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Noumenal Ignorance: Why, for Kant, Can't We Know Things in Themselves?

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Nothing is so firmly believed, as that which we least know.

– Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Introduction

Kant is famous for distinguishing between things as they appear to us (“appearances [*Erscheinungen*],” phenomena), and things as they are “in themselves” or as we think of them (*Dinge an sich*, noumena). *Transcendental Idealism* is the thesis (roughly) that some of the most important features of appearances –including their spatiotemporal-causal features – originate *not* in the world but in the perceiving or cognizing mind itself. *Noumenal Ignorance* is the following related but distinct thesis:

Noumenal Ignorance: We cannot cognize or have any substantive positive synthetic knowledge about particular things in themselves.

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It is crucial to note that the truth of *Noumenal Ignorance* is consistent with the claim that we have knowledge of *analytic* truths regarding things in themselves (such as: things in themselves are things). It is also consistent with the claim that we have *very general* synthetic knowledge about them (such as: some things in themselves affect us and thereby ground appearances) and/or negative knowledge about them (such as: things in themselves are not in space and time in the way that appearances are). Furthermore, *Noumenal Ignorance* is consistent with the claim that we can *think* coherently about things in themselves (hence: “nou-mena”) and that some of those thoughts are preferable to others for theoretical and/or practical reasons. Finally, *Noumenal Ignorance* is consistent with the claim that we can have rational belief or “faith” (*Vernunftglaube*) concerning the substantive properties of particular things in themselves. We do not propose to defend the truth of any of these claims here. We just want to point out that they are consistent with *Noumenal Ignorance*.

It is also crucial to note that *Noumenal Ignorance* is not entailed by *Transcendental Idealism*. One might think that the spatiotemporal-categorical structure of the world is not fundamentally real, and thus count as a transcendental idealist, and yet still hold that we can *know* some informative truths about whatever *is* fundamental. Kant himself held this combination of positions in the 1770 text typically referred to as “The Inaugural Dissertation” (officially titled *Dissertation on the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*). For the 1770 Kant, space and time are a function of the transaction between mind and world, but ultimate or “intelligible” reality is still at least partially knowable.

By 1781, Kant has changed his mind about the latter point and argues, in the first *Critique*, that fundamental reality “in itself” is not knowable (or, more precisely, that we cannot know anything substantive and positive about particular things in themselves). In the first part of this chapter, we look at a few leading Anglophone interpretations of Kant’s argument for *Noumenal Ignorance*. We group these into two different camps: the first camp contains commentators who presuppose a “one-world” view of *Transcendental Idealism*; the second contains commentators who work with a “two-world” view. Although this grouping has been useful to us in discussing the state of play regarding *Noumenal Ignorance*, it is not our goal here to discuss the debate between one-world and two-world theorists in any detail.¹

¹ For more on *Transcendental Idealism*, see Paul Guyer’s chapter in this volume.

In the second part of the chapter, each of us sketches his own account of *Noumenal Ignorance*. The first (Naranjo Sandoval) emphasizes some of the logical and semantic themes related to this doctrine and claims that the reason we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves is that to know objects we must be able to *refer* to them – in a sense explained later on – and that we cannot, in this same sense, refer to things in themselves. The second (Chignell) suggests that Kant’s evolving views about the metaphysics and epistemology of *modality* in the critical period are what ultimately motivate his commitment to *Noumenal Ignorance*.

As may already be apparent, there are many different roads leading to *Noumenal Ignorance*. It is possible – even likely – that Kant himself recognized this, and that this explains why he seems to defend the doctrine differently in different passages. But, again, the main goals of the present chapter are to present some important recent accounts of the doctrine and then articulate what we each take to be Kant’s most significant argument for it.

One-world ignorance

Allison: Discursivity + Epistemic conditions = Ignorance

Henry Allison’s seminal book, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, appeared in 1983 and initiated a vigorous reappraisal of the nature, scope, and cogency of Kant’s arguments for *Transcendental Idealism* and *Noumenal Ignorance*. Although the view Allison defended was original in many important respects, it also drew on (and made accessible in English) Gerold Prauss’s influential picture articulated earlier in *Erscheinung bei Kant* (1971) and other writings. Because the view ascribes a one-world metaphysics to Kant and thus avoids what many analytic philosophers regard as the most pernicious forms of idealism, Allison’s interpretation also drew new readers to the first *Critique*. After twenty years of discussion and criticism, Allison released a heavily revised version of his book; this 2004 edition is the one from which we will quote here.

