

Things in Themselves

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The paper is an interpretation and defense of Kant's conception of things in themselves as noumena, along the following lines. Noumena are transempirical realities. As such they have several important roles in Kant's critical philosophy (Section 1). Our theoretical faculties cannot obtain enough content for a conception of noumena that would assure their real possibility as objects, but can establish their merely formal logical possibility (Sections 2-3). Our practical reason, however, grounds belief in the real possibility of some noumena, and even knowledge of the noumenal reality of a free will (Section 4). Section 5 defends Kant's conception of noumena as a good piece of philosophy, particularly with respect to its distinction between logical and real possibility. Are noumena numerically identical with experienced (phenomenal) objects? Kantian principles yield the answers that human selves are, God isn't, and it's harder to say about bodies (Section 6).

Immanuel Kant's conception of things in themselves as noumena, contrasted with empirical objects as phenomena, has been controversial from the beginning. Many in his own time thought it inconsistent with important doctrines and arguments of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹ And most recent interpreters either domesticate Kant, reading his talk of things in themselves as merely another way of talking about empirical objects, or else sharply criticize him for conceiving of the thing in itself as a transempirical reality, if they do ascribe that conception to him.² That, however, is the conception that I mean to defend here.

The issue is of topical as well as historical importance. Kant's treatment of the subject is the *locus classicus* for modern attempts to limit or prohibit metaphysical speculation. I suspect, though I am not in a position to prove, that through the medium of Neokantianism it is a major source of the strands of antirealism important for all the major twentieth century branches of the Western philosophical tradition. It should therefore be of quite general interest

¹ See Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 122-24, 187, 189-92, 282, 306-7.

² Cf. Karl Ameriks, "Recent Work on Kant's Theoretical Philosophy," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 19 (1982): 1. Ameriks does not endorse either of these views, however; his own view has much in common with mine; see *ibid.*, pp. 10-11, and Ameriks, "Kantian Idealism Today," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 9 (1992): 329-42.

if we can find in Kant's theory of things in themselves a defensible, if carefully circumscribed, realism that is *not* a realism about the concepts and claims of empirical science.

In this short essay I will not attempt to discuss in detail all the relevant Kantian texts, much less the vast secondary literature. I will present an exposition and very incomplete defense of a single, to my mind natural, interpretation of Kant's account of noumena or things in themselves. Near the end I will explain why I believe it is a good rather than a bad piece of philosophy. I begin with a brief overview of the problem.

1. The Roles of Noumena in Kant's Critical Philosophy

One of the clearest teachings of the first *Critique* is that all the objects of our experience are only phenomena, appearances, and that we cannot have any knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) of things in themselves. Kant holds that the concepts of our understanding apply only to objects of a possible experience, and even denies that they have any meaning [*Sinn* or *Bedeutung* (A 239–41 = B 298–300)³] as applied to things as they are, or may be, in themselves indepen-

³ The works of Kant are cited in the usual way: the first and second editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as A and B, respectively, and the other works by volume and page of the Prussian Academy edition (Ak). Works other than the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited by abbreviations indicated below. I quote generally in my own translations. Separate references are not given to English translations that record the Academy pagination. However, I have used the following editions and translations:

E = *Ueber eine Entdeckung nach der alle neue Kritik der reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll*, in Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. 5, *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik*, 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). *On a Discovery According to which Any New Critique of Pure Reason Has Been Made Superfluous by an Earlier One*, in *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy*, trans. and ed. by Henry E. Allison (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

emB = *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes/The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*: German text from Ak II, with facing English trans. by Gordon Treash (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

Kritik der reinen Vernunft, ed. by Raymund Schmidt, in the *Philosophische Bibliothek* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956). *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1956).

KpV = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, ed. by Karl Vorländer, in the *Philosophische Bibliothek* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1929). *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956).

KU = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. by Karl Vorländer, in the *Philosophische Bibliothek* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1924). *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987).

LPT = *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. by Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978). *Vorlesungen über Rationaltheologie* (or *Philosophische Religionslehre*) in Ak XXVIII,ii/iii.

MAN = *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, in Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. by Wilhelm Weischedel, vol. 9, *Schriften zur Naturphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977). *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in Kant, *Philosophy of Material Nature*, trans. by James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985).

dently of the conditions of our sensibility. Nevertheless, Kant has a lot to say about things in themselves, or noumena, largely in the context of four roles that concepts of such things play in his thought.

The first two roles are relatively uncontroversial. The *first* is a purely negative or limiting role. Kant uses the concept of a thing in itself to say what the objects of experience are not—that is, in articulating the claim that they are only appearances. He holds that we know the latter objects, *not* as they might be in themselves, but only as they appear to us, as possessing spatial and/or temporal properties that are constituted by their relation to our forms of sensibility. This use of the concept of noumena, to say what empirical objects are not, rather than what things in themselves are, carries minimal commitment with regard to noumena.⁴

So does its *second*, regulative use. A concept whose object would transcend the possibility of experience is called by Kant an “idea” (A 320 = B 377), and he speaks of a “regulative” employment of ideas. He thinks it will be of great value in our scientific thinking about the realm of *empirical* objects to organize it *as if* what we know about them were a fragment of the truth about a single completely determinate world or aggregate of all finite things, and *as if* all particular laws of nature were part of a single comprehensive design of an omniscient, omnipotent creator. In their complete or unconditioned character no such world or deity can be given in experience, but the regulative employment of ideas of them, *as if* our experience were related to them in certain ways, does not commit one to belief in the actual existence of such noumena.

The two remaining roles of the noumena are more committing and more controversial. The *third* has to do with Kant’s transcendental psychology. It is one of the doctrines of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that, of our two main cognitive faculties, the understanding is active and the sensibility is passive. The activity of the understanding is related to the merely phenomenal status of the objects of experience, for it is partly through the conceptual activity of the understanding in structuring our experience that these objects are as they are and appear to be, having, for instance, the causal properties they have. What the understanding structures, however, is *given* to us through sensation, and with respect to it we are passive and presumably affected by the action of something else. The actions that thus determine the content of our experience can hardly be identified with the causal actions of objects of our experience,

⁴ I think it is not obvious that it even implies that there are any noumena, though Kant may have thought otherwise. He remarks that it would be absurd to suppose “appearance without anything that appears there” (B xxvi–xxvii). But if “appearance” signifies simply the dependence of empirical objects on our sensibility and its forms, I cannot see an obvious inference from that to something more real, and not so dependent, *of* which they are appearances. Cf. the apt remarks of Henry Allison on what he calls “the polemical use” of the concept of a thing in itself: *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 237.

for the latter actions are part of the causal structure supposedly imposed on experience by our understanding. It seems to follow that these actions are accomplished outside of experience, by things as they are in themselves rather than as they appear in experience. And Kant is willing to embrace this conclusion, speaking, for example, of “a ground, to us unknown, of the appearances” of inner and outer sense (A 380). This may seem problematic, inasmuch as it appears to treat noumena as causes but Kant denies that the concept of causality has any application except to objects of a possible experience. I will discuss noumenal causality at the end of section 5, but I will not concentrate on this third role of the noumena, which is deeply intertwined with large issues in the first *Critique*, such as that of transcendental psychology, which lie outside the focus of the present paper. Accordingly, I will not try to determine here whether anything positive regarding noumena can be established within the bounds of Kant’s *theoretical* philosophy.

