

Transcendental idealism and metaphysics: Kant's commitment to things as they are in themselves

1

One of Kant's central central claims in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that we cannot have knowledge of things as they are in themselves. He says:

our cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself, but uncognized by us (Bxx).

The status of things in themselves in Kant's system has been regarded as problematic in a number of ways, for example, whether Kant is entitled to assert both that there are things in themselves and that we cannot have knowledge of them, and, more generally, what Kant's commitment to things in themselves amounts to. A number of commentators deny that Kant is committed to there actually being an aspect of reality which we cannot cognise; they argue that he is committed merely to the idea that we cannot avoid the *concept* of things as they are in themselves.¹ Perhaps one of the most important proponents of this view is Henry Allison (1983, 2004), who argues that transcendental idealism is not a metaphysical position, but a methodological standpoint. Allison famously argues that Kant's distinction between things in themselves and appearances should be understood in terms of the idea of considering things in terms of epistemic conditions, and the idea of things considered apart from such conditions, together with an emphasis on the idea that cognition requires both concepts and intuitions. Apparent support for anti-metaphysical, or deflationary, readings is provided by the implausibility of extreme metaphysical interpretations.² Deflationary interpreters (correctly, it seems to me) reject the idea that Kantian appearances should be understood as ideal in the Berkelean sense, and reject the idea that Kant's notion of things in themselves should be understood as a commitment to there being supersensible, non-spatio-temporal 'objects,' of which we cannot have knowledge—intelligibilia. However, from the facts that Kant is not committed to the existence of intelligibilia and that he is not a Berkelean idealist, it does not follow that he is not committed to there being a way things are in themselves, which we cannot cognise, or that he is not committed to appearances being genuinely dependent on our minds in some (non-Berkelean) sense. And while the claim that we cannot know things in themselves is of course an epistemic claim, this does not mean that it involves no metaphysical commitment—such as a commitment to the existence of an aspect of reality which we cannot cognise. I will argue in this paper that while transcendental idealism is partly an epistemological position, it is also partly a metaphysical position, and in specific, that Kant is committed to the claim that the things we cognise have, in addition to the way they appear to us, a nature that is independent of us, which we cannot cognise.³ Kant starts out with an epistemic

¹ See Bird, who says of the division between phenomena and noumena in the negative sense that “such a division is not, like an empirical distinction, between two genuine kinds of object, but only between phenomena, which are the things we ordinarily perceive and know about, and the empty (but not inconsistent) concept of a non-phenomenon” (Bird 1962:74), and that there “are two ways of looking at the same thing only because, on Kant's view, there is only one thing at which to look, namely appearances” (Bird 1962:29). See also Bird 2006: 553, 579; Grier 2001; Hanna 2006; Schrader 1968: 173, 181; Senderowicz 2005. In contrast, for authors who take it as entirely obvious that Kant does have a commitment to things in themselves, see Adams 1997; Adickes 1924; Walker (forthcoming).

² Bird seems to tie a commitment to there being a way things are in themselves to what he calls the traditional idealist interpretation, which sees Kant as a Berkelean idealist about appearances (2006:566).

³ My concern here is to argue that Kant is committed to things in themselves in the sense of there being a way in which the things we cognise are in themselves, which we cannot cognise. It is of course

distinction between considering objects as they are in our experience of them and as they are independent of our being able to experience them, but he goes on to make metaphysical claims about things considered in these two ways. He claims that things as they are in our experience are mind-dependent, and not metaphysically ultimate, and that they must be grounded in an aspect of reality that is entirely independent of our minds, but is unknowable.

A large part of Kant's aim in the *Critique* is to argue for the impossibility of our having *a priori* knowledge of God, freedom and immortality (knowledge he thinks metaphysics traditionally aspired to), and to shift the focus away from this to epistemological and meta-philosophical concerns.⁴ This leads some to think that interpreting transcendental idealism as any kind of metaphysical position would be to miss the point of Kant's revolutionary program. However, while Kant's concern in the *Critique* is to reject a certain sort of metaphysics, it doesn't follow that he rejects all metaphysics. Clearly, at least some of the time, when Kant talks of 'metaphysics' or 'ontology,' it is with the aim of criticising and rejecting them, as conceived by his predecessors.⁵ However, he also speaks of metaphysics in other ways. He says that his Copernican experiment 'promises to metaphysics the secure course of a science,...where it concerns itself with concepts *a priori* to which the corresponding objects appropriate to them can be given in experience (Bxviii) A845/B873).⁶ This suggests that Kant conceives of his own project as rejecting one sort of metaphysics but also as establishing another: one that is concerned with *a priori* knowledge of the objects of experience. But even if Kant did use the term 'metaphysics' exclusively to refer to the kind of *a priori* discussion of God, freewill and the soul that he is rejecting, this is clearly not what philosophers generally mean by the term today. This means that his rejection of metaphysics in this particular sense would not be a reason to think that no aspect of his position is metaphysical in *our* sense. His position is, at least partly, concerned with the nature of what exists and the extent to which what

compatible with this that Kant also allows noumena which do not correspond to ways in which the things we cognise are in themselves, such as God, on the grounds of practical reason. See Adams (1997:822).

⁴ In an often quoted passage, he says that "the understanding can never accomplish *a priori* anything more than to anticipate the form of a possible experience in general, and, since that which is not appearance cannot be an object of experience, it can never overstep the limits of sensibility, within which alone objects are given to us. Its principles are merely principles of the exposition of appearances, and the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognition of things in general in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality), must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding" (A247/B303). This passage might be taken to support reading Kant's transcendental idealism as an alternative to ontology.

⁵ Willaschek's (2008) discussion of Kant on the necessity of metaphysics assumes that metaphysics refers to transcendent metaphysics. He sees Kant's view as being that metaphysics concerns the unconditioned, and that metaphysics is not possible in theoretical reason.

⁶ In his Lectures on Metaphysics we find the same thing: sometimes Kant defines metaphysics and ontology in terms of the kinds of projects he is arguing are impossible, but sometimes he seems to see his project as part of metaphysics in another sense. He speaks of metaphysics as the science of *a priori* principles of cognition (29:749-754). He distinguishes between different ways in which we can think of metaphysics, saying that "in cosmology and also in ontology there are propositions which have objects in experience, and also those which do not—hence the critique of reason must assume quite different basic propositions with respect to its immanent as opposed to its transcendent use. We have classified metaphysics into the part which contains the immanent use of reason and that which contains the transcendent" (29:768, see also 29:749-50, 29:793, 29:794; 29:776). See also Ameriks 2000, 2006: Chs 3 and 5; 2003: Ch. 4). And he says that "All the despisers of metaphysics, who wanted to give themselves the appearances of having clearer heads, also had their own metaphysics, even Voltaire. For everyone still thinks something about his own soul" (MM 29:765).

exists is independent of our minds.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In section 2 I examine some of the basic textual evidence for the opposing interpretations of things in themselves. In section 3 I respond to reasons commentators have given for thinking that Kant cannot be committed to the existence of things in themselves because this would be inconsistent with his other concerns and arguments in the *Critique*. Section 4 examines the deflationary strategy of understanding things in themselves as the idea of things thought of in abstraction from epistemic conditions and argues that this approach does not give an adequate account of Kant's notion of things as they are in themselves. Section 5 looks at Kant's indirect argument for transcendental idealism in the *Dialectic*, and argues that it requires seeing transcendental idealism as making some metaphysical claims. Many of the considerations I urge here are not new. However, it seems to me to be worth bringing them together, both because of how much of the recent literature denies the position I defend here, and because some (although by no means all) of the extant defences of the considerations I appeal to have been bound up with commitments to implausible metaphysical interpretations, which have, I think, distracted attention from their force.