Allison’s central thesis is that *Noumenal Ignorance* follows from

- (i) Kant’s commitment to what Allison calls “the discursivity thesis” and
- (ii) Kant’s way of cashing out the distinction between things in themselves and appearances.

Regarding (i): The “discursivity thesis” says that human cognition arises from the combined operation of the receptive faculty of sensibility *and* the spontaneous faculty of understanding via concepts.² Allison does not think that Kant explicitly argues for the first part of the thesis – namely that objects have to be “given” to us in what he calls “sensible intuition.” But he does believe Kant endorses that broadly empiricist point in passages like this: “It comes along with our nature that **intuition** can never be other than **sensible**, i.e., that it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects. . . . Without sensibility no object would be given to us” (A51/B75).

According to Allison, the arguments of the Transcendental Aesthetic constitute a case for this first part of the thesis, since they conclude with a commitment to what Allison calls “*sensible* epistemic conditions.” For Allison, an *epistemic condition* is a condition under which a subject with faculties like ours is able to represent, cognize, and know about a domain of objects.³ The epistemic conditions imposed by the structure of sensibility, according to Kant, are twofold: all of the objects or states we can cognize must exist along a single temporal continuum, and all of the *outer* objects or states we can cognize must be related to one another in a unitary space.

But, Allison emphasizes, “sensible intuition alone is not *sufficient* to yield cognition of objects . . . it provides the data for such cognition but does not itself amount to cognition.”⁴ Hence the second part of the discursivity thesis: there are *conceptual* as well as sensible epistemic conditions on human cognition. Thus the arguments of the Transcendental Analytic are designed to show that the “material” or “data” given to us in intuition *must* be such that it is able to be brought under general rules or concepts. The universality of this feature, which Allison calls the “original orderability” of the sensible material, can obtain only on the assumption that such orderability is “a contribution of the cognitive subject.”⁵

Allison takes the following quote from Kant to reveal as much: “The capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations *through the way* [*durch die Art*] in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility” (A19/B33, emphasis added). This is pretty slim evidence, but Allison takes “way” here

² “To claim that human cognition is discursive is to claim that it requires both concepts and sensible intuition” (Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, rev. ed. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004], 13).

³ “By an epistemic condition is here understood a necessary condition for the representation of objects, that is, a condition without which our representations would not relate to objects or, equivalently, possess objective reality” (*ibid.*, 11).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

to refer to the manner in which sensible intuition is given – it is and must be given in a “way” that makes it susceptible to conceptualization, and at least part of this “way” is determined by the formal structures of the mind.

Regarding (ii): Allison says that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves has to be understood in relation to the epistemic conditions discussed under (i). That is, to talk about “appearances [*Erscheinungen*]” or empirical “objects [*Objecte*]” is to consider entities *as satisfying* the sensible and conceptual epistemic conditions under which alone we are able to cognize them. To talk about “things in themselves” is to consider *the same entities* independently of those epistemic conditions.⁶ It follows from this, almost by definition, that while there is only one world of entities, these things cannot be cognized when considered independently of these conditions (that is, they cannot be cognized as things in themselves).⁷ Allison does not say much about the difference between cognition and knowledge, but since he calls these *epistemic* conditions, he presumably thinks that without *cognition* of things in themselves, we also cannot have substantive synthetic *knowledge* of them.

Langton: Receptivity + Irreducibility = Ignorance

Other commentators develop accounts that, like Prauss’s and Allison’s, take Kant to be positing one “world” or set of entities, but depart from them in offering fundamentally *metaphysical* rather than *epistemological* motivations for the doctrine of *Noumenal Ignorance*. Rae Langton (and more recently Lucy Allais, Tobias Rosefeldt, Kristopher McDaniel, and one of the present authors [Chignell]) argue that the appearance/thing in itself distinction is ultimately grounded in a distinction between types of *properties*. Although the differences between these various “metaphysical one-world” pictures are illuminating and worth discussing, here we will focus on Langton’s account as articulated in *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (1998).⁸

⁶ Allison follows Prauss in providing a series of key quotations in which Kant himself speaks of the distinction as one about how one and the same set of entities is “considered [*betrachtet*]” – either under epistemic conditions or not (*ibid.*, 52–57).

⁷ This does not mean that, for Allison, *Noumenal Ignorance* is a trivial or purely conceptual truth. For, as he correctly points out, “this would follow only if the distinction [between appearances and things in themselves] were itself obvious or trivial. But this is far from the case with the transcendental distinction, which . . . rests upon a radical reconceptualization of human knowledge as based on . . . epistemic conditions” (*ibid.*, 19).