I am more concerned with the *fourth* role of the noumena, which is central to Kant’s *practical* philosophy. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* and elsewhere, Kant argues, famously, that our practical reason gives us compelling moral grounds to believe certain metaphysical propositions that we cannot be justified in accepting on theoretical grounds. For present purposes it will suffice to consider two of these propositions. One is that there exists a God who orders all things in such a way that the attainment of the highest good is possible. Such a deity, Kant insists, can never be an object of experience. It is thus clearly a thing in itself, a noumenon rather than a phenomenon. The other proposition (for me) is that I, as a moral agent, am free from the strict, complete causal determination to which (according to the first *Critique*) all objects of experience, as such, are necessarily subject. As a free moral agent, therefore, I cannot be an object of experience, or phenomenon, but must be a noumenon. This role of the noumena is problematic too; for it ascribes something like a causal role to the deity and to the self as moral agent, despite Kant’s critical thesis that the category of causality applies only to objects of a possible experience. Nonetheless, the practical role of noumena is already present in the first *Critique*, in the Antinomy and in the Canon of Pure Reason. Indeed it is a main aim of the first *Critique* “to set aside *knowledge* [*Wissen*] in order to obtain room for *faith*” (B xxx), as Kant put it in his Preface to the second edition. The arguments of the first *Critique* are supposed to show that theoretical reason cannot establish either the existence or the nonexistence of God, either the freedom or the causal bondage of the human self as it is or may be in itself, leaving these topics open for faith grounded in practical reason.

In what follows I will discuss first what Kant thinks we *cannot* know or conceive of things in themselves, then what he thinks our theoretical and practical reason *can* accomplish in regard to them. Focusing next on Kant’s conception of a “problematic concept,” I will defend the philosophical value

of the conception of noumena that I ascribe to him. Finally, and briefly, we will consider the famous (and overemphasized) question whether empirical objects and things in themselves are the *same* objects or *distinct*—the question of token-identity or -nonidentity.

2. The Unknowability and Inconceivability of Things in Themselves

It is one of the most emphasized doctrines of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the only objects of which we have any knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) are objects of experience. Obviously we cannot have *empirical* knowledge of any other objects. And *synthetic a priori* knowledge cannot extend beyond the bounds of possible experience if it is based, as Kant argues, on the necessary conditions of any possible experience. As we shall see, Kant thinks that *analytic* knowledge applies in a way to things in themselves but is not sufficient to give us *Erkenntnis* of objects. More broadly, it is clearly Kant's view that we cannot even have (synthetic) *beliefs* that are theoretically justified about any sort of objects as they may be in themselves, but only as objects of actual or possible experience. Kant's view of theoretically justified belief is more austere, more rationalistic (in a broad sense) than I would embrace; but I will not take up that issue here, preferring to devote more attention to his views about what we can *conceive*.

Modern philosophy has seen persistent attempts to derive negative metaphysical conclusions from theories of mental representation, by way of inconceivability arguments. This is a typically but not uniquely empiricist project. One of its earliest appearances in modern philosophy is in Malebranche, who uses a Cartesian doctrine of clear and distinct perception as a principle of metaphysical criticism in arguing that God is the only true cause.⁵ Closer to Kant is Berkeley's argument, from the mind-relatedness of ideas and notions, against mind-independent substances. Hume appeals to an empiricist theory of our *acquisition* of ideas in his critique of more realistic accounts of our conception of causality. The most sweeping of all these critiques of metaphysics, and arguably the most influential since Kant, was mounted by twentieth century logical empiricists on the basis of their verifiability criterion of meaning. That critique is generally deemed to have failed, but the impulse behind it is far from dead; and present-day empiricists may well be preparing a new assault, based on partially causal theories of mental representation, according to which we cannot have primitive conceptions of any kind of thing with which we do not stand in the sort of causal relations that may be deemed to constitute experience.

⁵ Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité* [*The Search after Truth*], Book 6, Part 2, Chs. 1–3.

The central feature of Kant's theory of mental representation is the distinction between intuitions and concepts, and his discussion of the conceivability and inconceivability of things in themselves is based on that distinction. There is a deep difference here between Kant and the strategies of twentieth century empiricists. The latter, partly inspired at first by operationalist ideas in the philosophy of science, make functional relations crucial for mental representation. Conceivability depends on what we can verify, or at least test, or on whether we stand in certain causal relations with the object. These approaches are heavily indebted to Kant. He characterizes concepts as "functions" or "rules" belonging to an active faculty of the mind—broadly speaking, as abilities to *do* something, to make judgments or to construct images. This is a more explicitly dynamic and functional account of mental representation than had previously been given in early modern philosophy. It is crucial for our present purpose, however, that Kant sees our possibility of conceiving of things in themselves as drastically limited, in the first instance, by a limitation, *not* of our active conceptual faculty, but rather of our passive intuitive faculty.

This is not the place to explore in detail the subtleties of the nature of the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts. Having said what I have about concepts, it will be enough here to note that our intuitions belong to our faculty of inner and outer sense, and are to be found in our sensations and feelings and in the forms of space and time in which, Kant claims, all our sensation must be structured. The etymology of 'intuition' (*intuitio* in Latin and *Anschaung* in German) suggests the image of looking at something. The point is that intuitions have *content* such as might be presented to our gaze (or to some sense modality other than sight). Concepts, for Kant, do not similarly have content in their own right. They are functional forms which order content that they must derive from intuitions. Hence Kant's famous dictum that "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (A 51 = B 75).

In Kant's view the fundamental reason why things as they are or may be in themselves cannot be given as objects for our cognition is not that we do not have the concepts for it, but that we do not have the intuitions for it (cf. *KpV* Ak V, 54).⁶ In their most abstract form the basic categories of the understanding, such as those of quantity, of reality and negation, of thing and property, ground and consequence, are "pure" enough to apply to things in

⁶ As Houston Smit has pointed out to me, Kant thinks that where intuition is adequate for cognition of things in themselves (as in God's knowledge), the cognition is nondiscursive and concepts play no part in it. In that sense neither our actual concepts nor any others are apt for *cognition* of noumena, but it is primarily in the realm of intuition that we are *deficient* in the cognition of noumena, and our concepts can at least *think* noumena to some extent. Also interesting on the relation of human concepts to noumena is Ameriks, "Kantian Idealism Today," p. 333.

themselves. They are sufficiently independent of experience and sufficiently untainted by the necessary conditions of our experience whose inescapable involvement in our cognition of empirical objects makes that a knowledge of mere appearance. In their abstract purity, however, these concepts have not enough content to present our thought with any object—or at any rate with any object sufficiently determinate for us to know it as really possible. Such content they can get only from intuition.

That only the [empirical use of concepts] can take place anywhere is seen from the following. For every concept is required, first, the logical form of a concept (of thinking) in general and then, second, also the possibility of giving it an object to which it may be related. Without this latter it has no sense [*Sinn*], and is completely empty of content, even though it may always still contain the logical function for making a concept out of whatever data [may be given]. Now the object cannot be given to a concept otherwise than in intuition ... (A 239 = B 298)

Our concepts need at least the content provided by the spatial and temporal forms of intuition. But it is precisely those forms that provide Kant with a first and decisive reason for holding that objects can be presented to our intuition only as they are in relation to the structures and cognitive needs of our minds—and hence not as they are or may be in themselves.

