

# Transcendental object and the “problem of affection”. Remarks on some difficulties of Kant’s theory of empirical cognition

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## I. Introduction

Kant’s doctrine of things in themselves has puzzled his students and readers from the very time of its formulation, because it introduced, as some would claim, inconsistency into Critical philosophy. Specifically, it rendered the transcendental-idealist account of objectivity quite problematic. Using contemporary terms, one might say Kant offered both an internalist and an externalist explanation of the relation between minds and the world.

Kant’s first critics, such as F.H. Jacobi, G.E. Schulze, K.L. Reinhold or S. Maimon, focused their criticisms on the so-called “problem of affection”, issuing from Kant’s attempt at explaining the fact that mind possesses representations of objects, an attempt which cost as much as reference to transcendental objectivity (i.e. absolutely external, mind-independent reality) and its alleged power of causation. In particular, the account of causality seemed implausible, since the concept of cause received both an empirical and an extra-empirical scope of application, while it should have been restricted to the former. How should causation be construed on this second, apparently illicit, mode of the application of the concept of cause? Can we talk about a causal relation linking two different kinds of entities with one another if we, *by definition*, do not know one of the members of the link; and if we can say nothing more about the causal relation in question than that it occurs?<sup>1</sup> *By definition* – which means that no matter how advanced scientific investigations should be pursued, we will never get to know

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<sup>1</sup> What kind of conditions ought to be fulfilled by some given objects, or events, if we are to be eligible to establish a causal connection between them? Kant pointed to temporal priority of cause over effect and to the necessity characterizing a causal link (manifest in the irreversibility of the order of events thus linked). The temporal priority of cause over effect obviously does not provide a sufficient condition for a causal link occurring, nor is it, on some accounts, required.

that mysterious member of the relation. It seems, therefore, that Kant violated the "principle of significance"<sup>2</sup> in that he spoke, in a positive manner, of the unknown cause of our representations.

This conclusion might be too hasty, though, and perhaps a consistent "internalist" reading of Kant is anyway possible, without violating any relevant principles, that of significance included. In what follows, I would like to outline the problem's details, firstly giving it historical background, and then suggesting certain interpretations, some of which, again to use a contemporary phrase, seem to defend Kant's internalist account of justifying our knowledge claims. On such interpretations, Kant does not infringe the bounds of sense and he does not invite any "bad metaphysics" into his system, although, indeed, he commits an equivocation when employing the concept of cause. The way Kant makes use of the term "transcendental object" does not have to entail as much as reference to mind-independent (transcendent) reality; rather, it points to some logical or conceptual necessities inherent in our thinking of and experiencing the world. Kant's argumentation would lead to recognizing some of these necessities.

However, one might as well literally read the statement about the *empirical* link between transcendental objectivity and our representations. We will touch upon the issue in the due course of the essay. Now it suffices to remark that,

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<sup>2</sup> Strawson's term; see: Strawson [1966] p. 16: "This is the principle that there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful, employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of their application. If we wish to use a concept in a certain way, but are unable to specify the kind of experience-situation to which the concept, used in that way, would apply, then we are not really envisaging any legitimate use of that concept at all. In so using it, we shall not merely be saying what we do not know; we shall not really know what we are saying. This principle, which I shall refer to as Kant's principle of significance, is one with which empiricist philosophers have no difficulty in sympathizing. They sympathize just as readily with the consequence which Kant drew from it: viz. the complete repudiation of transcendent metaphysics." Strawson suggests that Kant left undamaged only the so-called immanent metaphysics, i.e. metaphysics of experience. But he is rather wrong in putting so great an emphasis on Kant's *repudiation* of transcendent metaphysics. As Kant explicitly writes in the *Introductions* to the *Critique* (cf. e.g. B XXX), he only wanted to prepare the ground for a new scientific metaphysics which would be free from the flaws of the "old" one (the "field of an endless battle" (B XV)). By scientific metaphysics Kant did not, however, understand something like a metaphysics of science but rather the "old" metaphysics restored to its dignity after purification from the age-old controversies. As clearly and openly as his claims are made, it remains somewhat of a puzzle why so many contemporary commentators of Kant simply overlook them, ending up in slightly misguided interpretations which aim at reconciliation of transcendental philosophy with, e.g., some reductionist theories of mind.

apparently, the question concerning the cause of representational content has not been definitively answered until now by psychologists. Materialism does not offer an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem concerning the relation between the physical and the mental, and the reduction of the latter to the former leaves some of the well-grounded "folk-psychological" intuitions unexplained. We do not have to accept Cartesian dualism just to appreciate the indispensability of the intensional language we use in order to communicate our personal-level representational states (beliefs, expectations, convictions etc.). On the other hand, rejecting materialism, dualism and other "positive" stances leaves us, perhaps, in a position of not being able to answer some questions of considerable importance for the philosophy of mind.