⁸ See Lucy Allais, “Kant’s One World: Interpreting ‘Transcendental Idealism,’” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12, no. 4 (Nov. 2004): 655–84; Lucy Allais, *Manifest Reality: Kant’s Idealism and*

According to Langton, Kant's claim that we cannot know things in themselves is best understood as the claim that we cannot know the "intrinsic natures" of the (one world of) substances that exist. That is, we cannot know the intrinsic properties of things (properties that are instantiated even in worlds where the substance is completely alone).⁹ Langton's argument for this appeals to texts that suggest that the distinction between things in themselves and appearances seems to just be the distinction between *substances in respect of their intrinsic properties* and *substances in respect of their key extrinsic properties*.¹⁰ She then argues that our minds are affected by another substance in respect of the latter's relational (and thus extrinsic) properties, but not by its intrinsic properties. (Affection is a relation, after all.) In Kant's words, appearances "consist entirely of relations" (A285/B341), and "**we have no insight into the inner in things**" (A277/B333). More expansively:

Now through mere relations no thing in itself is cognized; it is therefore right to judge that since nothing is given to us through outer sense except mere representations of relation, outer sense can also contain in its representation only the relation of an object to the subject, and not that which is internal to the object in itself. (B67)

Clearly if all of our perceptual knowledge of the world comes by way of receptivity to what affects us, then the only way we could know about things in themselves is by *inferring* from knowledge of relational properties to knowledge of intrinsic properties. In other words, the fact that perception involves an affection relation between world and mind does not just entail that the only properties that can be known (especially by way of inference) are relational. Rather, Langton's Kant also believes, *contra*

His Realism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tobias Rosefeldt, "Dinge an sich und sekundäre Qualitäten," in *Kant in der Gegenwart*, ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 167–209; Kris McDaniel, "A Philosophical Model of the Relation between Things in Themselves and Appearances," *Noûs* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 2015): 643–64; and Andrew Chignell, "Skepticism, Common Sense, and Mind-Dependence," in *The Sensible and Intelligible Worlds*, ed. Karl Schafer and Nicholas Stang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁹ See Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 18. Langton quotes from the Kemp Smith edition, which sometimes translates Kant's *das Innere und Äussere* as "the intrinsic and the extrinsic." The Guyer/Wood translation uses more literal (and possibly less technical) terminology: "the **inner** and the **outer**" (A265/B321).

¹⁰ See, for example: "The inner determinations of a *substantia phaenomenon* in space . . . are nothing but relations, and it is itself entirely a sum total of mere relations. . . . As object of the pure understanding, on the contrary, every substance must have inner determinations and forces that pertain to its inner reality" (A265/B321).

Leibniz, that relational (extrinsic) properties cannot be ontologically reduced to (that is, do not even supervene on) categorial (intrinsic) ones. This means that we have no inferential route from facts about the one to facts about the other, and thus cannot know things in themselves. In Langton's words:

Receptivity implies that we can have knowledge of what can affect us. Irreducibility implies, in Kant's view, that intrinsic properties cannot affect us. If Kant maintains this view throughout his philosophical career – as I shall argue he does – then one can trace a path to humility [i.e., *Noumenal Ignorance*]. If substances affect us, but it is not through their intrinsic properties that we are affected, then their intrinsic properties remain unknown.¹¹

One of the biggest concerns about Langton's view, raised most prominently by Karl Ameriks, is that this "short argument" to humility (from receptivity and irreducibility) seems to leave no role for Kant's idealism about space and time to play, not to mention the other key arguments of the Aesthetic and Analytic. Kant himself, though, seems to indicate that idealism is part of what ultimately underwrites *Noumenal Ignorance* (which Langton calls "humility"). This may not be a concern for Langton in the end, since she openly admits that her metaphysical one-world picture is not meant to be a form of genuine idealism after all.¹²

Two-world ignorance

Van Cleve: Receptivity + Reducibility = Ignorance

In his influential study of the first *Critique*, *Problems from Kant* (1999), James Van Cleve allows that, for Kant, we can know about some of the "*relational* or *structural* features of things in themselves" – such as that they ground appearances.¹³ Hence he agrees with Langton that what Kant means by

¹¹ Langton, *Kantian Humility*, 5.

¹² For Ameriks's criticism, see Karl Ameriks, "Kant and Short Arguments to Humility," in *Interpreting Kant's "Critiques"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 135–57. For Langton's assessment of her own view, consider: "[My interpretation] does ascribe to a notorious idealist a position that is not idealism, not anti-realism of any kind, but rather epistemic humility" (Langton, *Kantian Humility*, 6).