The theme of presentation of an object plays a key role in Kant's thought here. It is related to both knowledge and meaning. To knowledge, because *Erkenntnis* is essentially cognition of an object. The object need not actually exist; it may be merely possible; but without relation to an object there is no *Erkenntnis*. Because of these features the usual translation of *Erkenntnis* as "knowledge" may be misleading.⁷ In the remainder of this paper I will render it as "cognition," leaving "knowledge" to represent *Wissen*.

It is in relation to presentation of an object that we must understand Kant's claims of the meaninglessness of concepts in any attempted application beyond the bounds of possible experience. I have already quoted Kant's statement that without "the possibility of giving it an object to which it may be related" a concept "has no sense [*Sinn*]" (A 239 = B 298). He also says about "all categories" that "if this condition [of sensibility] is taken away, all meaning [*Bedeutung*], that is, relation to the object, falls away" (A 240f. = B 300). The explanation, "meaning, that is, relation to the object" must not escape our attention here. If we overlook it, we might be tempted to take these statements as implying that concepts are meaningless in the most sweeping sense when applied to things in themselves. That can hardly have been Kant's intention, given the extensive roles that talk about things in themselves was meant from the outset to play in the critical philosophy, as I explained in the previous section. Kant surely never thought that talk about God and the causally undetermined freedom of the noumenal self was sheer

⁷ Cf. Kant's related acknowledgment about his extended use of *Tatsache* ['fact' or 'matter of fact'] in *KU* Ak V, 468n.

nonsense. What he did think, as indicated by a careful reading of these statements about meaninglessness, is that such noumena can never be given as objects to our speculative thought inasmuch as we cannot have any intuitive content referring to them (cf. B 166n).

In fact [Kant says] there certainly remains for the pure concepts of the understanding, even after removal of every sensible condition, a meaning [*Bedeutung*], but one that is only logical, of mere unity of representations, to which, however, no object [*Gegenstand*] is given, and therefore also no meaning [*Bedeutung*] that could yield a concept of the object [*Objekt*].⁸

This emphasis on intuitive content is characteristic of the eighteenth century. I do not believe that a verifiability criterion of meaning, or any other criterion of meaning drawn from the active or dynamic side of our cognitive processes, played a fundamental role in the criticism of metaphysical theses in early modern philosophy, as they have in the twentieth century. If we were to find such a strategy anywhere in the early modern period, we should expect to find it in Kant, but we do not find it there. Leibniz sometimes appeals to verifiability or perceivability as a test of existence⁹ or of reality of difference,¹⁰ but not as a criterion of meaning.¹¹ The metaphysical critiques of Malebranche, Berkeley, and Hume, to which I have alluded, all allege a lack of what Kant would call intuitive content.

My own sympathies on this point are with the eighteenth century rather than the twentieth. If a concept lacks intuitive content, that does seem intuitively (in another sense of 'intuitive') to raise at least a question about its meaningfulness. But if a concept has intuitive content, it does not seem plausible to me that my causal isolation from its objects, or my inability (even in principle) to verify claims about them, should keep me from having meaningful thoughts about them and understanding well enough what they would be like if they exist; and I have not been persuaded by any of our century's arguments to the contrary. I hasten to add two clarifications. The first is that I am talking about concepts of some generality, such as Kant thought all concepts to be. I grant that if there are singular concepts, concepts that directly signify single individuals as such, their meaning may depend on our causal relation to their objects. The second clarification is that in denying that a failure of extramental dynamic relations voids of meaning a concept that does

⁸ There is an interesting discussion of "purely logical" *Bedeutung* in J. P. Nolan, "Kant on Meaning: Two Studies," *Kant-Studien*, 70 (1979):113–21, esp. pp. 118–21.

⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Voraußedition zur Reihe VI—Philosophische Schriften—in der Ausgabe der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR*, bearbeitet von der Leibniz-Forschungsstelle der Universität Münster, Fascicles 1–10, 1982–1991, p. 1872 (= LH IV,1,14B,1 in Bodemann's classification of the manuscripts of the Leibniz *Nachlass* in Hannover).

¹⁰ *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. by H. G. Alexander (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), p. 63f. (§ 29 of Leibniz's fifth letter).

¹¹ See R. M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 237.

have intuitive content, I do not mean to foreclose the question whether our active faculties can do anything to make up for a lack of intuitive content. That question arises, in a very interesting form, in Kant's practical philosophy, as we shall see in section 4.

3. What We Do Know and Conceive Theoretically of Things in Themselves

In calling things in themselves "noumena," "things thought," Kant signifies that they are thought rather than sensed. If we subtract all intuition from an empirical cognition, he says, "the form of thought still remains, that is, the way of determining an object for the manifold of a possible intuition." This form is provided by the concepts that Kant calls pure categories of the understanding.

Therefore the categories extend farther than the sensible intuition, because they think objects in general, without regard to the special way (by sensibility) in which they may be given. But they do not determine thereby a larger sphere of objects. For one cannot assume that such [objects] can be given, without presupposing as possible another kind of intuition than the sensible, which, however, we are in no way justified in doing. (A 254 = B 309)

What is the function that Kant thinks remains to these concepts even where they cannot "determine" any objects because no intuition provides the content for doing so? Apparently just the "form" or "way" in which the concept might determine an object if intuition did provide the content for it. As to what that does and does not carry with it, the comment in the quoted passage that we are not justified in presupposing the *possibility* of a nonsensible intuition is significant. Since Kant held that God would have a nonsensible, purely intellectual intuition, and affirmed, on practical grounds, the existence of God, he must in some sense have believed in the possibility of a nonsensible intuition. Here, I think, we must invoke the distinction between real and logical possibility which plays a prominent part in Kant's discussion of phenomena and noumena.

The *real possibility* of a concept is virtually identified by Kant with its "relat[ing] to an object and thus mean[ing] [*bedeuten*] something" (B 302f.). The "possibility of a thing" that "can never be proved merely from the non-contradictoriness of a concept of it, but only through one's confirming this [concept] through an intuition corresponding to it" (B 308), must be its *real possibility*. For the noncontradictoriness of a concept not only proves, but constitutes, its *logical possibility*, in Kant's scheme of things (A 244 = B 302). Likewise it is presumably the *real possibility* of a nonsensible intuition that Kant thinks we are not justified in assuming. The twentieth century philosopher may well wonder what the real possibility of a thing is supposed to add to its logical possibility; that question will be pursued in section 5 of this paper.

For the moment I wish to focus on *logical* possibility. That is the sort of possibility that Kant does think our reason can establish with regard to noumena. “Only *logical* possibility remains over” when “all sensible intuition (the only intuition we have) is taken away” (B 302f.) What the logical possibility amounts to is that “the concept (thought) is possible,” that is, that the concept “does not contradict itself” (A 244, B 302f.). The implication is that in extending our categories “farther than the sensible intuition” we can think *consistently* about things as they may be in themselves, independently of the conditions of our experience, though this consistency does not establish the *real* possibility of such things. It is consistency, and nothing more, that Kant thinks theoretical reason can establish with regard to thought about such noumena as God, leaving room for faith, which could not be rationally approved with regard to a contradiction.¹²

If noumena can and must be thought consistently, it follows that at least one type of truth can be known about them—namely, analytic truths, which cannot fail without contradiction. Most fundamentally, “the principle of contradiction” is an analytic truth that can be affirmed about noumena; it “is a principle that is valid about everything whatever that we can even think, whether it is a sensible object ... or not” (*E Ak VIII*, 195). Kant sees no objection to our possessing analytic truths about noumena, though he regards such truths as relatively empty (A 258f. = B 314). Can we have any other sort of knowledge of noumena?