## II. The "problem of affection": historical background

§1. One of the first and most influential critical comments on Kant's transcendental idealism, which deals with the inconsistency brought about by the doctrine of transcendental objectivity, was formulated by his student, Friedrich H. Jacobi:

"I was held up not a little by this difficulty in my study of the Kantian philosophy", Jacobi wrote in the appendix to his dialogues on Hume, "so much so that for several years running I had to start from the beginning over and over again with the *Critique of Pure Reason* because I was incessantly going astray on this point, viz. that *without* that presupposition [i.e. that things in themselves exist – A.T.] I could not enter into the system, but *with* it I could not stay within it."<sup>3</sup>

Jacobi's challenge taken up by the Kantians of that period comes down to the following claims:

(i) if Kant takes *all objects* to be mere appearances, subjective entities with no existence outside our representations, he cannot postulate that there should be mind-independent realities (objects) affecting the senses, realities whose appearances we get to know;

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<sup>3</sup> F.H. Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben; oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch*, Loewe, Breslau 1787. The English translation of the fragment in Wayne [forthcoming].

(ii) even if Kant grants the existence of such extra-experiential realities, he cannot legitimately apply categories to them (in this case the category of cause), which he nevertheless does, violating thereby what we have called the principle of significance;

(iii) if Kant does apply the category of cause to the unknown ground(s) of our representations, he contradicts his earlier claim that things in themselves are unknowable. If things in themselves are referred to by means of objectively valid statements (judgments), i.e. statements employing the pure conceptions of the understanding, this means that they are not (utterly) unknown, and thus (to an extent) on a par with appearances. Therefore, the transcendental distinction, i.e. the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, loses its validity. Transcendental idealism proves self-invalidating.

The problem, historically speaking, was solved by denying meaningfulness to the "noumenal discourse", or, more properly, by rejecting the transcendental distinction. Interestingly, Kant's followers pondered over yet another dilemma, namely that of the ground (first principle, foundation) of the systematic project of transcendental idealism, which they found missing. Both the first Kantians, as well as the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century idealists aimed at somehow improving Kant's Critical project.<sup>4</sup> Reinhold, for instance, suggested representation as the most fundamental element and starting point for his system. Fichte's "starting point" was transcendental subjectivity constituting (*setzend*) its opposite: the realm of objects, and constituting *itself* as constrained by its opposite. Unlike Reinhold, Fichte claimed to not have fallen into dogmatism:<sup>5</sup> the subject-object intentional relation was deduced from the first principle by way of a kind of reductive (transcendental) argument. Hegel denied the unknowability of things in themselves, retaining the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Siemek [1977].

<sup>5</sup> Dogmatism means, for Kant, the opposite of criticism. A critical philosopher does not accept any claim without first investigating its grounds. The critique of cognition, for instance, requires separating cognitive capacities from one another, attributing a due kind of content to them, and determining the source of that content, be it empirical or extra-empirical. If the content is extra-empirical, a deduction demonstrating its indispensable contribution to cognition is necessary. Thus, if Reinhold takes the concept of representation as the cornerstone of his system, he proceeds dogmatically in that he neither refers this concept to experience, nor deduces it from other concepts or shows its place in the whole "conceptual scheme".

subject, or mind (*der Geist*), as active "constitutor" of the world. Consequently, he arrived at the claim to absolute knowledge correlative to the absolute subject.

On the transcendental-idealist account, the idea of objectivity absolutely external to the subject (mind) makes no sense at all; both subject and object are necessarily correlated. It is impossible meaningfully to think of an object outside this necessary correlation. Such a thought would be empty, i.e. without any cognitive content. Irrespective now of what the other idealists claimed, we should note that Kant understood cognitive content as experiential content, i.e. as the result of "cooperation" between both intuitional and conceptual constituents of experience.<sup>6</sup> "Intuitions and concepts", Kant wrote in the A 50/B 74 paragraph of the *Critique*, "constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way, nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition." Thus, an empty thought would be one without intuitional content corresponding to the object of thought. Could we regard it as a thought in that case? Kant seems to give an affirmative reply. But such a contention implies either that thought can have other than intentional (subject-object) structure,<sup>7</sup> or that even if it retains that structure, it has to be granted some access to *objects* unlike the objects given in experience. However, thought deprived of its relational (intentional) character is no longer a thought, but mere sensing (perhaps with its quasi-objects like sensations); it lacks, therefore, representational content. Furthermore, the very concept of object as Kant construes it does not allow of the application of this concept "outside" the boundaries of experience: for Kant, the objective (i.e. the *empirically* real) equates with what can be given in experience.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, Jacobi's criticism levelled at the doctrine of things in

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<sup>6</sup> One might suggest here a conceptualist reading of Kant's theory of experience, in line with the one advocated by McDowell [1994]. Some authors defend Kant's nonconceptualism, though. See Hanna [2005]. Hanna indicates both conceptualist and nonconceptualist strands present in Kant's dualist account of concepts and intuitions, and inspiring for representatives of both opposite camps.