¹³ James Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 136. Van Cleve also suggests that it might be possible to know that there is *some* structural similarity (if not outright isomorphism) between facts about things in themselves and facts about appearances (*ibid.*, 155–62).

Noumenal Ignorance is only that we cannot have knowledge of the *intrinsic* properties of fundamentalia.

Van Cleve's argument for this reading of *Noumenal Ignorance* makes use of the following components:

- (i) A "two-world" account of the distinction between things in themselves and appearances.
- (ii) A specific interpretation of Kant's theory of relational and intrinsic properties.
- (iii) Kant's claim that we can only know objects through their powers to affect us.

With respect to (ii) and (iii), Van Cleve's view is similar to Langton's, as we will see in a moment. But with respect to (i) there is a big difference: Van Cleve follows other prominent Anglophone commentators (such as Paul Guyer, Jonathan Bennett, and P. F. Strawson) in ascribing full-blown metaphysical idealism to Kant (although Van Cleve seems to find this part of Kant's philosophy more palatable than these earlier commentators do). According to this kind of idealism, the existence and key features of appearances ontologically depend on minds that can cognize them, while the existence and intrinsic features of things in themselves do not.¹⁴ As evidence, Van Cleve points to passages in which Kant gives a deflationary account of appearances, such as: "appearances do not exist in themselves, but only relative to the same [cognizing] being, insofar as it has senses" (B164). He also cites those in which Kant expresses the counterpart claim regarding things in themselves: "that [something] should exist in itself without relation to our senses and possible experience, could of course be said if we were talking about a thing in itself" (A493/B521–22). It follows, according to Van Cleve, that appearances are *phenomenal* – all truths about them are reducible to or "derivable from truths about states of perceivers."¹⁵ This also means that appearances and things in themselves are of different ontological kinds: there are "two worlds" that are metaphysically distinct – the phenomenal world and the noumenal world.

¹⁴ "In dozens of passages, Kant tells us that appearances have no being apart from being represented. . . . Things in themselves, by contrast, are things that exist independently of human representation or cognition. They exist whether perceived or not and have whatever properties they do independently of us" (*ibid.*, 6–7).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

One of the main differences between these two worlds has to do with whether the objects in them consist of mere relations or not. For Van Cleve, as for Langton, appearances are *constituted* by all and only relational properties. So when we cognize them we are cognizing relations that they bear to each other, to themselves and their parts, as well as to space and time and to our minds. As Kant says: “everything in our cognition that belongs to intuition . . . contains nothing but mere relations, of places in one intuition (extension), alteration of places (motion), and laws in accordance with which this alteration is determined (moving forces)” (B66–67).

Van Cleve and Langton also agree that this is not the case with things in themselves: they do have intrinsic or inner properties. Van Cleve’s argument to this conclusion relies on the view that Kant endorses a broadly Leibnizian view of relations, according to which the relational properties of things in themselves supervene on their intrinsic properties.¹⁶ He reads Kant as saying as much when he states: “if I think of mere things in general, then the difference in the outer relations certainly does not constitute a difference in the things themselves, but rather presupposes this” (A280/B336). If this is correct, then it follows that knowing the relational properties of things in themselves (as they affect us) is not to know everything about them: further and more fundamental facts about things in themselves always remain.

At this point, the crucial claim is (iii): we only know objects in virtue of the dispositional properties they have to affect us or other objects.¹⁷ Van Cleve does not explicitly cite his evidence for attributing this view to Kant. Arguably, however, he has in mind passages where Kant claims that intuition is needed for the cognition of objects – as in the well-known dictum: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” Intuitions, moreover, are “the way in which we are affected by objects” (A51/B75).

The key is that, for Van Cleve, such dispositional properties are not intrinsic to objects – they are either relational properties themselves or “powers . . . that are manifestable in [these relational properties].”¹⁸ This

¹⁶ Van Cleve claims that this thesis “underlines two of his assumptions in the ‘Amphiboly’ section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: things in themselves cannot have their nature exhausted by relations, and they cannot differ numerically without differing qualitatively” (*ibid.*, 47). Even though they both agree on the conclusion – that is, that things in themselves have intrinsic properties – this is in sharp contrast to Langton’s views, according to which Kant originally held the reducibility of relations in the pre-critical period but later on came to believe that relational properties are irreducible to intrinsic ones.