Kant seems to claim surprisingly extensive knowledge, mostly negative, about things as they may be in themselves, outside the bounds of any possible experience. First and foremost he claims to show that such things *are not* in space or time. It is not obvious that the arguments he presents could, at best, show more than that things in themselves *may not* be in space or time, in the sense that we have no compelling reason to believe that they are. But this is not the place to take up that issue.

I am at least as interested in some rather Leibnizian theses that Kant seems to think he knows about things in themselves, theses that he thinks do not hold for mere appearances. For instance, his solution to the Antinomy of Pure Reason depends on the claim that “if the conditioned as well as its condition are things in themselves, then if the former is given, the regress to the latter is not merely *set as a task* [*aufgegeben*],” which is all that could be inferred with regard to mere appearances, “but it is therewith already actually *given* [*gegeben*]” (A 498 = B 526).

A similar point concerns relational and nonrelational properties. In accordance with most early modern views about physical properties, Kant held that “whatever we know [*kennen*] in matter are nothing but relations.” That does

¹² Cf. *KpV Ak V*, 42, 55. Kant relies explicitly here on the consistency of the noumena, which is supposed to have been established in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

not keep material things from being permanent objects, but that is “because they are not things in themselves, but merely appearances.”¹³ Things in themselves must have, or at any rate must be thought as having, internal, nonrelational properties that are prior to their relations; without them there is no possibility of a noumenon. “Certainly it is startling to hear that a thing is to consist entirely of relations, but such a thing is also mere appearance, and cannot be thought through pure categories; itself it consists in the mere relation of something in general to the senses” (A 285 = B 341).

I take it that the point in this latter case, as in that of the conditioned and its condition, is that things in themselves must be completely determinate, but mere appearances need not be. A thing that is conditioned without any original condition, or that has relations without any internal, nonrelational properties, is metaphysically incomplete, but may still be a perfectly good appearance, just as there need not be any particular date that is the birthday of a fictitious person. But things in themselves must be complete.

These claims about the completeness of things in themselves seem to me to have considerable intrinsic plausibility, but how does Kant think he knows them? It would best fit his general views about the limits of our knowledge of noumena if he took these to be analytic truths; and there is some evidence that he does. It is “according to mere concepts” that he says “the inner is the substratum of all relation or outer determinations” (A 282f. = B 338f.). “Through mere concepts I cannot indeed think anything outer without something inner, precisely because relation-concepts surely presuppose things that are given absolutely [*schlechthin*], and are not possible without the latter” (A 284 = B 340)—where the absolute is clearly the nonrelative. The dependence of the relative on the absolute is treated here as known by analysis of concepts of relation. It is doubtless difficult to know whether these really are analytic truths about things in themselves; but much of this difficulty (perhaps most of it) is simply the difficulty of understanding and applying the analytic-synthetic distinction in the first place.

From what has been said thus far you might expect that for Kant only the most general categorial concepts (such as that of cause or ground) can have even that degenerate sort of application to noumena that concerns only logical and not real possibility. This expectation, however, is not borne out by Kant’s treatment of the noumenal concept that he develops most fully, the concept of God. This surprisingly rich development is found in Kant’s *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, delivered probably in the early 1780’s, and

¹³ As Derk Pereboom aptly remarks, “By providing this explanation, Kant indicates that he does not thoroughly reject the claim that intrinsic properties must ground the reality of extrinsic properties. For if he completely rejected it, he would not need to explain the plausibility of matter’s being purely extrinsic by saying that it is only an appearance.” Derk Pereboom, “Kant’s Amphiboly,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 73 (1991): 69.

certainly after the publication of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I will summarize it here, though some of its features may be superseded by the account given later in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which I will discuss in section 4.

In agreement with Leibniz, Kant conceives of God as an *ens realissimum*, to whom therefore all and only *realities* are to be ascribed, where realities must be, at a minimum, purely positive, nonnegative properties. Some such realities “are given ... through pure reason independently of all experience” and “apply to things in general and determine them through the pure understanding. Here no experience slips in; [the realities] therefore are not even affected by any sensibility.” Such realities fit easily into the account of noumenal concepts given thus far. They are the realities that are involved in the concept of a thing in general. Kant calls them “ontological predicates.” To this class of realities, Kant says, “belong [God’s] possibility, his existence, his necessity, or such an existence as flows from his concept; [also] the concept of substance, the concept of the unity of substance, simplicity, infinity, duration, presence, and others” (Ak XXVIII,ii/ii,1020 = *LPT* 51).¹⁴

But these concepts, Kant says, are too abstract to yield a satisfactory philosophical theology, one that is theistic and not merely deistic. He proposes to add to them by taking “materials for the concept of God from empirical principles and cognitions [Kenntnisse]” (Ak XXVIII,ii/ii,1020 = *LPT* 51). Here the problem obviously arises, how such empirical content can have even a merely logical application to a being that cannot be experienced at all. To deal with the problem Kant draws on Scholastic treatments of the traditional theological problem of attribution. By the *via negationis* we are to “separate” everything negative and merely sensible from the empirical concepts in question, leaving only the reality or positive content contained in them.¹⁵ Predicates that contain no such reality must not be ascribed to God at all. Moreover empirical concepts will contain realities only in limited degree; by the *via eminentiae* we are to ascribe the realities to God in infinite degree (Ak XXVIII,ii/ii,1021f. = *LPT* 52f.).

Kant grants that the reality thus isolated from empirical concepts and infinitely potentiated “cannot in general be comprehended by us at all.” How could it, if all intuitive content, as he must suppose, has fallen away with the limitations of empirical objects? He proposes to deal with this difficulty by

¹⁴ It is clear in this text from the early 1780’s that Kant was aware of the possibility of treating necessary existence as a “reality” and an attribute of God. It is less clear that he saw the importance of the difference between treating existence in this way and treating *necessary* existence in this way—a difference that is, arguably, not adequately reflected in the discussion of the ontological argument in the first *Critique*.

¹⁵ Kant understands that the *via negationis* proceeds by denying. In the traditional *via negationis*, however, only the negative is left—it is the negative predicates that are ascribed to God—whereas in Kant’s procedure the negative is denied and only the purely positive is left to be ascribed to God.

“the noble way of *analogy*,” and to develop the way of analogy, not in terms of similarities between God and empirical objects, which Kant thinks would be too vague, but in terms of a “perfect similarity” of relations of ground and consequence. “For example, as the happiness of one man ... is related to the kindness of another, so the happiness of all men is related to the kindness of God” (Ak XXVIII,ii/ii,1023 = *LPT* 54).¹⁶ Among the “realities” that Kant would extend in this way from empirical objects to God are perfect knowledge, perfect will, holiness, kindness or benevolence, and justice (Ak XXVIII,ii/ii,1047–70, 1073–76 = *LPT* 81–108, 111–14).