<sup>7</sup> For that requires (possible) intuition in which the object is (can be) given.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the meaning of the concept of object might be broadened, so as to include the "objects of reason". Indeed, Kant distinguished between the objects of reason and real objects. But it seems that the proper meaning of objectivity he associated with the latter. See: Kant [2003]. *Ontology*, Kant writes (*ibidem*, p. 36), does not treat of objects, rather of concepts, laws and principles of pure thought.

themselves proves quite plausible so far. We do not understand what it means to *think* of something which eludes any meaningful thought, as the non-empirical (transcendental) "object" seems to.

§2. Kant is sometimes charged with making an equivocation when using "cause" with reference to both appearances and the transcendental object. The following would be the easiest way out of the problem: by disambiguating an expression one might quickly get to the right – consistent – picture. Such a move might perhaps fall short of an oversimplification, though. As suggested earlier, we should consider the possibility of Kant postulating *both* a logical, or a conceptual, tie, on the one hand, and the causal one, on the other, between representational content and its ground. This could take us to interesting results: if the link is only logical, then this points to a fact about the way we think, about the distinctive marks of our rationality. Becoming aware of the fact at issue can have an impact on the evaluation of philosophical theories, granting precedence to some over the other on the basis of their conforming or not to the standards of rationality. But if the link is causal, meaning empirical, then it might be instructive to investigate the sources of the impediments occurring on the way to determining one of its members. Quite simply, the question is why we cannot have a good theory explaining mental phenomena in relation to their non-mental ground.

Kant introduces the idea of noumenal causation in the following passage from the chapter on phenomena and noumena in the First Critique:

The faculty of sensible intuition is strictly only a receptivity, a capacity of being affected in a certain manner with representations, the relation of which to one another is a pure intuition of space and of time (mere forms of our sensibility), and which, in so far as they are connected in this manner in space and time, and are determinable according to laws of the unity of experience, are entitled *objects*. The non-sensible cause (*Ursache*) of these representations is completely unknown to us, and cannot therefore be intuited by us as object. For such an object would have to be represented as neither in space nor in time (these being merely conditions of sensible representation), and apart from such conditions we cannot think any intuition. We may, however, entitle the purely intelligible cause (*Ursache*) of

appearances in general the transcendental object, but merely in order to have something corresponding to sensibility viewed as a receptivity. To this transcendental object we can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions, and can say that it is given in itself prior to all experience (A 493-4).

The fragment is quite compact; in it, Kant formulates several definitions, which it might prove worthwhile briefly to discuss:

- (1) The faculty of *sensible intuition* is equivalent to receptivity.
- (2) *Receptivity* is the capacity of being affected (in a certain manner) by representations.
- (3) Pure intuition of space and time provides the rules governing the relations of representations to one another.
- (4) *Space and time* are forms exclusively of our sensibility.
- (5) *Objects* are representations connected in space and time, determinable according to the laws of the unity of experience.

This is the positive part of the fragment in question, which seems to give way, afterwards, to the characteristic of what apparently evades any characterizations. Now the idea might be that characterization of the latter makes sense but with that of the former one in the background; to put it otherwise, there should be a logical (conceptual) connection between Kant's characteristic of the realm of experience and his introduction of the "transcendental reality". The logical relation between the realm of experience and the non-experienceable would consist in the fact that the concept of the first should somehow bring to the fore the concept of the second: our acquiring or possessing experiential knowledge, when reflected upon, should result in our formulating a conclusion regarding some realm beyond the constraints of experience.<sup>9</sup> Our fragmentary knowledge of reality has no value if not backed by a postulate making it somehow

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<sup>9</sup> One can see it as quite obvious *what* "non-experienceable realm" Kant must have had in mind, judging at least by his remarks and notes preparatory to the First Critique. (See e.g. the *Philosophical Encyclopaedia*, where he writes that all natural events have their natural causes, and the chain of causes goes on till it ends in God. I am referring here to the Polish translation of Kant's book: Kant [2003] p. 42.)

grounded, the postulate our knowledge logically (or conceptually) implies.<sup>10</sup> Mind-independent reality, thus, cannot be that easily dismissed, on pain of reason's losing its own authority. By introducing the conception of transcendental objectivity Kant makes empirical knowledge doubly-grounded, or alternatively he provides for two strategies of justification. The question is obviously whether they can coexist with one another.<sup>11</sup>

Let us shortly comment on the above points. (1) restates the distinction between the two mutually irreducible sources of cognition, which Kant made at the beginning of the *Transcendental Logic*,<sup>12</sup> sensible intuition being receptive, and understanding – spontaneous. Both receptivity and spontaneity cannot be exchanged: one cannot think by means of sensibility and intuit by means of the understanding. This seemingly obvious slogan expresses Kant's disagreement with the empiricist (Lockean) account of concept-formation, on the one hand, and the rationalist (Leibnizian) theory of intellectual intuition, on the other. Would Kant concede that perception is concept-independent?