¹⁷ “The only properties *we know of* in external things are their powers to affect us” (Van Cleve, *Problems from Kant*, 153).

is because dispositional properties do not satisfy the definition of intrinsicity that Van Cleve attributes to Kant, according to which an intrinsic property is one that the object has in every world in which it exists.¹⁹ The sugar cube's disposition to dissolve in water, for example, is not intrinsic, since it is a power that sugar has only in worlds with laws similar to ours. In other words, there are worlds in which sugar cubes exist and yet the laws of nature differ such that the sugar cubes do not dissolve in water.²⁰

So Van Cleve's Kant thinks, in sum, that we can only know objects in virtue of knowing the dispositional properties they have to affect us, but those properties (or powers in which those properties are "manifestable") are not intrinsic – they are relations between objects and minds. If our knowledge is always of non-intrinsic manifestations of powers, then we cannot know anything about the intrinsic properties of things. This does not threaten our knowledge of phenomenal objects, however: after all, their very existence consists in such relational properties – that is all there is to know about them. The opposite is the case, however, with things in themselves: they are more than mere relations – they have intrinsic, non-relational features. Given Kant's account of cognition it looks like substantive knowledge of those features, at the very least, always escapes us.

But a puzzle remains: Why could we not "recover" some information about the intrinsic properties of things by knowing them through their dispositions to affect us? That is, given that Van Cleve holds that the relational properties of things in themselves are reducible to their intrinsic properties, it is not clear why we cannot infer from our knowledge of the former to at least some knowledge of the latter. Here Langton's view may have the advantage: her claim that relational properties of things in themselves are irreducible blocks off any inferential path toward knowledge of the intrinsic properties of things.

¹⁹ More precisely, Van Cleve references Moore's test: P is intrinsic if and only if "when anything possesses it, that same thing or anything exactly like it would *necessarily* or *must* always, under all circumstances, possess it in exactly the same degree" (*ibid.*, 152).

²⁰ Some metaphysicians would disagree with Van Cleve here and claim that dispositions are categorial, intrinsic properties that are only "triggered" in the right kinds of circumstances.

Hogan: Freedom + Practical knowledge = (Theoretical) ignorance

Desmond Hogan is not primarily concerned to offer a reconstruction of Kant's arguments for *Noumenal Ignorance*; rather, he seeks to explain how Kant could both describe things in themselves as unknowable and yet also claim certainty (and thus knowledge) of some substantive features of them. Indeed, the kind of ignorance claim that he focuses on is unusual because it results from a substantive metaphysical claim. This metaphysical claim also plays a key role in Kant's argument for the subjectivity of space and time and in this way *indirectly* helps to motivate his more general restriction of our knowledge to appearances.²¹

According to Hogan, when Kant says that we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves, he at times simply means that this knowledge exceeds our cognitive capacities and at others that there is *no ground through which* certain key features of things in themselves could be known. Hogan's focus is on the latter claim – although it is important to note that he does not think that *Noumenal Ignorance* is exhausted by it.

Hogan's reconstruction relies on three key ideas:

- (i) At times, “*a priori* knowledge” means, for Kant, “knowledge through the ground.”
- (ii) There are no grounds through which free actions can be known.
- (iii) For the critical Kant, we have practical knowledge that we are free.

Regarding (i): Hogan recognizes that in some passages “*a priori* knowledge” means “non-empirical knowledge.” He plausibly contends, however, that in other passages the phrase refers to a concept that Kant inherited from his rationalist predecessors – namely, “knowledge through the ground.” On this understanding, we know something *a priori* “when we understand it ‘through’ the thing or things that ground it metaphysically.”²² So someone knows *a priori* that the sun rises every morning only if she knows *a priori* the complex facts about planetary motion that ground our observation of sunrises.

²¹ All citations are from Desmond Hogan, “How to Know Unknowable Things in Themselves,” *Noûs* 43, no. 1 (March 2009): 49–63. Hogan has expanded on some of the details of his view in Desmond Hogan, “Noumenal Affection,” *Philosophical Review* 118, no. 4 (Oct. 2009): 501–32.

²² Hogan, “How to Know Unknowable Things in Themselves,” 52.

Hogan offers both textual and philosophical reasons to think that Kant was, at least sometimes, trading on this secondary meaning of “*a priori* knowledge.” One of the key passages is found in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*: “time could not precede the objects as a determination or order attaching to the things themselves as their condition and be cognized and intuited *a priori* through synthetic propositions” (A33/B49). Setting aside some complexities, Hogan’s claim is that Kant is not only making the *epistemological* point that, if the fundamental structure of time depended on things in themselves, then any *a priori* knowledge of this structure would exceed our cognitive capacities. Rather, he is also making the *metaphysical* point that there would be *no grounds through which* synthetic propositions about the structure of time could be non-empirically known. This suggests (according to Hogan) that the sense of *a priori* at play here is “knowledge through the ground.”²³