2

I start by noting some significant features of the way Kant talks about things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves. An important and often repeated common feature is the fact that Kant talks about things as they appear to us and *these same things* as they are in themselves. For example, he says that “We do not understand through pure reason what the things that appear to us might be in themselves” (A276/B332⁷). Deflationary interpreters have made much of such passages, and see them as supporting the idea that transcendental idealism involves two different ways of considering the same things.⁸ I am broadly in agreement with this, but it does not follow that transcendental idealism makes no metaphysical claims, since a distinction between two ways of considering things is compatible with making metaphysical claims about the aspects of things so considered.⁹ For example, someone who thinks of colour as a mind-dependent property of objects might introduce this idea by considering objects as they are in our perceptual experience, and as they are apart from our perceptual experience, and argue that colour features only in the former.

The fact that Kant frequently distinguishes between two ways of considering the same things does not establish whether or not his position is metaphysical, but other aspects of the text straightforwardly suggest two metaphysical claims: the idea that things as they appear to us depend on our minds in some sense, and the idea that there is an aspect of reality that we cannot cognise. Three striking common features of the passages in which Kant talks about things as they appear to us are that he claims that appearances are ‘*in us*’;¹⁰ he calls appearances *representations* or *mere*

⁷ See also Bxx; Bxxvii; A38/B55; A39/B56; A42/B59; B69; B153–6; B306; A276/B332; A360; A546/B574

⁸ Prauss (1974), for example, has argued in detail that Kant's distinction is not between appearances and things-in-themselves thought of as a different kind of thing, but between things considered as they appear to us, and considered as they are in themselves.

⁹ See Westphal (1997, 2001) who distinguishes between methodological and metaphysical double aspect interpretations, rejecting the former (‘dual descriptions’) views.

¹⁰ B59/A42; A370; A490–1/B518–9; A492/B520.

representations;¹¹ and he says that the *existence* of appearances requires *a connection with actual perception*.¹² A striking feature of the passages in which Kant talks about things in themselves is that he frequently explicitly says or clearly implies that there actually is a way things are in themselves, or, in other words, that there exists an aspect of reality of which we cannot have knowledge. He says:

We have wanted to say that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that *the things* that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us (A42/B59, my italics).¹³

Further, he frequently makes claims such as that things in themselves are the *ground* of appearances; he also speaks of things in themselves as the *cause* of appearances, and of their *affecting* us. He says:

The sensible faculty of intuition is really only a receptivity for being affected in a certain way with representations...which, insofar as they are connected and determinable in these relations (in space and time) according to laws of the unity of experience, are called **objects**. The *non-sensible cause* of these representations is entirely unknown to us (A494/B522¹⁴).

Another striking feature of the way Kant talks about things as they are in themselves is not something he says about them, but rather what he doesn't say: when he first starts talking about things in themselves Kant says virtually nothing to explain or introduce the notion, or to indicate that it requires explanation, and he doesn't give any arguments for thinking that there are things in themselves. Allison takes this to mean that when Kant first talks about things in themselves, the "uninstructed reader" (who has not yet been introduced to the idea of epistemic conditions, and the correlative idea of considering things in terms of epistemic conditions and apart from them) is not in a position to understand the notion (Allison 2004:118–9). But a simpler explanation is that Kant does not take it to be a technical or unusual notion which requires introduction and definition. It is simply the notion that things have a way they are which is independent of other things, and, in particular, independent of us. Locke uses the expression in this way, saying of primary qualities "We have by these an idea of the thing as it is in itself" (1976: II, VIII, 23). Locke opposes primary qualities to properties which are understood in relation to us, and to properties of things which are understood in relation to other things; he simply assumes that things must have a way they are independent of their relations to us and other things, and speaks of this as the way things are in themselves. According to Locke's understanding of a primary quality as a quality an object has as it is in itself (independent of other things, including subjects), thinking that there are such qualities is simply thinking that there are mind-independent things, or that there is mind-

¹¹ A492/B520; B45; A98; A101; A104; A109; A113; B164; A490/B518–A491/B519; A369; A370; A383; A492/B520; A190/B235, A197/B242, A369, A372, A385, A386, A493/B521, A494/B522, A499/B527, A507/B535, A563/B591, A793/B821, *Proleg*, 288, 289, 319, 341, 342.

¹² A 376; A225/B272; A376; A493/B521; A493–4/B521–2.

¹³ See also Bxx; A26/B42; A30/B45; A42/B59; A43/B60; B66–7; B68; B164; A190/ B235; A191/B236; A366; *Proleg.*: 315; *Discovery* 8:209, *Groundwork* 4:451. Erich Adickes (1924) documents this point in detail. He says: 'Was Kant an zahlreichen Stellen als notwendig fordert und als selbstverständlich annimmt, ist nicht der Begriff des Dinges an sich, sondern die extramentale Existenz einer Vielheit uns affizierende Dinge an sich' (Adickes 1924:3). See also Willaschek 2001:225.

¹⁴ See also A44/B61; A190/B235; A190/B235; A251–2; A288/B344; A379–80; A393; A496/B524; MM 29:861.

independent reality.¹⁵ In this sense, the idea of things as they are in themselves is the idea of things as they are *independently* of our experience.

This straightforward reading of the notion of things as they are in themselves explains why Kant has no argument for there being things in themselves.¹⁶ On this reading, Kant's central concern in the *Critique* is not to oppose the Cartesian sceptic;¹⁷ he starts by assuming that there are things. He then argues that our cognition of these things is limited to mind-dependent appearances of them (aspects of them which exist only in relation to us), and that we cannot have determinate knowledge of their natures as they are apart from their mind-dependent appearances. Against this, Graham Bird argues that

To deny knowledge of things in themselves is certainly compatible with a belief in their existence, but to deny such knowledge and assume that existence as a premise in a metaphysical system must be unsatisfactory. How can a system seriously both accept an essential premise and at the same time deny that we can have *any* knowledge of its truth? (Bird 2007:553)

On my reading, the premise in the system is that there are things, neutrally understood (I take it that Bird would agree with this¹⁸), and that these things have a mind-independent nature, a way they are in themselves in the Lockean sense. Kant then goes on to argue that we cannot know this mind-independent nature. Thus, his starting point is not a commitment to things in themselves understood as mysterious supersensible entities, but rather a commitment to things, understood neutrally, as well as to the idea that things must have a nature that is independent of us. And he does not deny knowledge of his starting point—that there is a way things are in themselves—but rather of the natures things have as they are in themselves.¹⁹

Against the idea that Kant's position makes metaphysical claims, Allison points out that we must read passages in which Kant says appearances are 'in us' bearing in mind his disambiguation between the empirical and transcendental senses of '*in uns*' and '*ausser uns*' (Allison 2004:24, A373). According to Allison, understood empirically, the terms 'in us' and 'outside us' mark a distinction between objects of inner and outer sense respectively, but understood transcendently, they mark a distinction between "two manners in which objects can be considered in relation to the conditions of human sensibility" (2004:24). I agree with Allison about the importance of the disambiguation, but think that the way Kant presents it supports thinking both that appearances are mind-dependent, and that the notion of things as they are in themselves is to be understood as the notion of things as they are

¹⁵ Of course one might deny that reality has to be made up of primary qualities in this sense (for example, by thinking that there are ungrounded dispositions or relations, as in contemporary ontological structural realism), but this does not seem to be something Locke entertains.