Many contemporary theorists incline to not draw a clear-cut division between the sensible (perceptual) and the conceptual features of representations. Mental content, they argue, is never purely conceptual, or purely perceptual but a combination of both, and objects cannot be represented save through the concepts we use. For instance, E. Rosch uses the concept of "fundamental level", which refers to the most basic level of the categorial organization of experience at which concepts somehow "come most closely" to the way things are; e.g., similarity is both a concept used in comparing two numerically distinct objects, and a *feeling* or an *intuition* of these objects having something in common. P. Gärdenfors' theory of mental spaces aims at a unitary spatial interpretation of properties and concepts: both are "interpreted" as areas within multidimensional spaces which can be measured in terms of physical magnitudes corresponding to perception. In this

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<sup>10</sup> Surely, this *is* a metaphysical claim, and as much a strong one as was Aristotle's inference to the First Mover as the initial link in the causal chain which had its beginning in nature.

<sup>11</sup> The strategy at issue might be called an epistemic and an extra-epistemic strategy of justification.

<sup>12</sup> See: A 51-2/B 75-6.



way, e.g. colour *concepts* receive a spatial – *intuitional* – representation.<sup>13</sup> On many cognitive-psychological accounts, though, mental representations constitute two separate classes: one of concepts and the other one of percepts, both producing experiential output in the process of synthesis.<sup>14</sup> What has to be explained in this case is how it is possible for percepts to combine with, or provide a sort of a basis for concepts, the thing Kant himself took interest in, attempting at some explanations e.g. in the doctrine of schematism and syntheses.

The Kantian distinction might be regarded, however, as of merely methodological significance. Thus, it is not the case that concepts and intuitions remain mutually independent in our experiences, and consequently that experience involves nonconceptual representational content, rendering perception concept-independent; rather in the critical analysis we have first to regard the two classes of representations separately, to see the contribution of each of them to experience, and to find out what epistemic conditions they presuppose.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of receptivity recalled by (2) emerges as parallel to the concept of spontaneity, the former pointing to the capacity of receiving, the latter – to the capacity of producing representations. The concept of representation makes in fact a bit of a problem: one ought to beware of exchanging the Kantian meaning of the term for that used by philosophers today.<sup>16</sup> Kant divided representations (*Vorstellungen*) into intuitional, i.e. particular, and conceptual, i.e. general. Particularity involves reference to one object, whereas generality – reference to a plurality of objects. Contemporary authors are not unanimous about what conceptual resp. nonconceptual representations are. One of the most common characteristics of conceptual content links the concept of content with the Fregean concept of sense,<sup>17</sup> and thereby with the concept of proposition. It is not perhaps

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the two theories mentioned, as well as other stances in cognitivist phenomenology of perception, see: Piłat [2006] Ch. 1.

<sup>14</sup> For a cognitivist interpretation of transcendental idealism see: Brook [1994].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Allison [1982/2004].

<sup>16</sup> For a more thorough exposition of the issue see A. Banaszkiewicz's introduction to the Polish translation of Kant's *Philosophical Encyclopaedia* (Kant [2003]).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Byrne [2004].

entirely clear what kind of "entities" Kant meant when talking about representations: propositional or mental content, and though it seems more plausible to opt for the latter, still it is far from clear how this kind of content should be understood: if it were understood as content figuring in individual mental states, this would entail disavowal of the transcendental-empirical distinction with regard to subjectivity (or at least the distinction would be blurred).

The problem of nonconceptual content can be expressed by the question whether there exist representations which, though not conceptual, represent certain features of the environment. Such representations, being intentional, would have their correctness criteria and they would convey information which would further on be productive of knowledge. This "production of knowledge" on the basis of nonconceptual informational content is something which contemporary theories cannot, according to the conceptualists, deliver an entirely satisfactory account of; strictly speaking, they do not explain how nonconceptual information can provide a sort of justification for a subject's belief based upon that information.

John McDowell,<sup>18</sup> the key defender of conceptualism, claims nonconceptual representational content epistemologically irrelevant: only conceptual informational states provide the required kind of foundation and justification for experience-based beliefs. McDowell refers to Kant's theory of experience elaborating the consequences of one of the most fundamental claims of transcendental philosophy, namely that all (human) consciousness involves self-consciousness.<sup>19</sup> If consciousness presupposes self-consciousness, and the latter hinges on the minimal conceptual capacity of self-identification and self-reference, then object-directedness (intentionality) implied by consciousness also presupposes conceptual capacities being in play. Since perception involves object-directedness, it thereby has to involve conceptual capacities too.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. McDowell [1994].

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *CPuR* B 132.

According to (3), time and space (forms of intuition and pure intuitions themselves) constitute relations between representations. This means that they organize mental content, a contention leading to a question about the status of physical objects, also describable in spatiotemporal terms. If time and space organize phenomena, i.e. the objects of experience, as much as our representations thereof, how can phenomena differ from merely intentional objects? From the transcendental viewpoint, phenomena *are* intentional objects, i.e. objects of consciousness, but on the empirical level they fully retain their (existential) autonomy. Transcendental consideration of an object does not deprive it of any characteristics it possesses as an object of experience: mere reflection does not modify the *content* of experience, and so identifying objects with representations, as in (5), is not quite correct.