Hogan’s innovative suggestion, then, is that Kant’s claim that we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves means (at least sometimes) that there are important features of reality that simply lack a ground through which they could be non-empirically known. Most significantly, Hogan argues, Kant follows the Pietist theologian and philosopher Christian August Crusius in holding that the *free acts* of human beings necessarily lack a ground through which they can be known: “Kant does not merely think that *a priori* knowledge of free acts exceeds our cognitive powers. He rather means to point out that in the case of a feature of reality lacking a determining ground there is nothing through which it could be cognized in principle.”²⁴

As evidence for this reading of the argument for *Noumenal Ignorance*, Hogan points to passages in which Kant expresses the incompatibilist sentiment that, on the assumption that we are free, there are no antecedent causes determining our actions and hence no grounds through which they could be known²⁵:

²³ In fact, these two senses of “*a priori* knowledge” are related. For Hogan, Kant held that knowledge through the ground depends on non-empirical knowledge precisely *because* we cannot know via empirical observation alone the causes or grounds of things – non-empirical principles are ultimately required for this purpose. In our example regarding sunrises, some causes could be known empirically, but in the last analysis one would have to invoke either the Principle of Contradiction, if the truths involved are necessary, or the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This allows Hogan to read some of Kant’s *epistemic* claims that we cannot non-empirically know some things – which is by far the most frequent formulation of *Noumenal Ignorance* – as *metaphysical* claims that there are no grounds through which these things could be known.

²⁴ Hogan, “How to Know Unknowable Things in Themselves,” 56.

²⁵ Note that this interpretation of *Noumenal Ignorance* is not limited to the unknowability of facts regarding agents. In conversation Hogan has indicated that, since free acts are unknowable, and since

[In the case of free actions] the conditions are lacking under which reason can comprehend [*einsehen*] something; these are the determining grounds. But our free actions have no determining grounds, thus we also cannot comprehend them. This is a ground for comprehending the limits of the understanding [*Dieses ist ein Grund, die Schranken des Verstandes einzusehen*], but not for denying the matter. (LM 28:271)²⁶

Note that Hogan's reading also depends on (iii): the claim that Kant held that we can have (practical) knowledge (*Wissen*), and not merely belief (*Glaube*), that we are free. He presents evidence for that conclusion from Kant's mature writings; for example²⁷:

[There is] one idea of reason (which is . . . incapable of theoretical proof of its possibility) among the facts, and that is the idea of **freedom**, the reality of which, as a particular kind of causality . . . can be established through practical laws of pure reason. . . . It is the only one among all the ideas of pure reason whose object is a fact [*deren Gegenstand Tatsache ist*] and which must be counted among the *scibilia*. (CJ 5:468)²⁸

So Hogan's overall picture is that Kant thinks we can know (practically, at the very least) that we are free, and this prevents us from having *a priori* knowledge (that is, knowledge through the ground) of any of our free acts. Since the phenomenal world has been shown, in other parts of the *Critique*, to be fully deterministic, these unknowable free acts must occur at the level of things in themselves, and the knowable world of appearances must be ontologically distinct from the world of things in themselves. Thus the doctrine that things in themselves are *not* in space

agents can freely act on (some) features of reality, it follows that those features of reality are unknowable too, in the sense that they lack grounds through which they could be known.

²⁶ Another clear passage presented by Hogan is: "[contingent changes such as free actions], in so far as they appear to have about them an indeterminacy in respect of determining grounds and necessary laws, harbour within themselves a possibility of deviating from the general tendency of natural things towards perfection" (OPA 2:110–11).

²⁷ Hogan is in good company in this regard: Allison and Ameriks have also defended the claim that, at the time Kant wrote the first edition of the first *Critique*, he believed that there is theoretical proof that we are absolutely free. See Karl Ameriks, *Kant's Theory of Mind: An Analysis of the Paralogisms of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 189–98; and Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chs. 1–3.

²⁸ Hogan recognizes that in passages like this it seems that absolute freedom could only be known to be real *if* we know that the moral law is binding. Hence it seems that absolute freedom has only practical (and not theoretical) grounding. But, he alleges, Kant holds that facts that have practical grounding have the same epistemic standing as facts that have theoretical grounding (CPrR 5:121; RP 20:310).

and time is “something against which not the least ground for uncertainty can be raised” (Pro 4:289); it is “not just a mere hypothesis, . . . but a demonstrated truth” (RP 20:268). Likewise, “it is . . . indubitably certain, and not merely possible or even probable, that space and time, as the necessary conditions of all (outer and inner) experience, are merely subjective conditions of all our intuition” (A48–49).