This is an astonishingly luxuriant development of the concept of a noumenon, given the strictures of the first *Critique*, which are clearly at work in Kant’s mind in the *Lectures*. We must remember, however, that all that Kant claims for this concept, on *theoretical* grounds, is *logical* possibility, freedom from contradiction, not *real* possibility. Even with the aid of analogy, these “realities” seem to be for Kant only tenuously realities, not sufficient to constitute what he calls “objective reality” or relation to a possible object.

4. The Extension of Pure Reason in Its Practical Use

Thus far I have been discussing what Kant says we can conceive or know by *theoretical* reason about things in themselves. But he claims that pure reason has, with regard to noumena, a “right ... to an extension in its practical use that is not possible to it in its speculative [use]” (*KpV* Ak V,50). What is it that practical reason is supposed to give us with regard to noumena that theoretical reason cannot?

First and foremost, relation to an object. By the achievement of practical reason, “the theoretical cognition of pure reason does to be sure receive an increment, which however consists merely in this, that those concepts which otherwise are problematic (merely thinkable) for it are now assertorically declared to be such as actually have objects” (*KpV* Ak V,134). This assertion extends to the actual existence of noumenal freedom, immortality, and God, as postulates of pure practical reason. But actual existence carries with it real as well as merely logical possibility, and it is real possibility on which relation to an object principally turns for Kant. What practical reason adds to the theoretical, he says, with regard to the objective reality of the ideas of God and immortality, is just that “the possibility, which was previously only a *problem*, here becomes *assertion*” (*KpV* Ak V,5)—where the previously problematic possibility must be real possibility, since the merely logical possibility of noumena is never a problem for Kant.

¹⁶ Can these relations really be *perfectly* similar for Kant? Presumably the former is schematized by time and the latter is not.

In gaining relation to a really possible object, the noumenal idea also gains meaning [*Bedeutung*] (*KpV* Ak V,56, 133, 136) and “objective reality” (*KpV* Ak V,3–6, 44, 48, 55–57, 134–36, 138; cf. E Ak VIII,225),¹⁷ but I think these are merely tautological gains, alternative ways of ascribing, in Kant’s terminology, a reference to a really possible object. Do noumenal ideas gain anything more through practical reason? Kant denies that practical reason gives “insight into the nature” of things in themselves (*KpV* Ak V,56; cf. Ak V,4, 48–50). “For we thereby cognize [*erkennen*] in fact neither the nature of our soul, nor the intelligible world nor the highest being according to what they are in themselves” (*KpV* Ak V,133). And whatever practical reason gives us, he does not think it gives us any *intuition* of noumena (*KpV* Ak V,46, 56, 103, 136, 138).

Kant does suggest, however, that in “begin[ning] with pure practical laws and their actuality,” the critical philosophy obtains something that can play in these matters a foundational role analogous to that of intuition. “Instead of intuition,” he says, “it makes the concept of their existence in the intelligible world (that is, of freedom) the foundation of [the laws]” (*KpV* Ak V,46; cf. Ak V,56). It is tempting to read Kant as suggesting that in this way noumenal ideas gain something analogous to the intuitive *content* of which their nonempirical character deprives them, though he does not say that in so many words.

If this suggestion applies to any noumenal idea, it applies to that of freedom. It is clear that Kant assigns freedom a privileged place in the practical grounding of noumenal ideas. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* he says that “Freedom is the only one, among all the ideas of speculative reason, whose possibility we *know* [*wissen*] a priori, though without understanding it, because it is the condition of the moral law, which we know.” Since “the ideas of *God* and *immortality* are not, however, conditions of the moral law,” but only of something at which the moral law requires us to aim, their possibility cannot be known, but only “can and must be *assumed* [*angenommen*] in this practical relation.” And even this assumption is justified only “by means of the concept of freedom” (*KpV* Ak V,4).

The priority of the idea of freedom in the practical cognition of things in themselves is similarly stressed in the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant says that

among the three pure ideas of reason, *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality*, that of freedom is the only concept of the supersensible that (by means of the causality that is thought in it) proves in nature its objective reality through its possible efficacy in nature, and precisely thereby makes possible the connection of the two other [ideas] with nature, and of all three with each other to [form] a religion. (*KU* Ak V,474; cf. Ak V,468, 475)

¹⁷ For the identification of objective reality with real possibility, see also B xxvi n.

It is “through a determinate law of causality” (the moral law) that supersensible freedom “not only provides material for the cognition of the rest of the supersensible, ... but also proves its reality, as a fact [*Tatsache*] in actions, but for just that reason also cannot furnish any ground of proof except one that is valid only for a practical purpose” (*KU Ak V,474*).

It is the category contained in the idea of freedom, which is the category of causality (*KpV Ak V,103*), that “now gives to all the other categories ... objective, though only practically applicable, reality” (*KpV Ak V,56*). At the noumenal level, accordingly, the categories “have reference [*Beziehung*] only to beings as *intelligences*, and even in these only to the relation of the *reason* to the *will*, and therefore always only to the *practical*” (*KpV Ak V,56f.*).¹⁸ Here the second *Critique* either supersedes or supplements the account of analogical predication given in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*. The only way, Kant now says, that any content remains to the idea of God, “beyond the merely ontological predicates,” when everything anthropomorphic is subtracted, is that “in respect of the practical, ... there still remains to us, of the properties of an understanding and a will, the concept of a relation that is given objective reality by the practical law, which determines a priori precisely this relation of the understanding to the will” (*KpV Ak V,138*). The attributes of knowledge and will and of holiness, benevolence, and justice, which Kant ascribes to God, are all closely connected with the determination of the will by the moral law through practical rationality.

“Without the mediation of” the idea of freedom, Kant says, “we could not rise from the world of the senses to” the idea of God, for we would have to leave behind everything that is “given to us.” “The concept of freedom is unique in enabling us to find the unconditioned and intelligible for the conditioned and sensible without going outside ourselves.” In its acknowledgement of the moral law “our reason itself ... cognizes [*erkennt*] itself ... and the being that is conscious to itself of this law (our own person), as belonging to the pure world of the understanding.” What is more, it cognizes this “with determination of the way in which it can be active as such [a being]” (*KpV Ak V,105f.*).

It is the concept of determination [*Bestimmung*] that suggests here an accession of something like content that practical reason derives from “the principle of *morality* [*Sittlichkeit*].” It signifies, not *causal* determination, but filling out of a concept with detail—in this case, detail supplied by the conscious relation of our reason and will to the moral law. Freedom, as “unconditioned causality and the faculty thereof,” is “not just indeterminately and problematically *thought* ...,” Kant says, “but also *cognized* [*erkannt*],”

¹⁸ Kant goes on to speak of other “properties which belong to the theoretical mode of representation of such supersensuous things,” denying that we can have any knowledge [*wissen*] of them, but allowing us a “right [*Befugnis*] (and for practical purposes even a necessity) to assume and presuppose them” (*Ak V,57*).

both “assertorically” and “as *determined in respect of the law of its causality*” (KpV Ak V,105). Kant speaks of this determination as concrete: despite the lack of any intuition that would “determine its theoretical objective reality,” the concept of freedom as empirically unconditioned causality “has nonetheless actual application, which can be presented concretely [*in concreto*] in dispositions [*Gesinnungen*] or maxims, that is, practical reality, which can be declared [*angegeben*]” (KpV Ak V,56). Through the “fact [*Factum*] of pure reason” (KpV Ak V,31, 47) we know what it is like to be free,¹⁹ and the specific injunctions of the moral law provide detail as to the content of the principles on which our freedom is an ability to act.