As (4) says, on the Kantian assumptions, were there possible any other than merely temporal and spatial modes of intuition, they would not concern our (human) mode of knowledge acquisition. Kant does not exclude such alternative forms of intuition but he cannot make any positive use of this claim, since the alternative mode cannot be representable for us. Its idea, i.e. the idea of intellectual intuition, plays a negative role in Kant's description of human cognitive capacities, delimiting their intrinsic constraints. Cognition from God's perspective, for Kant, provides an ideal rather than gives shape to our epistemic practices. But "God's perspective" is just a metaphor for the point of view from which things can be known as they are and with certainty; in other words – by reason. As those two provide for the crucial components of Kant's idea of science, it must seem quite strange that he denies human cognition the possibility of getting through to things as they are in their essences, no matter how they appear in space and time, the more that he takes the possibility of science for granted.

Finally, in the cited fragment, one comes across a statement that representations must have their cause, itself outside the scope of possible experience, and hence non-representable. Consequently, it cannot have the status of an object. Neither can it have the status of a subject viewed as a structure constituted by specific experience-conditioning functions. Numerous versions of

the speculation on what the transcendental object might be range from an interpretation ascribing the role of the cause of representations to God,<sup>20</sup> to the cognitivist reading of the transcendental reality as a so far unknown structure by which cognitive functions of the mind are realized. On the latter reading, Kant establishes a causal (hence natural) rather than a logical (conceptual) relation between representations and their ground. If so, there is a chance that this link might one day be discovered by empirical sciences. So far, however, psychologists are rather skeptical about postulating anything more than a correlation between the mental and the physical, but postulating a correlation does by no means amount to establishing a cause-effect relation, neither does it prove that the two members of the relation share the same nature (i.e. the same essential features).

§3. Let us now return to Jacobi's dilemma. From the two candidates for affecting object(s) (the candidates for the "causes" of our representations of objects), i.e. the transcendental object (equated by Jacobi with the thing in itself) and appearances, neither can be considered adequate: the first because of its unknowability and the second – for their already being mere representations in us. Jacobi's argument fails, however, on the invalid assumption that appearances are equivalent to subjective representations (what Kant calls modifications of inner sense), whereas they, more properly, mean for Kant objects of experience, the objects in space included. Admittedly, Kant is to blame for terminological confusion resulting from his not explicitly distinguishing different senses of "representation" and "appearance". Sometimes he speaks of appearances as if he identified them with empirical, spatio-temporally locatable objects, but he also associates them with subjective representations, thus moving from the transcendental onto the empirical level of considerations.

Hans Vaihinger,<sup>21</sup> one of the earlier readers, editors and commentators on Kant's philosophy, formulated the problem of affection as a trilemma. He would

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<sup>20</sup> The "God of philosophers", obviously: a "Self-thinking Thought". Such an interpretation would fit the characteristic of the transcendental object as "something corresponding to sensibility viewed as a receptivity", i.e. as a pure, spontaneous – atemporal, and so non-human – understanding.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of the problem, as well as its interpretations and solutions by various authors, see: Allison [1982/2004].

name three candidates for affecting object(s), again all of them apparently bad, though he stayed by the third suggestion. These included: things in themselves, objects in space (with which he rightly associated the Kantian appearances), and both of them. The doctrine of double affection is not the best way out of the problem, however, because it leads to the identification of things in themselves with empirical objects on the same phenomenal level (it implies that we can have knowledge of the in-itself reality *in the same sense* in which we have knowledge of the empirical one), and thus to forgetting about the transcendental distinction.

According to some contemporary authors,<sup>22</sup> the problem of affection has been misconstrued as it derives from a false assumption that the appearances-things in themselves distinction is one between two kinds of entities, rather than between two perspectives – the empirical and the transcendental – of considering an object. From the empirical perspective, it becomes considered as spatiotemporally conditioned, and from the transcendental perspective – in abstraction from the conditions of space and/or time. The point is not that objects (in general) can *exist* outside the spatiotemporal framework but rather that they can be *thought of* regardless of their spatio-temporality, merely under conceptual conditions of acquiring knowledge of them.<sup>23</sup>

Allison intends to show that the whole talk about the transcendental object deals with Kant's distinguishing a set of conditions – both perceptual and conceptual – under which objects can be cognized. It is not only the set of conditions provided by the forms of intuition (spatiotemporal relatedness) that

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<sup>22</sup> Allison [1982/2004]. Allison inherits the two-perspectives interpretation from Prauss [1974], pp. 30-45, who talks about three possible ways of reading the appearances-things in themselves distinction: the empirical, the transcendent-metaphysical and the transcendental-philosophical – the only correct one, according to the author. In the last sense, "thing in itself" (*Ding an sich*) provides an abbreviation for "thing as considered in itself" (*Ding an sich selbst betrachtet*).

