

perspicacity," which seems weaker than the suggestion that they are in some way actually *necessary* for the judgment of objects. And he says about his second principle, the principle of unity or simplicity, that we "give our vote [to it] not because either by reason or experience we clearly see a causal unity in the world, but we pursue that very unity driven on by our intellect which seems to itself to have been successful in the explanation of phenomena only to the degree that it has received permission to descend from the same principle to the very large number of things grounded." This is a thoroughly confusing statement: It begins by *denying* to the principle of convenience a source in either experience or reason, but it then goes on to say that the principle is both *derived* from the intellect and *accepted* by it on the basis of the intellect's own past success when using it.

The dissertation thus concludes with a return to its opening hint of a connection between conception and intuition. Its final thought is that there must be some concepts and principles that are more closely connected to the intellect than to the forms of sensitive cognition, and that are nevertheless requisite for the empirical knowledge of phenomena, which has otherwise seemed to be grounded in those forms of sensitive cognition alone. But this afterthought is both vaguely formulated and entirely undefended. It is obvious that reflection on the results of the dissertation could have suggested to any careful reader, including its own author, that there was more of a problem here than this casual treatment revealed. As we shall see, Kant – though not even his most perspicacious readers – soon did become aware of the profundity of the problem so lightly glossed over here, and most of his effort in the "silent decade" between this work and the appearance of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, and even for the decade beyond that, may be seen as an effort to defend the assertions so casually tossed off here.

Ontological realism

But before we turn to the beginning of Kant's efforts to solve the fundamental problem hidden for now by his "principles of convenience," we must note one feature about the underlying assumptions of the inaugural dissertation which constitutes an essential constraint on any intended solution of this problem. As I noted earlier, Section III of the dissertation anticipates Kant's later "Transcendental Aesthetic." Space and time are argued to be presupposed by all empirical representations of particulars, and are thus themselves *forms of intuition*, and they are also argued to be themselves singular, thus *pure intuitions*. Metaphysical difficulties with both the absolute and relational conceptions of space and time are then raised, and epistemological problems with the relational conception are hinted at (cf. §15.D, 2:404),¹¹ from all of which it is concluded that space and time are not themselves real features or relations of objects.

Time is not something objective and real, nor is it a substance or an accident or a relation, but it is the subjective condition necessary by the nature of the human mind for coordinating with each other by a fixed law whatsoever things are sensible. (§14.5, 2:400)

Space is not something objective and real, nor is it a substance or an accident, or a relation, but it is *subjective* and ideal and proceeds from the nature of the mind by unchanging law, as a schema for coordinating with each other absolutely all things externally sensed. (§15.D, 2:403)

But it is crucial to notice that although he is denying the reality of space and time and of spatial and temporal form, Kant does not imply that there is any way in which the existence of the objects perceived in space and time is ideal or dependent upon the "nature of the human mind." Rather, his assumption is that it is precisely mind-independent objects which come before the mind by means of these ideal and mind-dependent forms. As Kant put it four years later, although of course using the term "understanding," which was not yet in currency in 1770,

The understanding must acknowledge that there are in general things which correspond to the sensibility; therefore the *ideality of space* is nothing more than *the distinction between sensibility and what is posited by means of it*, by means of the understanding and what is thereby thought. By means of ideality the reality of bodies (certain beings, which correspond to them) and certain properties is not denied . . . (R 4673, 17:639–40)

As we have already noted, when Kant comes to consider the intellectual principle upon which the relation of all substances as noumena or objects of the intellect rests, he says that it is this "*relation which when seen intuitively is called space*" (§16, 2:407). Since there is no suggestion whatever that the objects of the intellect are in any way dependent upon the human mind, which is not an *intellectus archetypus*, this clearly suggests that although space as the form of intuition for sensitive knowledge is ideal, the objects of sensitive knowledge are not.