¹⁶ As Ameriks (2006: 74–75) and Adickes (1924:9) argue, the most straightforward account of why Kant does not argue for things in themselves is precisely because he takes them in this way. Ameriks argues that Kant starts with, rather than argues towards, the reality of things in themselves, and that "the very lack of an argument by Kant shows his insight into the oddity of insisting that one must be had" 2006: 74–75; 127–8; Ameriks 2003:23, 33. See also Willaschek 2001:221 and Buroker, who says that "we are logically justified in making the minimal assumption that something exists that has its own nature" (2006:22).

¹⁷ See Bird 2006 for detailed argument.

¹⁸ Further, I agree with his detailed rejection of interpretations which see Kant as a noumenalist and a phenomenalist, as well as with interpretations which see him as concerned to reject Cartesian scepticism.

¹⁹ As Ameriks says, Kant means to exclude "only positive *determinate* theoretical knowledge of things in themselves" (Ameriks 2003:17n25).

independently of us. Kant provides his disambiguation in the following passage:

the expression **outside us** carries with it an unavoidable ambiguity, since it sometimes signifies something that, **as a thing in itself**, exists distinct from us and sometimes merely something that belongs to outer **appearance**, then in order to escape uncertainty and use this concept in the latter significance—in which it is taken in the proper psychological question about the reality of our outer intuition—we will distinguish **empirically external** objects from those that might be called “external” in the transcendental sense, by directly calling them “things **that are to be encountered in space**” (A373).

Here, Kant explains that what is outside us in the empirical sense are things which exist in space, whereas what is transcendently external is “something that, **as a thing in itself**, exists *distinct* from us” (A373, my italics). Kant’s point is to distinguish the idea of being outside us in space from the idea of being independent of us: he thinks that objects which are outside us in space are nevertheless not entirely independent of us. While I agree with Allison that Kant’s saying that appearances are ‘in us’ does not establish that he is a phenomenalist or a Berkelean idealist about appearances²⁰ (and there are many other, conclusive reasons for not seeing Kant as a phenomenalist²¹), it seems to me that Kant’s account of what it means to be transcendently ‘outside us’ is much more straightforwardly metaphysical than Allison’s distinction between two manners in which objects can be considered in relation to the conditions of human sensibility. In the very passage in which Kant introduces the disambiguation he speaks of something which *exists distinct* from us, rather than of something thought of in terms of one of two ways in which objects can be considered. And while Kant’s saying that appearances are ‘in us’ does not mean that we have to read him as a phenomenalist, he clearly uses the expression to assert some form of idealism or mind-dependence: that objects do not exist distinct from us, in some sense.²²

One way in which deflationary interpreters argue against the idea that Kant’s notion of things in themselves should be understood as involving a commitment to an aspect of reality which we cannot cognise is by pointing out the extensive textual evidence for denying that Kant is committed to the existence of supersensible, non-spatio-temporal things which are distinct things from the things of which we have experience. Noumena are literally intelligibilia: objects which can be known by an intellect alone, independent of sensibility. Possible examples of such intelligibilia may be Cartesian souls, Leibnizian monads, God, Platonic forms and Platonically understood numbers. The idea that Kant’s notion of things in themselves should be understood as a commitment to the existence of intelligibilia is clearly incorrect: he

²⁰ To say that what is transcendently in us is dependent on us does not give a particular account of what this mind-dependence amounts to, but a non-phenomenalist kind of idealism would make more sense of Kant’s contrasting what is transcendently in us (dependent on us) with what is empirically in us (what is not outside our minds, what is not in space). Phenomenalism, broadly, holds that the existence of objects in space does not amount to anything more than the existence of certain actual and possible mental states; this is very different from the insistence that the question of whether objects are outside us in space is a separate question from whether they are independent of us.

²¹ See the discussion in Abela, 2002; Allais 2004; Allais 2007; Allison 2004; Bird 1962; Bird 2006; Collins 1999; Langton 1998; Melnick 1973; Matthews 1982; Prauss 1974, amongst others.

²² Crucially, he does not say simply that appearances are in us, but that they are *merely* in us, and that they *exist only in us*. His claim is not simply that objects *are* apprehended or cognized by us, but that the very *existence* of appearances is necessarily connected to the possibility of their being apprehended or cognized by us (A490/B518). He says that there is a necessary connection between objects’ existence and their being apprehended by us, and this is an idealist claim.

states explicitly that his notion of things in themselves should *not* be understood as a commitment to noumena in this sense. Further, this would be incompatible with his account of the limits of our knowledge, as well as with his attack on transcendent metaphysics, in which he argues that we cannot have knowledge even that there are intelligibilia. However, it doesn't follow from the fact that Kant is not a noumenalist that there is no metaphysical commitment involved in his view of things as they are in themselves.

The section “On the Ground of the Distinction between Noumena and Phenomena” (A235–260/B294–315) is the place where Kant most explicitly repudiates the idea that things in themselves should be understood as intelligibilia. Here, Kant distinguishes between a positive and a negative conception of noumena, and also introduces the idea of what he calls a *problematic* concept; this is a concept which is coherent but with respect to which we cannot have any knowledge that there is anything corresponding to it. Kant makes it clear that his notion of things as they are in themselves should be understood in terms of the notion of noumena in the *negative* sense (B307). The notion of a noumenon in the positive sense is the notion of a special kind of object, distinct from the objects of which we have knowledge and experience, which would be an object for a different kind of intuition than ours. In the positive sense, a noumenon is “an **object of a non-sensible intuition,**” and this notion assumes a special kind of intuition, intellectual intuition, “which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand” (B307). Kant is clear that there *may* be noumena in the positive sense, although we have no idea whether there are, and we don't even really understand what they would be (A249²³). In contrast, in the negative sense, the notion of a noumenon refers to an aspect of the very things of which we have experience, but is negative in the sense that we can give it no content. Kant says that it is *the thing insofar as it* is not an object of our sensible intuition (B307). To reach the negative notion of a noumenon, we take a thing which is presented to us in intuition and “we abstract from our intuition of it” (B307); this gives us the notion of the thing as it is apart from our experience of it, as it is in itself.²⁴

Kant introduces the idea of a problematic concept as one which contains no contradiction, but the objective reality of which “can in no way be cognized” (A254). While he requires both something given in intuition and the application of concepts for cognition, he allows that where there cannot be something given in intuition there may nonetheless be a coherent concept. Problematic concepts cannot be known to have instantiations but can still play essential limiting or regulative roles in our thinking. He says that the concept of a noumenon is problematic in this way, and that it is merely a boundary concept, whose function is the negative one of limiting “the pretensions of sensibility” (A255), and that “we have no insight into the possibility of such *noumena*.” Some commentators think that Kant's claim that his notion of things in themselves should be understood in terms of noumena in the negative sense, and/or his claim that the positive concept of a noumenon is problematic, show that he does not have a commitment to the existence of an aspect of reality which we cannot

²³ See also A289/B345; B307; B311; A251–2.

²⁴ Note, this does not mean that there are two different kinds of noumena, rather, in the positive sense, the idea of a noumenon is the idea of a distinct kind of thing—a non-spatio-temporal, non-sensible thing—whereas in the negative sense the notion of a noumenon is the notion of something which is other than what we experience, to which we can give no positive content. Of course, there may be different kinds of noumena, for example, there may be noumena which are not aspects of the things which appear to us (such as God).

cognise. However, to say that the idea of things as they are in themselves must be understood in terms of the notion of noumena in the negative sense is not to say that the idea of things as they are in themselves is problematic in Kant's sense. It is the positive notion of noumena, the notion of *intelligibilia*, which Kant says is problematic.²⁵ Kant thinks that there is nothing logically incoherent with the idea of non-spatio-temporal non-sensible objects (*intelligibilia*) and that the notion of such objects plays an important limiting function, but we have no knowledge of whether there actually are such things. The latter is something he never says about the notion of things as they are in themselves. The notion of things as they are in themselves is negative not because it is a merely unavoidable concept which does not correspond to something actually existing, but because we can give it no positive content: we have no knowledge of the way things are as they are in themselves. In the "Remark on the amphiboly of concepts of reflection," Kant confirms that the problematic concept of a noumenon is

"the representation of a thing of which we can say neither that it is possible nor that it is impossible, since we are acquainted with no sort of intuition other than our own sensible one and no other sort of concepts than the categories, neither of which, however, is suited to an extrasensible object" (A287/B343).