<sup>23</sup> The following passage from Kant's *Opus postumum* proves that the two-perspectives account is present in Kant's considerations: "Sinnenobjekte, deren Mannigfaltiges in der Anschauung nur durch das Verhältnis desselben im Raum und der Zeit bestimmbar ist, stehen a priori unter Prinzipien der Vorstellung ihrer Objekte als Erscheinungen, denen noch eine andere Vorstellungsart notwendig in der Idee korrespondiert, sie als Dinge an sich zu betrachten, wo doch das Ding an sich = x nicht einen [besonderen] anderen Gegenstand, sondern nur einen anderen, nämlich den negativen Standpunkt bedeutet, aus welchem eben derselbe Gegenstand betrachtet wird." (In Adickes [1978], pp. 696-7 (C 563f.) (my italics – A.T.)) Fragments confirming the two-perspectives interpretation can also be found in the *CPuR* (see, in particular, B XXI).

suffices for cognition of an object, since that has to be both perceptually *and* conceptually mediated. Considering the transcendental object is tantamount to considering the object in general in its relation only to thought and its conceptual conditions, and it leads to recognizing intentionality (subject-object relatedness) as a necessary feature of thought. The doctrine of affection serves Kant merely to emphasize that in any account of empirical cognition reference to the concept of object must be present. Allison's account does not enable an explanation why we have any representations of objects, or what their cause is, only on what conditions we can have them. To explain under what conditions mind can represent the objects does not amount to explaining what causes these representations. The latter deals with "grounding" our knowledge, and thereby with the purpose of our epistemic practices. As such, it implies a metaphysical question which the theoretical part of the Critical philosophy has difficulties to cope with.<sup>24</sup> Kant cannot remain consistent while granting, like Descartes, that it is God who guarantees objective reference to our cognitions, neither can he posit any kind of correspondence between cognition and its object unless the object becomes from the outset identified with an appearance. But then the role of the cause of representations would have to be ascribed to mind itself, which it is anyhow difficult to understand. For Kant has at least two theories of mind and two modes of consideration of the latter: the empirical and the transcendental, and the relation between them is far from unambiguous.

Furthermore, are we really justified in understanding the question as metaphysical? Kant introduces causation, and thus an empirical relation, where there should obtain a rational relation of grounding. Thus, two – mutually exclusive – options emerge: (1) a metaphysical and (2) a naturalistic account of the non-representable cause of our representations. In the following section, I intend to look at these options more closely. Interestingly, both seem equally plausible, so the choice between the options might depend on rather extra-theoretical reasons.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This is clearly because it has embarked on a criticism of metaphysics, having obliged itself to suspend all metaphysical claims until they have been made subject to the critique.

<sup>25</sup> This ambiguity (as well as many other intrinsic to Kant's work) perhaps explains the development of the idea of transcendental idealism in contradictory directions. Kant's reception on

### III. Two attempts at a solution

§1. The interpretation of the problem of affection to be considered first was suggested by Nicholas Rescher in his essays on Kant.<sup>26</sup> He recognizes in the doctrine of transcendental objectivity a comeback of Leibnizian metaphysics, although in an epistemological rather than ontological guise. Rescher names two types of causal discourse to be found in the *Critique*: one in which Kant considers "authentic causality" obtaining within the experiential realm and ordering phenomena in accordance with the principle of causality, and one in which Kant refers to "a not properly causal generic grounding which is merely intelligible".<sup>27</sup> Whereas the principle of causality helps establish a definite type of relations within the realm of experienced objects, it is, according to Rescher, the epistemologically reinterpreted principle of sufficient reason that establishes relations between experience and objectivity (construed as the unconditioned). According to Rescher, reason *postulates* the existence of mind-independent, in-itself reality in order to endow cognitions with objective validity – a (quasi)property of judgments, making them proper candidates for truth-valuation – and in order to block the infinite regress in the series of conditions necessary for a natural event to occur. The idea of the unconditioned provides, too, for a necessary regulative condition of our epistemic practices: it (i.e. the cognition of the absolute reality as a whole) is something we strive for, though never attain, as much as truth in Ch. S. Peirce's theory of inquiry. Rescher turns transcendental idealism into a kind of conceptual idealism, with the thing in itself as the pure object of thought (pure *intelligibile*).

Does not this reading render reality Kant makes claim for an "als-ob"<sup>28</sup> reality? The idea of the extra-empirical becomes apparently turned into a fiction,

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the Continent greatly diverges from that in the English-speaking world, where attempts have been made at naturalization of the transcendental project. One is for sure: the "Copernican revolution" or – much more properly – the anthropocentric turn (cf. Miles [2006]) had diverging consequences, all of which, however, undermined the classical view of the world.

<sup>26</sup> See: Rescher [1972] and Rescher [1981].

<sup>27</sup> Rescher [1972] p. 463.

<sup>28</sup> H. Vaihinger seems to be the first to have used this term.

which it is useful to believe in, in order to maintain the meaningfulness of the practices (be they epistemic, communicational, moral or whatever) one gets involved into. From another point of view, though, the fictitiousness of the idea does not make much of a problem: for we are not interested in whether the idea is true (*scil.* whether it has a referent), but more in its role as one of the conditions constitutive of our rationality, as one of the minimal requirements making our intelligent rapport with the world and with other rational creatures possible. In other words, we are interested in our conceptual scheme and the fundamental ideas, or minimal beliefs constitutive of it, one of them being that our statements do refer to reality external to our mental representations.