Hogan’s emphasis on freedom as a motivation for one of Kant’s signature doctrines raises an exegetical concern. If Kant really thought that our inability to know anything *a priori* about free action is part of the *motive* for *Noumenal Ignorance* (not to mention *Transcendental Idealism*), then why did he not just come out and *say* it in the early parts of the *Critique*? Why did he focus almost entirely on the arguments from geometry, chronometry, and the principles of pure understanding instead?

A second concern is that the view ends up giving us a surprising amount of knowledge of things in themselves. Yes, we cannot know *a priori* precisely what an incompatibilistically free agent did or will choose, but we do know (practically) that there *is* such freedom (as Hogan-*cum*-Kant claims), that it must exist at the non-deterministic level of things in themselves, and that it must be exemplified by minds or mind-like substances (the bearers of free will). This makes it seem as though the spirit (if not the letter) of *Noumenal Ignorance* has been left behind.

The logical and semantic side of *noumenal ignorance* (Naranjo Sandoval)

Let us take a step back. Recall that Kant’s official rationale for why we cannot know things in themselves is that in order to cognize an object we need to have both intuitions of it and concepts that apply to it:

In the analytical part of the critique it is proved . . . that we have no concepts of the understanding and hence no elements for the cognition of things except insofar as an intuition can be given corresponding to these concepts, consequently that we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition, i.e. as an appearance. (Bxxv-xxvi; see also B165, B146)

Kant clearly says that we can *think* about things in themselves – that is, subsume them under concepts in accordance with purely logical laws – and so what we lack in order to cognize such things are intuitions of

them.²⁹ This immediately raises two questions: First, what does Kant mean when he says that we do not have intuitions of things in themselves? Second, why are intuitions required for us to cognize – and ultimately know – objects?

A full answer to the first question is one of the crown jewels of any satisfactory interpretation of *Transcendental Idealism*. For such an answer would involve, among other things, an account of the distinction between things in themselves and appearances, as well as a picture of the kind of knowledge that can result from our interaction – through either affection or causation – with them. Given the intense interest in Kant’s idealism, discussions of *Noumenal Ignorance* have largely focused on answering the first question. The second question, however, is frequently neglected. In my view, this is a serious omission: to understand *why* our lack of intuitions of things in themselves precludes our knowing them it is not enough to show that and why there *is* this lack. Rather, we also need to understand why intuitions are necessary for knowledge of things in the first place. The way to do this, I think, is to study and contrast the role that intuitions and concepts play in Kant’s theories of cognition, truth, reference, and knowledge.³⁰

The central goal of my interpretation, then, is to remedy this omission.³¹ Fortunately, this does not require wholesale revisions of most previous accounts of the motivations behind *Noumenal Ignorance*, since the aim in those discussions has been to answer the first question, whereas my aim is to answer the second. Van Cleve and Langton, for example, agree that *Noumenal Ignorance* is the result of Kant’s claim that we have knowledge of objects insofar as they affect us – and thus only if we have intuitions of them, since intuition “contains . . . the way in which we are affected by objects” (A51/B75). They do not specify, however, how or in what sense representations with intuitional content encode this information, or why this intuitionally-encoded information is required to have knowledge of objects.

²⁹ “Even if we cannot **cognize** [*erkennen*] . . . objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to **think** [*denken*] them as things in themselves” (Bxxvi–xxvii).

³⁰ The view sketched here is a simplified version of an interpretation that I (Naranjo Sandoval) am currently preparing for presentation elsewhere. Here, I focus mostly on Kant’s theory of truth and cognition. A fuller study, I think, would also consider the role that intuition plays in the justification of knowledge as a propositional attitude.

³¹ For an important exception, see Eric Watkins and Marcus Willaschek, “Kant’s Account of Cognition,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 1 (Jan. 2017): 83–112. See also the replies to that article (in the same volume) by Stefanie Grüne and Andrew Chignell.

In my view, the answer to this question can be located in the following two ideas. First, Kant holds that in order for epistemic agents to know an object they must be able to *refer* to it. Second, he believes that only representations that have intuitional content can genuinely refer to objects. Naturally, this assumes a technical sense of “reference” that will be explained below, one which is more stringent than the contemporary sense – for according to the latter certain definite descriptions, which Kant would consider purely conceptual representations, succeed in referring (for example, consider the description “the first man to walk on the moon”). Understanding these two claims, as well as Kant’s reasons for holding them, will occupy us for the rest of this section.