Perhaps even better evidence for the ontological position intended by the inaugural dissertation is furnished by this claim, which precedes the detailed discussion of space and time:

Now although phenomena are properly species of things and are not ideas, nor do they express the internal and absolute quality of objects, none the less cognition of them is most veridical. For first of all, in as much as they are sensual concepts or apprehensions, they are witnesses, as being things caused, to the presence of an object, and this is opposed to idealism. (§11, 2:397)

Here Kant clearly claims that the thesis that the forms of intuition are ideal, that they represent appearances (it is in this sense that "species" is used here) rather than things as they really are, is not equivalent to and does not imply idealism about the things represented. Again, there is no suggestion that the *ideality* of space and time in any way impugns the *reality* of the things represented in and by these ideal forms. Of course Kant later came

to have the gravest doubts about the force of the causal argument used here. These doubts certainly led him to waver from the combination of idealism about form together with realism about existence just described until he discovered an alternative form of argument which allowed him to return to his original position. But the point, for the moment, is just that the position which Kant originally adopted was a form of realism about the existence, if not the forms, of objects in space and time and that when he came to raise a problem about the objective validity of the "principles of convenience," or of what he eventually described as the pure concepts of the understanding, it was precisely the problem of how they could be known *a priori* to apply to objects *so understood*: how principles rooted in the organization of our own thought could necessarily apply to objects which exist independently of our thought of them.

This is just what we shall see if we now return to the famous letter of 1772. In the fall of 1770, Kant received comments on the inaugural dissertation from three of the most famous savants of the German republic of letters: J. H. Lambert, J. G. Sulzer, and Moses Mendelssohn. Each of these writers responded with consternation to Kant's thesis concerning the ideality of time. Lambert put the point in a broad form: "*If changes are real, so is time. . . . Since I cannot deny reality to change, until I am convinced to the contrary, I am still unable to say that time and thus space as well are both merely expedients for the benefit of human representations*" (10:102).¹² This leaves open the possibility that change is somehow real, even though not intrinsically temporal. But Mendelssohn raised a more difficult objection:

There are several reasons why I cannot persuade myself that time should be something merely subjective. Succession is, after all, at least a necessary condition of the representation of finite minds. Now finite minds are not merely subjects but also objects of representations, both of God and of their fellow-minds. Consequently succession is also to be regarded as something objective. (10:110)¹³

Mendelssohn surely weakened his case by bringing in God (a fact which Kant was not to miss), but his basic point was clear enough: Even if temporal succession is just the form in which nontemporal objects appear to human minds, still it must really characterize *those minds themselves* and cannot be just an appearance of the mind to itself.

Six months later Kant asked his intermediary in Berlin, his former student Marcus Herz, to apologize for his procrastination in answering these letters from such "honest people"; his excuse, he said, was that the letters from Lambert and Mendelssohn had led him "into a long chain of researches" which had to be completed before these writers could be answered (letter of 7 June 1771, 10:116-17).¹⁴ But what is remarkable is that Kant's "long chain of researches" does not seem to have concerned the problem of the ideality of time at all,¹⁵ for Kant apparently never wavered from this position. Although he did attempt to supply more arguments for the point than were included in the dissertation, he does not seem to have

begun thinking of them until some years after 1771. Instead, Kant's next letter to Herz, the famous letter of February 1772, revealed that he had been thinking about a problem which none of his correspondents of 1770 had even raised: the necessity of what are now for the first time called "pure concepts of the understanding" (10:125) rather than mere "principles of convenience" for conceiving of the very same objects given to us by the forms of sensitive cognition, and the difficulty of explaining how such concepts can be known *a priori* and yet be objectively valid.

As we saw at the outset of this chapter, the problem which Kant announced to his disciple in 1772 was this: "On what basis rests the relation to the object of that which, in ourselves, we call representation?" Two accounts were excluded. In the case of the "pure concepts of the understanding" the representations could not be caused by their objects, as is the empirical content (but not, as Kant had argued by 1770, the form) of sensible, passive representations; yet the objects could not be related to the pure concepts simply by being their effect, or by the concepts being the cause. The reason for the latter exclusion is self-evident: To think that our pure concepts literally caused their objects would be to think of ourselves as, like the *intellectus archetypus*, creating objects simply by conceiving of them, and that would be as baseless as it was heretical. The reason for the former exclusion is not, in fact, made clear at first, but eventually emerges. The problem is that these pure concepts furnish "axioms of pure reason concerning" their objects, that the understanding "construct[s] for itself entirely *a priori* concepts of things, with which the things are necessarily in agreement" (10:130-1). That is, because its principles are known to be true *a priori*, the understanding must draw them up, out of its own resources, independently of experience, yet the objects of experiences *necessarily*, rather than accidentally, agree with these principles (10:126). Since the objects do not cause the principles nor the principles the objects, some third account must be found to explain necessary rather than contingent agreement between representation and object. That is the task which must be accomplished before *The Limits of Sensibility and Reason* can be published (10:124). Kant optimistically expected to publish such a work in a few months; of course, the *Critique of Pure Reason* actually appeared only after another decade of labor.