§2. Another interpretation, a naturalized version of the problem of transcendental affection, might be suggested on the basis of some mind-theoretical readings of Kant, like that by Andrew Brook,<sup>29</sup> who argues that Kant's overall position is at least compatible with materialism, pointing to brain, or central nervous system, as the non-representable cause of mental representations. He writes: "The only account Kant can allow us to give of things, *including representations*, as they are, is whatever turns out to give the best account of things, *including representations*, as they appear. Thus, if materialism turns out to give us the best account of representations as they appear to us, which is how things seem to be turning out, Kant would have to accept it."<sup>30</sup> The idea is that materialism can, apparently, best explain the fact that mind possesses representational content. However, assuming that brain stands for the cause of our representations, do we not violate the previous qualification concerning nonrepresentability of the "transcendental cause"? After all, theoretically, there can be no difficulties in representing, and in making observations of brains, provided we dispose of necessary technical equipment. This is true but the objection fails as soon as we make out that Kant had *an inferential theory of perception*. That implies that the only *immediate* objects of

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<sup>29</sup> See: Brook [1994]. The importance of this interpretation consists in the fact that it highlights some major points of Kant's theory from the standpoint of cognitive science. Brook reads functionalist ideas into Kant's theory of the mind, emphasizing the dualism of concepts and intuitions and the role of syntheses in the theory.

<sup>30</sup> Brook [1994] p. 17.



awareness one can think of are representations, and not the objects represented themselves. Since mind, thus seen, has unmediated access only to its representational content, knowledge of the properties of objects must be inferential. Thus, we will never have knowledge of anything as it is in itself and we may as well dispense with this kind of knowledge claims. Materialism turns out, again, a hypothesis, with no ontological commitments implied. But then why should one posit a correlation between mind (let us call it a global representation) and brain? After all, should the link occur possible, both members of the relation should have something in common, if not a common nature. If the relation in question is *causal*, both of its constitutive elements must be physical in nature. It would be rather awkward to say, however, that representations possess physical properties. At most they can possess the *function* of pointing at physical properties of objects. Does *this* understanding of the concept of representation properly match Kant's intentions? If the idea of naturalizing transcendental philosophy is to prove successful, it must also make sense to explicate the Kantian concept of representation in terms of an information-carrying unit.<sup>31</sup> But, naturally, a question arises as to *what* this information should be *about*. Obviously, about certain properties of the environment, but if we stick to the Kantian distinctions, all representations might be divided into pure and empirical, the former relating specifically to the characteristics of the subject or mind which they characterize. Since Kant shows that all experience and its epistemic value turns on its a priori constitutive structure, all empirical information (information about the object of experience) must at the same time contain the information about the subject of the very experience. Thus, in the Kantian sense, not only do representations have the function of pointing at certain properties of the environment, but they are also self-referential, in the sense that they too convey the information on *how* they perform their function of informing about the environment. This could all be expressed in naturalistic terms but for the Kantian "transcendental story" about the unknown object affecting cognitive faculties: how can we know that mental representations are *about* any features of the environment if there is some

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<sup>31</sup> Much as it is done in Dretske [1995].

unknown interfering factor modifying the kind of content these representations have? Thus, any supporter of the naturalistic interpretation of Kant's theory of the mind must reject the doctrine of transcendental idealism, and consequently the transcendental distinction (one into appearances and things in themselves). What remains could be called an empirical-level theory of mind, something which it seems rather doubtful Kant would recognize as the whole story he had to tell about human cognition.

§3. Can we draw a comparison between the above suggested interpretations? If they share any common points, this is the fact that they both remain in line with the Critical philosophy, eschewing dogmatically metaphysical commitments, or promoting neutrality on ontological issues. Neither of them says, for sure, what the transcendental ground of our representations is, the first only suggesting we approximate it in our cognitive practices, the second naming no more than a candidate for it. But both readings differ with respect to their intentions. Rescher wants to show how come our knowledge *can* and should be grounded, and thus why it can be knowledge at all, with its particular claim to certainty. Brook, for his part, inclines to establish a functionalist reading of Kant being compatible with materialism in philosophical psychology, nowadays a commonly acknowledged position in the English-speaking philosophy of mind. Materialist accounts of the mental, if cogent, are preferable for several reasons: they resolve (or dissolve) the notorious problem of the relation between the mental and the physical; they provide for a *unitary* explanation of mental phenomena; they have more explanatory power than other (e.g. idealist or dualist) accounts, as they make explicit references to and find confirmation in scientific experiments and observations.