He never says that the notion of things as they are in themselves is the representation of something of which we can say neither that it is possible nor that it is impossible, but rather that it is implied by the notion of appearance (Bxxvi; A249; A251-2A253; *Proleg.*:315). He always argues that we could not have knowledge of merely intelligible entities, including knowledge that there are such things (see, for example, A669/B697-A704/B732), but he never says that we do not know if there is a way things are in themselves. The section on the distinction between noumena and phenomena clearly shows that Kant's notion of things as they are in themselves should not be understood as a commitment to there being *intelligibilia*. It does not undermine, but rather supports, the idea that things as they are in themselves should be understood in terms of the idea of things as they are independently of us, and that Kant thinks there is reality that exists independently of us. However, since we have no knowledge of reality that exists independently of us, our conception of it is merely negative.

3

I have suggested that the most straightforward way of doing justice to the way in which Kant talks about things in themselves is to see him as committed to thinking that the empirically real things that we experience are an aspect of a more fundamental or ultimate aspect of reality, which is entirely independent of us, of which we cannot have knowledge, and which is somehow responsible for the aspect we experience. However, all parts of this reading have been denied. Some interpreters have denied that we can have even coherent thought of things in themselves.²⁶ As we have seen, many interpreters deny that Kant is committed to a metaphysical position according to which there actually exists an aspect of reality that we cannot know, and see the notion of things in themselves as a merely limiting concept—a coherent concept which we cannot help using but with respect to which we cannot have

²⁵ Bird seems to run together the ideas of noumena as negative, problematic and limiting (2006:553). Similarly see Grier (2001:89).

²⁶ An example is Melnick's interpretation, according to which, the notion of a thing in itself is the notion of an object quite literally incomprehensible to us (Melnick 1973:152, see also Matthews 1982:137). Such readings have problems accommodating Kant's view of coherent thoughts about things in themselves. Keller argues that this is also a problem for Allison's view (Keller 1998:226-8).

knowledge that there is actually something to which it applies.²⁷ This may be part of a generally deflationary approach, but it is also argued by some who see transcendental idealism as an ontological position, but one which sees what exists as empirically real things only.²⁸ Although, as I have documented, there is textual evidence which appears to commit Kant to there being a way things are in themselves, it might be argued that he is inconsistent. Both the notion of an actually existing aspect of reality which we cannot know, and the idea of things in themselves as the ground or cause of things as they appear to us, are argued to be inconsistent with Kant's own account of the conditions of knowledge and the legitimate use of the categories.²⁹ Further, the former is argued to be inconsistent with his critique of the ontological argument,³⁰ which says that we cannot infer from the necessity of a concept to there being something actually existing corresponding to it.

The conditions of objectively valid cognition, for Kant, include both the application of a concept and something given in intuition, and where both conditions are not met we are not entitled to make knowledge claims at all, including, of course, existential ones. Some commentators argue that a commitment to there being things in themselves involves an existential commitment which is not made within experience, and therefore is not, in Kantian terms, legitimate. This is argued by Senderowicz, who says that knowledge of the existence of noumena is incompatible both with Kant's 'principle of significance'³¹ and with his account of synthetic *a priori* knowledge,³² and by Wood who says that the category of existence applies only to phenomena (2007:6).³³ In response to this, it can be pointed out that Kant seems to think that it is *analytic* that where there is something that appears in a certain way to us, there is something that has a way it is in itself (Bxxvi, A251–2).³⁴ Similarly, Kant thinks that it is a conceptual truth that what is relational requires something non-relational (A284/B340), and he thinks that appearances are merely relational.

In response to this line of argument, Hanna argues that it is not consistent with Kant's critique of the ontological argument, which says that we cannot infer the existence of something from mere concepts, and that although reason needs the

²⁷ For example, Allison 2004; Bird 1966; Bird 2006; 2006; Grier 2001; Hanna 2006; McDowell 1998; Senderowicz 2005.

²⁸ For example, Hanna 2006.

²⁹ See, for example, Schrader, who says that when Kant talks about things in themselves as causes of appearances, and as accessible through practical reason, he is using the notion of things in themselves dogmatically (Schrader 1968:185). See also Prauss 1974:197; Hanna 2006:422–6; Senderowicz 2005.

³⁰ Hanna 2006.

³¹ The 'principle of significance' Strawson attributes to Kant says that "we can make no significant use of concepts in propositions claiming to express knowledge unless we have empirical criteria for the application of those concepts" (Strawson 1966: 241).

³² Senderowicz agrees that there is textual evidence for the opposing view: he thinks that "Kant was divided regarding the question of whether the actual existence of things in themselves should be part of his transcendental theory of experience" (Senderowicz 2005:10). Similarly, see Hanna 2006:422.

³³ See also Bird 2007:553–580.

³⁴ Bird (2006:560) and Allison (2004) argue that the fact that appearance implies something that appears does not mean that the something that appears is something other than the appearance. This seems to me correct in so far as Kant's saying that the notion of appearance implies something that appears may not be enough, on its own, to show that he thinks that there is an aspect of the things that appear to us that we can't know. The point here is simply that the idea that something that appears is analytically entailed by the notion of appearances shows that Kant is entitled to assert that there is something that appears. He gives further arguments to show that we cannot have knowledge of what appears as it is in itself.

concept of an absolutely necessary being, we cannot conclude from this that the concept is instantiated (A592–603/B620–31). Hanna says that Kant’s critique of the ontological argument clearly shows that “analytic entailments of the concept of existence guarantee at most the logical possibility of the thing to which the concept of existence necessarily applies (Hanna 2006:197) He thinks that the notion of things in themselves is something our minds cannot help thinking, but that we have no more rational entitlement to say that this notion is instantiated than we have with respect to the concept of a being containing all perfections.³⁵

Allowing Hanna’s reading of Kant’s critique of the ontological argument,³⁶ it seems to me that this argument is correct—with respect to intelligibilia. Because these are understood as distinct objects from the things of which we have experience, Kant thinks that even if our reason unavoidably posits the notion of supersensible objects, we cannot conclude from this that there are such objects. But this objection will not apply if the notion of things in themselves is the idea that the things which we cognize have a way that they are, independently of our cognizing them, because in saying that there is a way things are in themselves we are not positing distinct supersensible things, but simply talking about an aspect of the things we know, so we are not making new, unjustified existential commitments. It is not inconsistent with Kant’s critique of the ontological argument to think that we can make assertions about the things we already know to exist on the basis of analytic judgments that apply to them. If it is analytic that appearances are appearances of something, then it does not even make sense to think that there are appearances without there being a way things are in themselves: in all possible worlds, appearances are appearances of something which appears. Similarly, if (as Kant thinks) it is analytic that relations require something non-relational, and if appearances are entirely relational, then we are entitled to assert that there is something which is not merely relational. Kant’s argument that existence is not a true predicate in fact shows that making an existence claim about things in themselves is compatible with knowing nothing about them, since he thinks that to say that something exists is to say nothing about its nature.³⁷

On interpretations such as those of Hanna and Senderowicz, Kant’s notion of things in themselves functions in our knowledge in a similar way to that of the ideal of complete systematic unity: as a regulative ideal with respect to which we can never have knowledge that it is instantiated. But Kant is extremely careful about drawing the distinction between the necessary postulation of a concept and the claim that it is instantiated, as this is one of the major themes of the Dialectic. If he doubted that there existed something corresponding to the notion of things as they are in themselves, we would expect him to draw attention to this, as he explicitly, carefully and repeatedly does in the case of ideas of reason.³⁸ In the Dialectic, he argues, for

³⁵ Similarly, Senderowicz argues that the notion of a noumena is relevantly like an *idea* of reason (Senderowicz 2005:14); for Kant, ideas have a necessary regulative role in empirical knowledge, but cannot be known to be instantiated.