5. Problematic Concepts

I promised an explanation of why I think Kant’s account of things in themselves is a good piece of philosophy; it’s time to deliver on the promise. A comprehensive defense of the whole theory would be too much to attempt here; nor would I wish to defend every detail of it. I will defend only the heart of the view, which Kant expresses in terms of what he calls “problematic concepts.” A problematic concept, he says, is one “that contains no contradiction, and that also is connected with other cognitions as a limitation of given concepts, but whose objective reality cannot in any way be cognized [*erkannt*]” (A 254 = B 310). This conception of a problematic concept has both a negative and a positive aspect.

The negative aspect is expressed in the quoted definition by the statement that the objective reality of a problematic concept cannot be cognized. Strictly speaking, it is presumably *theoretical* cognition that is denied here; for Kant claims, as we have seen, that from *practical* reason, and for practical purposes, noumenal concepts can obtain objective reality, and we can even know [*wissen*] that our own noumenal freedom has this reality. For the time being, however, we may restrict our attention to the domain of theoretical reason. Theoretical cognition of the objective reality of a problematic concept is denied on the ground that the concept lacks intuitive content. Without intuitive content, no object can be given to the concept. More important, we cannot even know that an object for the concept is *possible*. That is what is *problematic* about the concept.

At the same time we do not know that an object for the concept is not possible. Indeed it is only the *real* possibility of such an object that is unknown to us. We do know that it is *logically* possible, inasmuch as there is no contradiction in the concept. This is the positive aspect of the conception of a problematic concept, and it carries with it the legitimacy of using such a concept in the ways in which Kant uses concepts of noumena. Only the least controversial, merely negative or limiting role of noumenal concepts

¹⁹ Jessica Moss helped me to arrive at this way of putting it.

is mentioned in Kant's definition of a problematic concept; but freedom from contradiction is supposed to clear the way for the other roles as well.

My defense of Kant's conception of a problematic concept is first of all a defense of the distinction between real and logical possibility (where real possibility is more than logical possibility but may be less than causal possibility).²⁰ It is also a defense of the view that the logical possibility of a concept may be known, and may justify some uses of the concept, even though something like a lack of intuitive content denies us knowledge of the real possibility of the concept.

Reflection on a well known argument from Berkeley may help us to see this. Berkeley argues, in effect, as follows:

- (1) In order to conceive of bodies, we must have ideas that are like them.
- (2) An idea cannot be like anything but an idea.
- (3) Therefore we cannot conceive of bodies that are not ideas.²¹

This is not the place to join in the lively discussion of the role that *likeness* and *ideas* play in Berkeley's argument. For present purposes we can think of Berkeley's claims as specific versions of somewhat more general theses about mental representation.

(1) He holds that in order to conceive of bodies we would have to have before our minds something that represents to us what it would be like for them to exist. This expresses the characteristic eighteenth century view of mental representation that I have discussed in section 2 above. It is a view that Kant also holds, in claiming that the mental representation of bodies, or indeed theoretical representation of any object, requires intuitive content.

(2) Berkeley also argues that we cannot have before our minds anything that represents to us what it would be like for bodies to exist independently of their being perceived, but only something that represents to us what it is like to perceive them. Kant's view on this point diverges from Berkeley's, but is still broadly similar (more similar, I think, than Kant wished to admit). He does not hold that our intuition represents only what it is like to perceive objects, but does hold that it represents objects only in relation to our experience, and not as they may be in themselves independently of that relation.

From these two theses, in their Berkeleyan form, the Berkeleyan conclusion evidently follows. The argument, however, has inspired great resistance. One is inclined to object that Berkeley himself surely understands very well the claim that bodies exist unperceived, and hence independently of being per-

²⁰ For Kant's articulation of this distinction, see especially the notes at B 302f. and B xxvi.

²¹ *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 2, ed. by T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949), pp. 205–7, from the end of the first of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*.

ceived. For example, he understands its logical form, and knows a number of things that follow logically from it. If he did not, he could not argue against it as he does. This objection is plausible.

At the same time there seems to be something right about Berkeley's position, and particularly about his first claim. If we really cannot represent to ourselves what it would be like for a body to exist independently of its being perceived, or independently of its relation to our perceptions, there is something empty about our conception of such an existence. How do we know that such a conception is more than a mere form that nothing could possibly fill?

Kant's account of things in themselves in terms of problematic concepts deals nicely with both what is right and what is wrong in Berkeley's argument. Berkeley does understand the concept of a mind-independent body inasmuch as he grasps its logical form and is able to use it in logical inference. From this form we can know the concept's *logical* possibility, if it is indeed consistent (as Berkeley rightly or wrongly denies). But if the concept lacks intuitive content, then we cannot know that it has or represents a *real* possibility.

A point that needs explanation here is what is meant by *real possibility*, and how it differs from logical possibility. The distinction between them is deeply rooted in Kant's thought. In a precritical essay of 1763 it provides him with *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. Kant distinguishes there between "material" and "formal" elements in both possibilities and impossibilities. In the possibility of a right-angled triangle, for example, "the triangle as well as the right angle are the data or the material . . . , but the agreement of the one with the other according to the principle of contradiction is what is formal in the possibility" (*emB* Ak II,77). Kant indicates that the "formal" and the "material" can also be called the "logical" and the "real" respectively (*emB* Ak II,77f.). The connection of the material with the real is important for Kant; in his view all the material of possibility is derived from the realities or purely positive properties (*emB* Ak II,87). The pure realities are limited or modified to form other properties; this affects the form, I take it, but does not add to the matter of possibility.

This provides Kant, in 1763, with a way in which the nonexistence of God can be (really) impossible even though it is logically possible: "possibility falls away, not only when an inner contradiction is to be met with as the logical [aspect] of impossibility, but also when no material, no datum, is there to be thought" (*emB* Ak II,78). Conversely, "something can be absolutely necessary, either if" its negation is formally contradictory, "or else if its nonbeing wipes out [*aufhebt*] the material for everything thinkable and all the data for it" (*emB* Ak II,82). Kant argues that existence cannot be necessary in the first of these ways, but that the existence of God is necessary in the second way because all the material for all possibility depends on the

existence of the *ens realissimum*, which possesses all the pure realities (*emB* Ak II,83–87).

Much of this structure remains in place in Kant's discussion of the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The most obvious difference is that according to the *Critique* the source that reason needs for the material for the possibility of all things is "not the existence" of an *ens realissimum* (as demanded in his earlier work) "but only the idea of it" (A 577f. = B 605f.). The position of the *Critique* is clearly more plausible on this point, and provides a justification (which Kant should have made more explicit) for the abandonment of his earlier theistic "ground of proof." It remains the position of the *Critique*, however, that "all possibility of things" is to be regarded as "derived" from the idea if not from the existence of the being that "contains all reality in itself" (A 578 = B 606).

Kant's view that real possibility has material as well as formal requirements, and needs positive content as well as freedom from contradiction strikes me as extremely plausible. His presentation of it in terms of realities and the *ens realissimum* is very abstract, however—perhaps too abstract to convince us that real and logical possibility can diverge as I am suggesting. We may wonder whether there is any case in which we may be sure the formal requirement is satisfied but still reasonably doubt whether the material requirement is. The following example may be helpful. Kant would hate the example, because it is about colors and colors have for him a very low status, hardly counting as properties at all (A 28–30, B 44–45); but I find it persuasive.