But what is vital to see is that this is a problem only on the very supposition that the objects to which the pure concepts of the understanding will be applied are conceived to exist independently of the human mind, or on the supposition that the human intellect is not an *intellectus archetypus*. If these concepts, although subjective because *a priori*, are not at least intended to be used with reference to objects existing quite independently of us and our representations, there is no philosophical problem here; there would be only a question of adding some to the list of representations which the mind can employ in its own constructions. Indeed, Kant makes precisely this point by distinguishing the case of the pure concepts of the understanding from that of the concepts of magnitude,

the objects for which we can always construct for ourselves. In that case, there is no puzzle about agreement; it is only because the concepts of the understanding, though they must have a source within the mind if they are to be known *a priori*, are intended to be used to know objects that exist independently of them that there arises "an obscurity with respect to the faculty of our understanding: whence comes the agreement with things" (10:131).

Thus, Kant's problem of 1772, as well as his theory of 1770, suggest that there is at least some sense in which his ontology is to be *realism* and that the newly discovered need for a justification of what first seemed to be mere "principles of convenience" must take place within a framework which is realistic in the requisite sense. Of course, evidence about intentions is just that, and the possibility must be left open for the discovery that the only way to solve the problem is by revising its original conception. But such a solution would be a Pyrrhic victory. Some have felt that only such a dissolution of realism could make a solution to the problem of the objective validity of *a priori* intuitions and concepts possible. Thus, DeVleeschauwer writes: "One of the actual conditions of the problem is incompatible with the future deduction, namely, the thing in itself."¹⁶ But I shall argue that even though Kant was clearly tempted to achieve such a victory, he was never completely happy with it. Thus, although the denial of realism dominates the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's original allegiance to realism returned to the fore in the second edition's "Refutation of Idealism." To be sure, only in the several years after 1787 did Kant actually consider how to reconcile realism and *a priori* knowledge, and even then he was obviously unable to settle into a stable realist solution to his epistemological problem. But we shall see at the very least that his purely Pyrrhic concession to idealism was only a temporary expedient.

The transcendental theory of experience: 1774-1775

Little more than three years after his famous letter to Marcus Herz, a great deal of Kant's eventual solution to the problem of the *a priori* but objective validity of the categories was already in place. These three years must have been a period of intense thought, but little of what Kant may have written during them has survived. Fortunately, however, some evidence of Kant's ideas at this point is preserved for us in a number of fascinating fragments. Several of these are marginalia in a copy of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* which Kant used for many years, beginning in 1767. (For that reason the marginalia have been dated only loosely.) But the bulk of them are a set of closely related separate sheets (so-called *lose Blätter*) known as the *Duisburg Nachlass*, which have been assigned to the years 1774 and 1775 with some certainty.¹ These documents provide fundamental insight into both the strategies and the problems of the eventual *Critique* by virtue of both their similarities to and their differences from the published work and are revealing in what they leave obscure as well as in what they make clear. They furnish indispensable evidence for the objectives and assumptions underlying the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

These materials suggest the following conclusions. The fundamental idea of 1774-5 is that certain rules can be shown to be necessary conditions for thinking of objects, as opposed to merely having sensations. But there is an underlying ambivalence on Kant's part as to how these rules are to be derived which is never really resolved, even in the *Critique* of 1781. Kant is not sure whether these rules should be derived directly from the concept of an object of experience, which by definition stands in contrast to a merely subjective form of consciousness, or whether there are rules for self-consciousness itself which are epistemologically prior to rules for objectivity yet which also imply the latter, as rules of the medium through which all objects must be represented. Second, although Kant is not initially equivocal about what we may call the force of these rules, he subsequently also becomes so. That is, to the initial position that these are conditional rules which must be satisfied if experience is to be possible but which the mind itself may not have the power to enforce under all circumstances, Kant gravitates toward the position that they are instead rules which the mind can literally impose upon its objects regardless of the circumstances and are therefore valid under all circumstances, and, for that reason, might be called absolute. These two ambivalences, the first surviving into Kant's thought in the 1780s and the second becoming prominent only during that