³⁶ It might be argued that the point of Kant’s critique is not to argue that analytic entailment of the concept of existence does not imply that it is instantiated, but rather that existence is not the kind of concept which can be analytically entailed by the conception of the perfection of a thing’s nature (A597/B625).

³⁷ See Buroker 2006:23.

³⁸ I know of only one passage in which Kant seems to assert that we do not know whether there are things in themselves: towards the end of the “Amphiboly” section, he says that “The understanding...thinks of an object in itself, but only as a transcendental object, which is the cause of appearance” and that it “remains completely unknown whether such an object is to be encountered

example, that while we need to posit the idea of systematic unity as a regulative goal of science, there is not complete systematic unity in the world as it appears to us. He says explicitly and repeatedly that we cannot know whether there are supersensible entities, and that we cannot infer the existence of anything corresponding to necessary ideas of reason, such as the idea of a necessary being. If his view were that the notion of things in themselves is as empty of ontological commitment as the notion of a necessary being, or a unified totality of appearances, we would expect him to say so, since he is so clear about this with respect to the latter notions.

Another way in which a commitment to things in themselves is thought to be incompatible with the restrictions Kant places on cognition is that the idea that things in themselves ground or are in some sense the cause of things as they appear to us is thought to be incompatible with his explicit statement that categories, such as causation, can be used in knowledge claims only when applied to spatio-temporal objects which could be objects of experience (for example, A96; A139/B178; B147).³⁹ However, as has been frequently pointed out, Kant allows a merely logical use of the categories, in which we are entitled to say that they apply to things in themselves.⁴⁰ What are sometimes referred to as the ‘unschematised’ categories are the categories used independently of the spatio-temporal conditions which enable us to apply them to objects of experience. Used in this purely logical sense, the notion of substance is merely the notion of something which can only be thought as a subject, and the notion of causation is merely the notion of the dependence of a consequence on a ground. The categories are only legitimately used for knowledge within experience, and this means that when we speak of things in themselves as *grounds* of appearances, we are using the category of causation outside of the spatio-temporal conditions within which we are able to have knowledge of causes. This means that not only do we not have knowledge of the way things are in themselves, we do not understand how they are responsible for appearances, and do not even understand what kind of dependency the relevant grounding might be. But to say that we have no understanding of what the grounding relation is, is not to say that we are not entitled to assert that there is one: there is no *inconsistency* involved in using the notion of ground-consequence dependence to apply to things in themselves.

Another objection that has been made to the idea that the things that appear to us have a way they are in themselves is that this requires an identification of things in themselves with appearances, but there is no perspective from which we can make such an identification, since all we are presented with are appearances.⁴¹ There is a sense in which we can speak of the identification of appearances and things in themselves, and a sense in which we cannot: what is right is that Kant’s view is that the things which appear to us have a way they are in themselves, but what is wrong, or at least misleading, is the idea that we can make identity claims between things which are appearances and things which have a way they are in themselves.⁴² In

within or without us” (A288/B344). This passage occurs in the middle of a discussion in which Kant is arguing against supersensible objects.

³⁹ See, for example, Prauss 1974:197.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Ameriks 2003:32; Walker (forthcoming) 7.

⁴¹ See Walker (forthcoming) 3.

⁴² It would be even more misleadingly to say that the empirical objects which appear to us are things in themselves (see Schrader 1968:172–3), or that “the only objects of experience (indeed the only objects at all) are independently real things in themselves” (Baldner 1988:355). The only level at which we can identify objects is at the level of appearances; there is no viewpoint from which we can identify

addition to the fact that we do not know what things are like in themselves, we do not know the nature of the relation between things in themselves and appearances, and we do not know enough to know that there is a one-to-one relation such that every individual in appearances corresponds to an individual in itself.

The fact that, in so many texts, Kant indicates a commitment to thinking that there is a way things are as they are in themselves would not be an overriding consideration if this commitment were in fact incompatible with central parts of his philosophical commitments. But, as we have seen, this is not the case. On the contrary, Kant thinks that the idea that there is a way things are in themselves is *required* by his other philosophical commitments.

3

We have looked at textual evidence for thinking that Kant is committed to the existence of an aspect of reality which we cannot cognize, as well as reasons for thinking that this is not inconsistent with other central claims in the *Critique*. Deflationary interpreters offer an alternative explanation of Kant's notion of things as they are in themselves; assessing this alternative is the subject of this section. The idea is that we can avoid the commitment to an uncognizable aspect of reality by seeing the notion of things in themselves as the idea that we can think about the objects of knowledge in abstraction from the conditions of our knowing them.⁴³ Breitenbach, for example, argues that the claim

that there exist things in themselves, thus has to be understood as no more than the claim that there are things which can be thought of in abstraction from the way they appear to us (Breitenbach 2004:143).

She says that things in themselves “are objects considered in abstraction from the conditions of knowing them, and *this* is why we cannot know anything about them” (Breitenbach 2004:143–4). We have already seen that this kind of deflationary reading is correct in its rejection of noumenalism: Kant is not committed to the existence of *intelligibilia* in addition to the objects of our knowledge. Further, there is textual support for the claim that the notion of things in themselves is the idea of the things of which we have knowledge, thought of in abstraction from what we know about them, or the conditions of our knowing them. However, it does not follow from this that we have to deny that Kant thinks that there is genuinely something unknowable about the things of which we have experience—that there actually exists a part of reality which we cannot cognize, and which is somehow the ground of our experience. Further, I will argue that the deflationary explanation of why we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves is neither a successful explanation nor *Kant's* explanation.

The proposal we are considering is that to say that we cannot know things considered as they are in themselves is not to say that there is an aspect of things which we cannot know, but merely to draw attention to the idea of there being conditions of cognition, and to insist on the possibility of the abstract thought of objects as they are apart from such conditions. However, there are at least two different ways of understanding the idea of things considered as they are in abstraction from the way they appear to us. First, we could consider things as they are to the extent that they are not the way they appear as being. From this reading it follows analytically that we can't attribute to things considered in themselves the properties they appear to us to have. Alternatively, we could consider things as they

something as an empirical object and the same thing as a thing in itself. All we can say is that the (empirically real) objects we experience are appearances of something which has a way it is in itself.

⁴³ See Allison 2004, Breitenbach 2004; Buchdahl 1992; Prauss 1974.

are *independently* of their appearing to us.⁴⁴ It seems that Allison must mean his account to be read in the first way, since he says that considering objects in this way leaves us with a notion of them that is cognitively vacuous (Allison 2004:56). But from the idea of considering things in this way nothing follows about whether or not things are the way we cognise them as being *independently* of us.⁴⁵

Consider the different answers we get if we apply the two readings to what Locke would say about a primary quality like shape. Thinking of a shaped object as it is apart from its being shaped is clearly not the same as thinking of it as it is independently of its appearing shaped to us: Locke thinks objects have shape independently of our experiencing them, but clearly they do not have shape as they are apart from their having shape (whatever this might amount to). Consider colour: this example is clearer, since it seems easier to give content to the idea of thinking of an object as it is apart from its being coloured. We might think, for example, that the causal implications of its shape are independent of its being coloured. Thinking of an object as it is apart from its being coloured is clearly not the same as asking whether it is coloured, as it is independently of our experiencing it. If we take the notion of objects thought of in abstraction from the ways we experience them as being, we will not be able to attribute colour to objects thought of in this way. But this does not establish whether objects have colour independently of our being able to experience them.

