notorious problem of outer affection. Here is the problem in a nutshell:

- (1) Outer affection is a causal process of some sort that consists in triggering the sensory responses of our faculty of outer empirical intuition, thereby providing a manifold of sensory content.
- (2) The ultimate causal source of outer sensory affection is thought by us to be wholly mind-independent and therefore beyond all sense experience.
- (3) In order to explain outer affection Kant must apply the schematized and objectively valid pure concept CAUSE, which applies to empirical objects only, to affection's super-sensible causal source.
- (4) Kant commits a howler by attempting to apply the concept of CAUSE beyond the limits of its legitimate sphere of application—that is, beyond all possible experience.
- (5) But, if the concept of CAUSE cannot be applied to the source of outer sensory affection, then the existence of the manifold of sensory content simply cannot be accounted for, and Kant's theory of cognition fails.

The problem of outer affection is one of the great unfixed potholes of Kant interpretation.⁷² Unlike other more or less serious problems surrounding Kant's doctrines, if this one is allowed to go unrepaired it will surely puncture the tyres of the Transcendental Project. As Jacobi famously noted, if the problem of affection is allowed to stand, then Kant's transcendental idealism is apparently *just plain wrong*. It seems that, without the assumption of a causally affecting thing-in-itself, one cannot enter Kant's system; but with it, one cannot remain inside the system either.⁷³ In my opinion, on the contrary, it is wrong to think that the problem of outer affection will show the falsity of Kant's idealism. Kant's doctrine of outer affection is perfectly self-consistent.

What I mean is this. Kant can perfectly well accept premisses (1) and (2) in the above argument, but also believe that (4) and (5) do not follow—and indeed are false—*because (3) is false*. The error lies in holding that, just because Kant is committed to the view that we are capable of thinking, and indeed even naturally and philosophically are driven to think, in a problematic sense, a noumenal causal source for outer affection, we are thereby obliged to apply the objectively valid category CAUSE to that thinkable source. On the

⁷² See Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 247–54.

⁷³ See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 124.

contrary, according to Kant, while we can, naturally do, and even must, think or entertain the idea of a noumenal cause, we nevertheless apply the objectively valid category CAUSE to phenomenal objects only:

Now one can indeed admit that something that *may* be outside us in the transcendental sense is the cause (*Ursache*) of our outer intuitions, but this is *not* the object of which we are thinking in the representations of matter and of corporeal things; for these are merely appearances—that is, mere modes of representation (*Vorstellungsarten*)—which are always found only in us . . . (CPR A372, emphases added)

The much-discussed question of the community between what thinks and what is extended comes then simply to this: *how outer intuition*—namely, that of space (its filling-in by shape and motion)—*is possible at all in a thinking subject*. But it is impossible for any human being to find an answer to this question, and no one will ever fill this gap in our scientific knowledge (*Wissens*), but rather only indicate it through the ascription of outer appearances to a transcendental object that is the cause of this mode (*Art*) of representations, with which, however, we have no acquaintance, nor will we never acquire any [objectively valid] concept of it. (CPR A393)

This crucial point needs further explication. By hypothesis, outer affection is a causal process of some sort that produces outer sensory impressions and triggers our faculty of empirical intuition. Therefore there exists a brute ‘fact of affection’; and, by virtue of the principle of sufficient reason—that is, necessarily every fact or entity has an explanation in terms of its cause or strict logical ground (CPR B112; see also JL Ak. ix. 51)—this brute fact needs to be causally explained. But in saying that, Kant has not yet said *just what sort of causal process he is talking about*. And in fact causal processes can be conceived in two irreducibly different ways: (1) as a law-determined ‘conditioned’ spatiotemporal causal process deriving from an empirical outer physical causal source; or (2) as a spontaneous or free, hence unconditioned, causal process deriving from a non-spatiotemporal or super-sensible causal source (CPR A389–94). That is, whatever it is that actually affects us in outer sensibility can be conceptualized either (1) as an apparent material object, a ‘phenomenal substance’ (*substantia phaenomenon* (see CPR A277/B333)), or (2) as a noumenal object with mysterious spontaneous causal powers, a purely intelligible substance with the capacity for freedom (CPR A358).

Now both concepts can be used in alternative possible explanations of the brute fact of affection *without contradiction*. In this sense, Kant’s doctrine of affection is simply the flip side of his famous transcendental solution to the Third Antinomy of freedom and universal natural necessity or determinism (CPR A490–7/B518–25, A532–58/B561–86). According to that solution, the very same phenomenal event in nature can be consistently and respectively thought under the two distinct concepts of causation, (1) as naturalistically and efficiently caused (‘*n*-caused’) by strictly law-governed earlier conditioned states of the empirical world, *and* (2) as spontaneously and non-efficiently caused (‘*s*-caused’) by an unconditioned causal process that operates entirely