I do not know whether it is possible for there to be a (phenomenal) color, quite different from yellow, that would occupy the same position as yellow between red and green on the visual spectrum. I cannot imagine such a color; in that way the notion lacks intuitive content for me. If it had intuitive content for me, I could presumably in that way see its possibility; but I cannot. The possibility at issue here is real *possibility*. I don't doubt that the description I gave of such a color is consistent, establishing the merely *logical* possibility of such a thing. But there seems still to be a question, unanswerable by me, whether in the space of metaphysical possibilities, so to speak, there is a color that could rightly play the indicated role. Of course you may think there is no "space" of metaphysically or really possible colors beyond those actually seen by us or by other creatures. In that case you may think that only colors actually seen are really possible. But that is not obviously a truth of *logic*; so we may plausibly suppose it is at least *logically* possible for there to be such a color as I proposed.

It may be harder to get our minds around a more Kantian example, the most important one being the concept of noumenal causality. It is well known that Kant said that "the pure concepts of the understanding," or categories, of which causality is one of the most important, "can *never* be of

transcendental but *always* only of *empirical* use" (A 247 = B 303). From Jacobi to the present day, this has formed a basis for objecting to speaking, in a Kantian context, of noumena as causes or grounds.²² To such objections I would respond that the concept of noumenal causality should be viewed as a Kantian problematic concept, and can appropriately be used in any context in which noumena are rightly spoken of at all.

Kant's limitation of the categories to exclusively empirical employment is to be understood as excluding only the possibility of obtaining, by means of them, *cognition* [*Erkenntnis*] of a nonempirical *object* (cf. *E Ak* VIII, 198). Kant insists that "in *thinking* the categories are not limited by the conditions of our sensible intuition, but have an unbounded field; and only the *cognizing* [*Erkennen*] of that which we think to ourselves, the determining of the object, requires intuition," and adds that where intuition is lacking, "the thought of the object" can still have its use for practical reason (B 166n). He states that "the categories extend further than sensible intuition, inasmuch as they think objects in general [*überhaupt*], without regard to the special manner (of sensibility) in which they may be given," although "they do not thereby determine a greater sphere of objects," for want of the requisite intuition (A 254 = B 309). This last statement immediately precedes Kant's definition of the notion of a problematic concept, and I think it is fair to assume that the categories, in their transempirical extension, are meant to be prime examples of problematic concepts.

As regards the category of *causality*, Kant certainly rejects any attempt to use it to gain *theoretical* cognition of supersensible objects. Thus he opposes any transempirical employment of a causal principle of sufficient reason, such as is involved in the cosmological argument for the existence of God (*E Ak* VIII, 193–98; A 609 = B 637). In Kant's *practical* philosophy, however, the transempirical extension of the theoretically problematic category of causality has a central role. The idea of freedom is an idea of noumenal causality, and Kant holds, as we have seen in section 4 above, that it is through the category of causality that "all the other categories" obtain "objective, though only practically applicable, reality" (*KpV Ak* V, 56) for thinking about God and the self. Moreover, the role of God in Kant's practical philosophy, as guarantor of the possibility of the highest good, depends on the postulated possibility of God's causing or grounding the existence of finite things.

Thus Kant's practical philosophy requires the concept of noumenal causality to have the legitimacy that he ascribes to problematic concepts. In the end he ascribes to it even more legitimacy than that, claiming that our knowledge

²² A useful brief survey of some important examples of this type of objection, in connection with the so-called "problem of affection," is contained in Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 247–48.

of our own freedom through the “fact of pure reason” establishes, for the purposes of practical reason, the real possibility of the causality involved in freedom. But this presupposes the logical possibility that belongs to a problematic concept. And I think it is plausible, from a Kantian point of view and for theoretical purposes, to regard the concept of noumenal causality as a problematic concept. It is the concept of a real (not a merely logical) relation that corresponds to the inferential form (and force) of the hypothetical judgment, and that is not understood in terms of succession of events in time, nor in any other terms that depend on our forms of intuition. If there is any problem about the possibility of such a relation, it is not a problem of formal inconsistency. If we doubt that there is any such relation in the space of real possibilities, that is presumably for lack of something like intuitive content to fill out the formal framework of the idea (cf. *E Ak VIII*, 224f.). Uncertain as it may be of the *real* possibility of noumenal causality, theoretical reason seems justified in affirming the *logical* possibility of the concept.

In a way, very little is granted, as Kant would insist, in granting a merely logical possibility; but the merely logical possibility may still assure the possibility of important types of discourse. Once assured of the *logical* possibility of noumenal causality, for instance, or of a deity that cannot be experienced, we are not yet assured of the *real* possibility, let alone the actuality, of such a thing, but we can go on to discuss those questions (which Kant, of course, proposes to do only on practical grounds and for exclusively practical purposes). If the notion of a problematic concept is philosophically sound, as I have argued, then we are not justified in dismissing all such concepts out of hand, and we have no good *philosophical* reason for supposing that Kant cannot really have meant what he is most naturally read as having said about them.

6. Two Worlds or One?

There remains the question whether Kant’s phenomena and noumena are the *same* objects or *distinct*. The question is one of *token*-identity; Kant clearly does not hold that noumena are in general of the same *types* as phenomena. The emphasis that has been laid on this question seems to me misleading. A Kant who would offer us one world instead of two, with things in themselves that are somehow identical with the familiar objects of experience, may have seemed to some philosophers less bizarre, or ontologically more economical. But the issue of identity hardly has foundational importance for the theory of noumena. Any answer to it must be derivative in relation to Kant’s more fundamental commitments.

Kant does not give a clear answer of his own; or rather, he speaks on both sides of the question. There is no doubt that he sometimes treats phenomena and noumena as the same objects, as in the Preface to the second edition of the first *Critique*, where he speaks of “the ... distinction of things as objects

of experience from the very same [things] as things in themselves” (B xxvii).²³ In other formulations, however, they sound like numerically different objects, as when he speaks of “beings of the understanding [*Verstandeswesen*] corresponding to the beings of the senses [*Sinnenwesen*]” (B 308).

Kant’s principles, strictly understood, do not allow a sweeping answer to the question of token-identity, but require different answers, and in some cases agnostic ones, for different kinds of beings, depending on the different characteristics allowed them. When practical reason is allowed into the discussion, it is clear that Kant postulates both noumena that definitely are identical with some phenomena and noumena that definitely are not. We ourselves are the prime example of the former. Kant’s solution of the problem of free will and determinism implies that “one and the same acting being *as appearance*” is causally determined within the system of nature but “at the same time considered *as noumenon*” is free of that determination “with respect to the same event” (*KpV* Ak V,114).²⁴ Freedom carries with it “a being (myself) that belongs to the world of the senses [*Sinnenwelt*] yet at the same time” can be thought, indeed cognized [*erkannt*] “as belonging to the intelligible [world]” (*KpV* Ak V,105).

On the other hand Kant holds that “there may also be beings of the understanding [*Verstandeswesen*] to which our sensible faculty of intuition has no reference [*Beziehung*]²⁵ at all” (B 309). One such being, indeed, he believes in on practical grounds; for *God* is not an object of our intuition or experience at all.