This discussion does not yet address Allison's subtle position, since his view is not that things in themselves are things thought of in abstraction from *what we know about them* (or the ways they appear to us), but things thought of in abstraction from *their meeting the conditions of our knowing them*. Clearly we cannot cognize anything about objects thought of in abstraction from their meeting the conditions of our cognizing them. But it is an entirely separate question whether things meet the conditions of our being able to cognise them as they are independently of us. Suppose that it is a condition of my experiencing a table that it is a spatial object. Now consider the table as it is to the extent that it does not meet the conditions of my being able to experience it. Clearly, in abstraction from meeting the conditions of my being able to experience it the table is not spatial (whatever this might amount to). However, nothing follows from this about whether the table is spatial *independently* of my being able to cognise it. The crucial point is that the table's meeting the conditions of my being able to cognise it need not depend on the conditions being conditions for me. This means that although it is not spatial independently of its meeting the conditions of my being able to cognise it, it may still be spatial independently of my being able to cognise it. The realist can agree that there are conditions of the representation of objects, and agree that space is one such condition,

⁴⁴ Allison says that there is an ambiguity in the notion of the consideration of something as it is in itself: on an ontological reading, to take a thing as something that exists in itself is to take it as a *substantia noumena*, whereas in an epistemological sense, it is "considering it as it is independently of its epistemic relation to human sensibility and its conditions" (Allison 2004:52). My argument is that there is a further ambiguity in the notion of considering a thing independently of its relation to human cognition.

⁴⁵ There is a similar conflation involved in the idea that the notion of epistemic conditions enables us to explain a kind of idealism (Allison 2006:116, also 2004:12). Although I cannot argue this in detail here, it seems to me that Allison gets a kind of idealism out of the notion of an epistemic condition only as a result of conflating two different accounts of such conditions: one, conditions which are necessary for the representation of objects or objectivity, and two, conditions which reflect the cognitive structure of mind. On its own, the idea that there are conditions of representing the world as objective implies nothing about whether or not objects meet such conditions independently of us.

but this places no bar on speculating about whether things are spatial independently of us. Allison says that:

in considering things as they appear, we are considering them in the way they are presented to discursive knowers with our form of sensibility. Conversely, to consider them as they are in themselves is to consider them apart from their epistemic relation to these forms or epistemic conditions, which, if it is to have any content, must be equivalent to considering them qua objects for some pure intelligence, or 'mere understanding' (Allison 2004:16-17).

In order to say that the notion of considering things as they are apart from their epistemic relation to us could have no content unless it is equivalent to considering them as objects for a pure intelligence, Allison must be assuming the first of the two readings I have given of the idea of considering things apart from our cognizing them. On this reading, thinking of things as they are in themselves is thinking of them as they are to the extent that they are not spatio-temporal and sensible. It is very difficult to give any content to this way of considering things, and perhaps Allison is right that the best way of doing so is by thinking of things as objects for a pure intelligence. But the fact that we cannot give any content to the idea of things as they are to the extent that they are not as we cognize them as being does not show that we cannot give any content to the idea of things as they independently of our cognizing them, or that they are not as we cognize them independently of our cognizing them. Just because epistemic conditions "condition the objectivity of our *representations* of things rather than the very existence of the things themselves" (Allison 2004:11), it does not follow that things could not meet these conditions, independently of us.

Breitenbach says that things in themselves "are objects considered in abstraction from the conditions of knowing them, and *this* is why we cannot know anything about them" (Breitenbach 2004:143-4). As we have seen, the unknowability of things in themselves would follow from the notion of things considered as they are apart from what we know about them, but nothing follows from this about things as they are independent of us. Further, *Kant* does not take the unknowability of things in themselves to follow simply from the notion of things considered in abstraction from epistemic conditions. Kant thinks that space is a condition of representing a world, and he thinks that things are not spatial, as they are independently of us. However, for Kant, this position does not follow from the mere notion of conditions which are necessary to represent objects, and it is not built into his notion of a condition of the possibility of experience that such a condition *could not* represent the way things mind-independently are.⁴⁶ Rather, Kant posits his idealism as an explanation of the (alleged) fact that we have *a priori* knowledge of such conditions. It is not simply because there are epistemic conditions that are necessary for us to cognize things that we cannot have cognition of things as they are in themselves, rather, it is for the further reason that these conditions are *a priori*, and *a priori* knowledge of things in themselves is, Kant thinks, inexplicable. Breitenbach says that "if all we know of about a thing are the properties we find in experience, we do not seem to be in a position to assert that the object of experience is only a partial appearance of something whose other properties will remain forever unknown" (Breitenbach 2004). However, this is exactly what Kant does assert: "what objects may be in themselves would still never be known through the most enlightened cognition of their appearances, which is alone given to us" (A43/B60); "our cognition reaches

⁴⁶ This would be an example of what Ameriks calls a 'short' argument for idealism: one which is based on a *general* feature of our cognition, rather than Kant's specific concern with *a priori* (Ameriks 1990).

appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself, but uncognized by us” (Bxx).

We have seen that there is textual evidence for the idea that the negative notion of noumena involves the idea of things thought of in abstraction from what we know about them: Kant says that the notion of a noumenon in the negative sense is “a thing **insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition**, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it” (B307). However, he does not *start* with the idea of things considered in abstraction from our being able to know them and argue that it follows analytically that we cannot have knowledge of things considered in this way. Rather, he starts with the idea of things as they are independently of us, and argues that we cannot have any knowledge of their mind-independent natures, and can know them only as they are in relation to our minds. Since everything we can know of things is only knowledge of properties they have in relation to us, all we are left with in terms of the idea of things as they are in themselves is the idea of things as they are apart from what we know about them. That our understanding of a thing as it is in itself is nothing more than the idea of things thought of in abstraction from what we can know about them follows from the claim that our knowledge of things is limited to their mind-dependent appearances.

5

The Dialectic is the section of the *Critique* which might most straightforwardly be taken to suggest that Kant rejects metaphysics, since this section is concerned with a rejection of a certain sort of metaphysics.⁴⁷ In the Dialectic, Kant wants to show that the attempts of rationalist metaphysicians to have *a priori* knowledge of things which are not given in experience, such as Cartesian souls, the world as a whole, and God, can never succeed. As well as arguing that such knowledge is not possible, Kant wants to diagnose the features of our thought which, he argues, mistakenly lead us to think that there are such things. He thinks that the nature of our reason gives rise to an illusion which leads us into erroneous metaphysical conclusions, and that although we cannot avoid the illusion, we can avoid making the erroneous conclusions. He also thinks that the very feature of reason which leads to illusion plays a necessary role in empirical knowledge,⁴⁸ because,

⁴⁷ It seems to be taken this way by Grier, who sees the *Critique* as a whole as a rejection of metaphysics, and the dialectic as a rejection of specific parts of metaphysics. She says “two central teachings from these earlier portions of the Critique — the transcendental ideality of space and time, and the critical limitation of all application of the concepts of the understanding to “appearances” — already carry with them Kant’s rejection of “ontology (metaphysica generalis).” Accordingly, in the Transcendental Analytic Kant argues against any attempt to acquire knowledge of “objects in general” through the formal concepts and principles of the understanding, taken by themselves alone.” Grier, Michelle, 2009.