But which of the suggested interpretations suits Kant's interest best? For sure, Kant was rather hostile to materialism mostly by virtue of its consequences for practical philosophy; he definitely wanted to make room for metaphysics.<sup>32</sup> As much as physical or mathematical knowledge, metaphysics should contain

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. the *Introductions* to the *CPuR*.

synthetic a priori judgments: apodictically certain – i.e. certain without recourse to experience, like the axioms of mathematics – and expanding our knowledge. This could be attained by metaphysics developing an intrinsic relation to our practices. Knowledge is but one example of the practices human beings get involved into. Hence, as much as other practices, cognition too needs a regulative idea: the search for truth would not make much sense if we did not implicitly presuppose that our cognitive practices do (sometimes) result in the cognition of truth, i.e. the way things are irrespective of what we think or know of them.

§4. Section II §2 of this essay was dedicated to an analysis of some of the aspects of the Kantian dualism of concepts and intuitions. Now it is time to relate those considerations to the two interpretations of the transcendental affection problem presented in Section III. That there is a connection between these two issues might be shown at least by remembering a historical fact that Kant's introducing the transcendental distinction resulted from his earlier investigations of the two sources of cognition (sensibility and understanding) and the respective differences between the kind of cognition they deliver. His 1770 Inaugural Dissertation, entitled *De Mundi Sensibilis atque Intelligibilis Forma et Principiis*, gave rise to a series of arguments for separating the phenomenal world of experience from the (hypothetical) realm of metaphysical "entities", later to receive the name of noumena.

On the reading suggested by Rescher, reason necessarily postulates a comprehensive system of knowledge, a system comprising the whole reality, and so something like the Hegelian absolute, as a regulative *idea* governing our experience-constrained epistemic strivings. Indeed, as Kant says, "all human knowledge begins with intuitions, proceeds from thence to concepts and ends with ideas" (A 702/ B 730). All modes of cognition are interrelated and interdependent: knowledge begins with subjective sense data, proceeds to intersubjectively communicable judgments about intersubjectively accessible objects, to culminate in the idea of a system of knowledge valid for all subjects. Although Rescher does not explicitly state it, the reading he proposes places Kant in the close proximity of Hegel.

Now what could be the connection between the conceptual-idealist reading of Kant's doctrine of transcendental affection (noumenal grounding) and certain interpretations of the intuition-concept dualism? As regards the latter sort of interpretations, two kinds of reading can be distinguished: the conceptualist and the nonconceptualist. To restate the query: does the postulate of the objectivity (or what is now more commonly called intersubjective communicability) of knowledge imply any theoretical decisions as to the nature of experiential content? Generally speaking, I think not, but does the general answer apply to Kant as well? I would venture to claim it does not.<sup>33</sup> The reason consists in Kant's subjectivist – or internalist – point of departure on which it is impossible to formulate a set of correctness criteria for nonconceptual representations of objects. One cannot say on what conditions one could correctly nonconceptually represent the objects of experience since one does not dispose of any positive determination of the environment, or external reality, as it would be when logically cut off from the subject of experience. Such a positive determination already makes the object of experience concept-dependent: for Kant – to repeat a commonplace – the objects of experience are "constituted" by both the intuitional and the conceptual a priori factors.

The idea of objectivity being merely regulative only requires that the subject *believed* his representations do convey information about the extra-mental reality. As the idea of nonconceptual experiential content refers to non-human or pre-linguistic modes of perception, we arrive at a conclusion that only rational human creatures, equipped with conceptual capacities, may play the role of the subjects of knowledge. Intentionality – or object-directedness – pertains only to concept-employing creatures,<sup>34</sup> this being one of the ineluctable consequences of Kant's anthropocentric turn.

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<sup>33</sup> And so McDowell's Hegelian interpretation of Kant's theory of experience he furthers in *Mind and World* would contain more than a grain of truth.

<sup>34</sup> The above stated does not by any means entail that rational creatures cannot entertain non-intentional experiences, only that such experiences do not have cognitive value.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Jacobi, who formulated the problem of transcendental affection, found out that the transcendental distinction leads to a paradox: as he expressed it, without the transcendental object one cannot enter the Kantian system, but with the transcendental object – one cannot stay within it. The difficulty can be rephrased in terms of the above suggested interpretations: the metaphysical and the naturalistic one. Jacobi's problem, recapitulated in terms of the former, could be stated thus: Kant's theory of knowledge requires thought of the objective, mind-independent reality as a necessary component of the Kantian account of rationality. Only with the underlying idea of objective reference of judgments, as candidates for truth-valuation, can our knowledge-claims be satisfied without our falling prey to skepticism. But as mind-independent reality becomes merely posited, it thereby loses its independence from the mind, regardless of its being posited as objective. There is, all in all, no way out of this trap of the transcendental subjectivism.

Naturalizing the transcendental theory of knowledge leads to no better results: by reading the causal relation between the transcendental and the empirical reality as a natural relation linking physical entities, one automatically shall reign from the transcendental distinction, and the very theory of transcendental affection shall not play its explanatory role any longer. Either way, revision of Kant's epistemology becomes mandatory. Indeed, looking at the development of Kant's thought one can easily notice that the revision did take place, and that in the opposite directions.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous referee for comments on the initial version of this paper.

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