We ourselves, as agents, are both phenomena and noumena; *God* is only a noumenon.²⁶ It is harder to say about *bodies*.²⁷ Here we must recall that our question is about token-identity, or identity *de re*. As regards qualitative or

²³ Cf. B xxvi and the note at B xviii. These texts are much emphasized by Gerold Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1974), pp. 32ff.; and by Merold Westphal, “In Defense of the Thing in Itself,” *Kant-Studien*, 59 (1968): 120f. In other respects I am broadly sympathetic with Westphal’s interpretation.

²⁴ The note in *KpV* at Ak V,6 has a similar implication.

²⁵ I translate *Beziehung* here as “reference” rather than “relation,” because I think the point is that the beings in question would in no way be *objects* of our intuition. Kant presumably does not mean to exclude that they might be related to our intuition as in some way *grounds* of it, since the prime example he probably has in mind is *God*, who would be a ground of everything.

²⁶ At B 306 Kant explicitly allows for noumena standing in both these relations to experience and phenomena, as pointed out by Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 239. The same double implication may be found in B 308f.

²⁷ The argument that bodies (as well as minds) must be identified with the noumena, if any, that ground them, in order to avoid an illegitimate transcendent employment of the category of causality does not convince me. Kant’s talk about noumena (thinkably) grounding phenomena is an instance of the legitimate use of a problematic concept of noumenal causality, which I discussed at the end of section 5 above.

type-identity, Kant is committed, in his practical philosophy, to regarding certain noumena—both God and our noumenal selves—as thinking beings, or at any rate as exercising understanding and volition, though not in time. But I see no comparable reason in Kant for regarding any noumenon as qualitatively material in itself. He repeatedly says or implies that matter is not a thing in itself,²⁸ and acknowledges a relevant asymmetry between “thinking” and “corporeal” nature, holding that there is an *idea*, “that is, a representation that transcends experience,” corresponding to the former but not to the latter. No idea is possible in regard to corporeal nature “because in it we are led solely by sensible intuition,” whereas “the psychological fundamental concept” expressed by ‘I’ “contains a priori a certain form of thought, namely the unity of thought” (A 684 = B 712). In other words, when we try to conceive of thought as something beyond experience, a certain conceptual form remains; but when we try to conceive of matter or the corporeal as something beyond experience, the whole content of the concept falls away with the forms and empirical data of intuition. Behind these claims may lie a view of the concepts of matter and the corporeal as tied to spatiality²⁹ more tightly than Kant could allow the concept of thought to be tied to temporality. As I have indicated, however, these considerations bear on qualitative issues, about the characteristics that may be ascribed to noumena as such, rather than on issues of identity *de re*. Even if we grant that no noumenon is *qualitatively* material *in itself*, it still remains to consider the hypothesis that some noumena are *token-identical* with things that are material *in appearance*.

Kant’s claim that noumena must definitely not be in space or time suggests an argument against the hypothesis. What remains of the identity of a body when all its spatiotemporal characteristics are taken away? This is probably not a conclusive argument, however. It presupposes that spatiotemporal properties are essential to bodies, or part of their identity conditions. That seems plausible enough regarding bodies as empirical objects, but I doubt that a Kantian should think that empirical objects, as appearances, have metaphysically strong identity conditions, or essential properties in the metaphysically strong sense required to ground claims about identity with

²⁸ Cf. Rudolf Eisler, *Kant-Lexicon* (Berlin: 1930; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), s.v. *Materie*. See also A 379f.: “The *transcendental object* that underlies outer appearances, as well as that which underlies inner intuition, is neither matter nor a thinking being in itself, but a ground, to us unknown, of the appearances that provide us with the empirical concept of the former as well the latter kind.” This statement may seem to deny the thinking character as flatly as the materiality of noumena, but it can be understood in the light of a suggestion in the following paragraph that “a thinking being” here is one that thinks, as we do, *in time*; the reference is to “purely thinking beings (that is according to the form of our inner sense)” (A 380). For help in understanding this text I am indebted to Karl Ameriks and to an anonymous referee for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

²⁹ Cf. B 18 and *MAN*. I have been helped on this point by an unpublished paper of Karl Ameriks on “Kant and Mind: Mere Immaterialism.”

noumena. What the unity and intelligibility of experience require us to judge about the identity of appearances probably does not go beyond whatever can be understood in terms of criteria of reidentification, and should not have implications for their identity with anything that transcends experience. For resolution of the strongly metaphysical issue of the token-identity of phenomena with noumena I think we must fall back on broader metaphysical considerations—and of course on considerations of practical reason.

What can be said more definitely is that Kantian noumena *may*, at least, be so different from bodies as known in sense experience and science that token-identity of the latter with the former would not add much to the realism of Kant's view of objects of experience. The noumena not only lack spatiotemporal properties. Kant gives us no reason to believe that there is more than one noumenal ground of all corporeal phenomena, corresponding to the many bodies,³⁰ or that any such noumenon is corporeal in any sense other than that of grounding corporeal phenomena. It is important to Kant's "empirical realism" to be able to say that bodies are distinct from each other, and have spatiotemporal properties. Some or all of these claims can be made about experienced bodies only insofar as they are different from Kantian noumena.

With respect to the possible identity of bodies with noumena Kant probably cannot get beyond agnosticism. This indeed is as far as Kant's *theoretical* philosophy can go with regard to minds *or* bodies. I do not see that he has a compelling theoretical justification for identifying any "appearances" or phenomenal objects with their noumenal "ground, to us unknown" (A 379f.). His *practical* philosophy does offer reasons of great weight, at least in a Kantian context, for identifying our own phenomenal minds with their noumenal grounds. Kant's practical philosophy, however, does not similarly include a belief that anything with which bodies could appropriately be identified is among the noumenal grounds of appearances; nor do I see any reason in it for such a belief.

Kant's philosophy as a whole, therefore, gives more reason to believe that minds are identical with something noumenal and ultimately real, than to suppose that bodies are. (It also gives more reason for believing that some sort of thought characterizes some things as they are in themselves than for believing that materiality does.) This should not surprise us, given Kant's

³⁰ That the supposed "supersensible substratum of matter is divided according to its monads in the same way as I divide matter itself" is at best an *unjustifiable* assumption from a Kantian point of view. Kant seems at least once to have thought it simply *false*; but the reason he gives, that if it were true, "the monad ... would be transferred into space, where it ceases to be a noumenon and is again itself composite," seems itself to need further explanation. (Why would multiplicity of the corresponding monads transfer them into space or make them composite?) I quote from *E Ak VIII*, 209n; the reference is drawn from the highly relevant discussion in Ameriks, "Recent Work on Kant's Theoretical Philosophy," p. 10.

heavy dependence on practical reason for beliefs about noumena. Do we not have much more pressing moral reasons to believe in the ultimate reality of minds than to believe in the ultimate reality of bodies? Surely we do.³¹

³¹ Versions of this paper have been presented to philosophy colloquia at Cornell and Syracuse Universities, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Colorado at Boulder, and to a meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America. I am grateful to David Weissman and Allen Wood for their written comments, and to other participants in those discussions, particularly to George Bealer, Hannah Ginsborg, Peter van Inwagen, Houston Smit, and Daniel Warren, as well as to an anonymous referee for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, for other comments that have helped in revising the paper.