⁴⁸ As Grier shows in detail, Kant identifies transcendental illusion “with the propensity to take the subjective or logical requirement that there be a complete unity of thought to be a requirement to which ‘objects’ considered independently of the conditions of experience (things in themselves) must conform” (Grier 2001:8; A297/B353). My discussion here is much indebted to her excellent discussion. While she has a deflationary reading of transcendental idealism, it seems to me that much of her analysis of transcendental illusion, the errors involved in rationalist metaphysics, and the role of the ideas of reason in empirical knowledge, is compatible with a more metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism (although perhaps not with a noumenalist and phenomenalist interpretation). Similarly, Allison’s discussion of the Antinomies does not appeal directly to the notion of epistemic conditions, and is largely concerned with Kant’s rejection of the idea that the unconditioned can be said to exist in appearances. As he argues, Kant’s solution does not require either the positing of supersensible entities, nor a phenomenalist account of appearances. This is compatible with a more moderate metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism, one which thinks that appearances are

roughly, the demand for systematic unity drives science. However, the illusion generates paradoxes, which show that the systematic unity reason seeks cannot be taken to be true of the spatio-temporal world of our experience. Once we realise that we have knowledge only of appearances, and not things in themselves, we see both why systematic unity is not actual in the world of our experience, and why we seek it. Although we will not be able to get rid of the illusion, we will no longer be deceived by it.

The part of the Dialectic which relates most clearly to transcendental idealism is the Antinomies. Kant says that this section provides indirect support for transcendental idealism, since positing transcendental idealism enables us to dissolve the conflicts that our thinking about the world would otherwise drive us to. Understanding the way in which transcendental idealism is supposed to resolve these conflicts gives us considerable insight into how exactly Kant understands transcendental idealism. I argue that if we pay attention to the way Kant introduces transcendental idealism in his solution to the Antinomies, as well as to the philosophical work which he requires the position to do in this section, we will see that a deflationary account cannot do justice to it, and that it requires a commitment to there being a way things are in themselves.

Kant says that the Antinomies arise from the fact that we mistake the principle which tells us to seek for the conditions for every conditioned, and therefore for the whole series of conditions, for an objective principle which tells us about the nature of the world: that the world exists as an unconditioned whole (A307–8/B364).⁴⁹ Kant argues that our natural and unavoidable demand for explanatory completeness misleads us into thinking that we have insight into the unconditioned. Further, he says that the reason we take this demand to be justified is that we mistakenly think that our experience presents us with things as they are in themselves. If we think that the objects of our experience—things as they appear to us—are things which exist independently of us, then we are entitled to think that there must be something unconditioned in the world, or that explanatory completeness must be possible with respect to the empirically real world. Kant says we resolve the Antinomies by realising that the objects we are given in experience are not things in themselves. He thinks that once we realise this, we can see that the demand for explanatory completeness, or for the unconditioned, is no longer legitimate.

The issue we need to consider here is which interpretation of transcendental idealism makes sense of the claim that seeing that the objects of experience are not things in themselves resolves the conflict. The first thing to pay attention to is the way Kant describes the position in his introduction to his resolution of the Antinomies. The section entitled “Transcendental idealism as the key to solving the cosmological dialectic” begins as follows:

We have sufficiently proved in the Transcendental Aesthetic that everything intuited in space or in time, hence all objects on 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*. This doctrine I call **transcendental idealism**. The realist, in the transcendental

mind-dependent in some (not phenomenalist) sense, and that Kant’s commitment to things in themselves is not an assertion of supersensible entities, but is a commitment to there being something which grounds appearances.

⁴⁹ As Allison argues, the demand for conditions for every conditioned can be understood as a requirement for explanatory completeness or ultimate explanation (Allison 2004:381; see also Grier 2001).

signification, makes these modifications of our sensibility into things subsisting in themselves, and hence makes **mere representations** into things in themselves (A490–1/B518–9, my italics).

Kant immediately goes on to distinguish this view from empirical idealism, which denies the existence of objects in space and insists that he allows for the reality of spatial objects, but says that:

Space itself, however, together with time, and, with both, all appearances, are **not things**, but rather *nothing but representations, and they cannot exist at all outside our minds*; and even the inner and sensible intuition of our mind (as an object of consciousness), the determination of which through the succession of different states is represented in time, is not the real object as it exists in itself, or the transcendental subject, but only an appearance of this to us unknown being, which was given to sensibility (A492/B520, my italics).

He also says that:

the objects of experience are **never given in themselves**, but only in experience, and they do not exist at all outside it (A492–3/B521);

The non-sensible cause of these representations is entirely unknown to us, and therefore we cannot intuit it as an object (A494/B522);

The cause of the empirical conditions of this progress, the cause, therefore, of which members of it I might encounter and also the extent to which I may encounter them in the regress, is transcendental, and hence necessarily unknown to us (A496/B524).

What is noteworthy here is that in introducing transcendental idealism as the solution to the antinomies Kant clearly says that the spatio-temporal objects of our experience are mind-dependent, and talks as if there is something which exists apart from mind-dependent appearances, as their ground. Notice that we see no talk here of considering things in terms of the conditions of our knowledge and apart from such conditions. Further, in the very section in which Kant is discussing ideas which we cannot avoid positing but which cannot be known to be instantiated he talks about things in themselves as grounding appearances, and does not say that the notion of things in themselves is merely a posit of reason.

More important than Kant's language here is the fact that both the mind-dependence of appearances and the existence of a more fundamental part of reality which is independent of us are fundamental to the way his resolution of the Antinomies is supposed to work. Kant's solution is to say that we can avoid the contradiction by recognising that there is nothing unconditioned in the world of experience, but, crucially, this makes sense only because the world of appearances is mind-dependent, and is not the same as the way things are in themselves. Kant says that "If the conditioned as well as its conditions are things in themselves, then when the first is given not only is the regress to the second **given as a problem**, but the latter is thereby already **given** along with it" (A498/B526 also A498/B526; A506/B534; A535/B563). In terms of the ways of understanding things in themselves we have looked at so far, there are at least three different things that could be meant by this. One is that if the conditions and its conditions are *intelligibilia*, the completeness of the series of conditions must be given. The second is that if the conditions and its conditions are thought of in abstraction from the conditions of knowledge, the completeness in the series of conditions is given. And the third is that if the conditions and its conditions were entirely independent real things, the complete series of conditions would be given. I submit that the first and the second are not plausible readings of what Kant has said, nor do they fit with the way he goes on to explain his solution. The first reading seems implausible since Kant says that *intelligibilia* are a kind of object of which we don't even really understand what they are. It would therefore be strange to find him making such positive claims about

intelligibilia as that completeness in the series of conditions of such things must be given.⁵⁰ The second reading also has Kant making an unmotivated claim: why should abstracting from the conditions of knowledge force us to say anything about whether or not the unconditioned must be thought of as given? The claim that there are certain conditions of representing an objective world, including space, time, and causal relations, does not explain the idea that the spatio-temporal world has no absolute magnitude. And the claim that we have the mere thought of spatio-temporal objects considered in abstraction from what we know about them cannot explain the claim that things considered in this way must be a determinate totality.⁵¹ On the third reading, Kant is making a very general point about the nature of (entirely) mind-independent reality: that (whatever it is like) it is complete. It exists as a determinate (complete) totality.⁵² That this is what he is saying is supported by what he immediately goes on to say, in contrast, about the status of appearances. He says that:

on the contrary, if I am dealing with appearances, which, as merely representations are not given at all if I do not achieve acquaintance with them...then I cannot say with the same meaning that if the conditioned is given, then all the conditions (as appearances) for it are also given (A498–9/B526–7).

Here, he says that what explains the fact that appearances need not be complete is their mind-dependence: they are merely representations which are not given at all if I do not achieve acquaintance with them. This general account matches the specific explanations Kant gives of the resolution of the first and second Antinomies. He says that the propositions ‘the world is finite in magnitude’ and ‘the world is infinite in magnitude’ would contradict each other if we were talking about things in themselves (A504/B532, A506/B534). Again, the thought seems to be that what exists entirely independently must be determinate in extent. However, once we realise that the world of which we have experience does not exist independently of us, we can make sense of the idea that it does not exist as a determinate totality: because “the world does not exist at all (independently of the regressive series of my representations) it exists neither as an **in itself infinite** whole nor as **an in itself finite whole**” (A504/B532). Both in respect of its boundaries in space and time, and in respect of its divisibility, Kant says that “the world of sense has no absolute magnitude” (A521/B549). This is not something he thinks it would make sense to say of reality *per se*, something which existed entirely independently of us; reality itself must have some absolute magnitude. He thinks that the idea that the world of sense has no absolute magnitude can be explained once we realise that the empirically real world is not (entirely) independent of our experience of it. If we see that our knowledge is of appearances only, then we are not forced to say that the world is “determined in itself regarding its magnitude” (A504/B532).

The crucial point is that Kant thinks that the claim that the world is not

⁵⁰ Consider, for example, the claim that if a (Cartesian) soul, as a conditioned thing, is given, totality in the series of conditions of the soul must also be given. This sounds like a transcendent metaphysical claim of the sort which Kant rules out.

⁵¹ As Aquila argues, “the incompatibility of the two ways of considering things must itself stem from some fact about things themselves” as the transcendental realist’s mistake is not “considering things considered in one way *not* in that way,” but “supposing that objects in space and time...are things that *exist* in themselves” (Aquila 1983:90). Similarly, Ameriks argues that the claim that human knowledge is governed by certain conditions will not account for “Kant’s own stronger conclusion, which is that there are objects which in themselves have *genuine* ultimate properties that do *not* conform to those conditions” (Ameriks 1992:334).

⁵² See Watkins, who points out things in themselves are completely determinate whereas appearances are not (Watkins 2005:313; A571–6/B599–604), and Adams (1997:813).

determined in its extent in space and time requires explanation, and his explanation involves invoking a metaphysical position according to which appearances are a mind-dependent aspect of things, which does not exist apart from its possible relation to mind. He thinks that understanding that this is what empirically real objects are like explains the idea that the unconditioned is not to be found in them, as well as the claim that there is something more ultimate, on which they are grounded, and in which the unconditioned would be found (but which is not given to us). Kant does not give much argument for the idea that what exists entirely independently must be a determinate totality, but it is clearly his view. He does not think it makes sense to deny that reality itself exists as a complete totality; it is only because we are dealing with mind-dependent appearances of things, which exist only in the possibility of their appearing to us, that we can deny that they exist as a complete totality.

Similar points may be made about Kant's discussion of relations requiring something non-relational, in the Amphiboly to the concepts of reflection (A260–292/B316–349). The Amphiboly section, which follows straight after the section on the distinction between noumena and phenomena, is not straightforward to read, because a lot of the time Kant is talking Leibniz's views in a way which makes it not entirely clear whether he is asserting any of what he mentions. However, throughout the section he clearly states that it is analytic that what is relational requires something non-relational, and also repeats the view (introduced in the Aesthetic) that appearances contain only relations. He says that “through mere concepts, of course, I cannot think of something external without anything inner, for the very reason that relational concepts absolutely presuppose given things and are not possible without them” (A284/B340). He denies that we will ever find something other than relations, something absolutely inner, in the things of our experience, and says that the necessity of positing something non-relational, or something absolutely inner, does not apply to the objects of our experience. But this is not something he thinks it would make sense to say of something entirely independent: the idea that relations could exist without requiring something non-relational seems to be a view Kant considers incoherent. Kant thinks that seeing that appearances are mind-dependent enables us to make sense of their being relations, and also commits us to thinking that there is something more fundamental on which they depend. He says that it is “startling” to be told that objects consist of nothing but relations, but that this can be explained once we realise that the things we are talking about “consist in the mere relation of something in general to the senses” (A284–5/BB341). Like in the Antinomies, Kant makes claims about the objects of our experience which he does not think it makes sense to make about entirely independent things, and thinks that we can make sense of this precisely by seeing that the objects of our experience are not entirely independent or fundamental, and that they are grounded on something that is.

The idea that Kant has a metaphysical commitment to an unknown reality which grounds the world we experience, and to the idea that the objects of our experience are (partly) mind-dependent, also provides the most straightforward reading of his (admittedly not terribly clear) solution to the third Antinomy. Since this notoriously complex and controversial section raises many problems, I will simply make a few comments. Kant's aim in the third Antinomy is to demonstrate that freedom is coherent, and that nothing we know about the world can be taken to rule out the possibility of freedom. The metaphysical nature of his position is suggested firstly by the fact that his conception of freedom involves a different kind of causality to causality in accordance with empirical laws (A533/B561). Second, his solution, which is supposed to enable us to show that this other kind of causality is possible

(although we cannot know it to be actual), depends on the possibility of an intelligible cause which not a part of the empirically real world. This possibility, in turn, can be explained because the empirically real objects of our knowledge are appearances, and not completely mind-independent things, but rather depend on some mind-independent ground (A539/B567).⁵³ This does not require asserting that there are intelligibilia, it simply requires that in addition to what we experience, there is an aspect of reality which we do not know. It is because appearances are not metaphysically complete or ultimate things, but, rather, must be grounded on something which exists in itself, that we can allow for the possibility that there is a kind of causality in the world in itself which is distinct from the causality of empirical law (A544/B572, A536–7/B564–5, see also A538/B566).⁵⁴

5

Throughout the *Critique* Kant speaks as if he is committed to there being an aspect of reality which we cannot have knowledge. The fact that Kant says that his notion of things in themselves must be understood in terms of the notion of noumena in the negative sense has lead some commentators to argue that the notion cannot be understood as having any existential commitment. However, Kant makes it clear that it is the notion of intelligibilia which cannot be known to have instantiations, and never says this with respect to his notion of things as they are in themselves. He gives a detailed and explicit account of concepts which reason leads us to posit, which play a role in empirical knowledge, but which cannot be known to have instantiations, but never says that the concept of things in themselves is like this. Some commentators have argued that a commitment to there being a way things are in themselves is inconsistent with other parts of Kant's position: his account of the conditions of knowledge, the limitations of the categories to a use within experience, and his critique of the ontological argument. I have argued that this is not the case, and further, that such a commitment is required by Kant's solution to the Antinomies. Further, I have argued that the idea of things considered in abstraction from the conditions of knowledge does not do justice to Kant's notion: Kant is committed to there being a way things are in themselves, of which we cannot have knowledge.

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⁵³ See also GW 4:453–460, CPR 5:95–8; See Ameriks 2006:110.

⁵⁴ Allison sees Kant's solution to the third Antinomy as saying that there is no fact of the matter as to whether we are free or not free; rather, claims about determinism and claims about freedom are each relativised to a point of view (Allison 2006:121). As Watkins points out, this is not an entirely satisfactory solution, since it leads one to ask what is the nature of the difference between the standpoints that precludes the possibility that they could be held at the same time? (Watkins 2005:321). Further, the place where Kant denies that there is a fact of the matter is with respect to the extent of the world in time and space. With respect to freedom he wants to show that it is possible that there is another kind of causality than the causality that falls under empirical laws.

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