A final prefatory remark: Kant is not always clear about which kinds of mental representation he takes to be candidates for substantive knowledge – at times he uses the genus “cognition [*Erkenntnis*],” at times the species “judgment [*Urteil*].” Even if one takes Kant’s more specific usage at face value, as I will here, it is not clear that all judgments could in principle count as substantive knowledge – this is not the case with analytic judgments, for example. For this reason, I use the neutral term “t-judgments” to refer to those judgments which Kant thinks are capable of counting as substantive, non-trivial knowledge.³²

In order to understand the first claim outlined above – that is, that reference is required for knowledge – it is necessary to note that, for Kant, t-judgments are essentially representations *about* individual objects that are also *grounded on* individual objects.³³ That they are *about* objects means that t-judgments contain representations that are related by means of a copula (‘is,’ for example) and that bear an intentional relation of description or expression to actual or possible objects. That they are *grounded on* objects means that the representations contained in t-judgments bear, via intuition, a non-representational relation of grounding or determination to actual individual objects.³⁴ For example, the judgment “my copy of the first *Critique* is on the table” contains a representation of my copy of the first *Critique*. In turn, this representation is related through intuition to my copy of the book – and to

³² The “t” in “t-judgments” stands for “theoretical,” although I do not claim here that all theoretical judgments are t-judgments and vice versa. Some general features of t-judgments include that they have content and are truth-evaluable attempts at describing the world. However, commentators will disagree on further details.

³³ Here I believe that Kant uses “object” to refer to any state of affairs or feature of reality which could be cognized – these might include propositions. For a similar take on what Kant means by “object” in the context of his theory of cognition, see Houston Smit, “Kant on Marks and the Immediacy of Intuition,” *Philosophical Review* 109, no. 2 (April 2000): 239–43.

³⁴ Here I remain neutral on the nature of this relation, since explaining it would require addressing complicated issues concerning intuition and intuitional content.

no other object. In Kant's words: "Judgment is therefore the mediate cognition of an object, hence the representation of a representation of it. In every judgment there is a concept that holds of many, and that among this many also comprehends a given representation, *which is then related immediately to the object*" (A68/B93, emphasis added).³⁵

The hope, then, if one aims for true t-judgments, is that the representations contained in them accurately describe the objects which ground them. I believe that this natural thought is the guiding principle of Kant's theory of truth. Accordingly, in the introduction to the *Transcendental Logic*, he unambiguously states his commitment to a correspondence theory, according to which t-judgments are true only insofar as their informational features correspond to the features of the objects which ground them: "**What is truth?** The nominal definition of truth, namely that it is the agreement of cognition with its object, is here granted and presupposed" (A58/B82).

For our purposes, it is most relevant that Kant draws the following conclusion from his commitment to a correspondence theory: for t-judgments to be true they must contain representations that not only accurately describe their objects but also distinguish them from all others. For short, we will say that these representations *truly refer* to their objects, where we can think of a representation which truly refers as one which is "tailor-made" to its object – it "fits" that very object and no other. Kant's reasoning for this claim is best explained through an illustration.

Suppose I form the true t-judgment "the painting acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is an original Vermeer." Since my t-judgment is truth-evaluable, it must contain a representation of the painting in front of me that distinguishes it from other similar objects as a necessary condition of its truth.³⁶ For suppose it did not – suppose my representation of the original is informationally identical to my representation of the counterfeit. Then Kant's correspondence theory would not only explain the truth of my t-judgment but also – *per*

³⁵ For more on the relation between judgments and their objects in the context of Kant's views on logic, see John MacFarlane, "Frege, Kant, and the Logic in Logicism," *Philosophical Review* 111, no. 1 (Jan. 2002): 50–51.

³⁶ This is not to say that we can *consciously* distinguish between similar objects – for example, between the original and the counterfeit. It means only that our representations possess sufficient informational complexity to individuate objects from all others, provided that we can form true t-judgments about them. Note, too, that the sense of "containment" involved here is not linguistic. That is, the *sentence* expressing the content of my t-judgment contains the expression "the painting acquired by the Metropolitan Museum"; but my t-judgment also contains a representation of the painting (whether the content of this representation can be expressed by that definite description depends on one's views on the semantics of descriptions). I hope to clarify this relation of containment between the judgment and its component representations elsewhere.

impossibile – its falsity! For the t-judgment could be considered a representation of *both* the original and the counterfeit, even though it is only grounded on the former.³⁷ As a representation about the original, the correspondence between representation and object would render the t-judgment true; as a representation of the counterfeit, it would render the t-judgment false.³⁸ Kant summarizes this argument soon after subscribing to a correspondence theory:

[Since] truth consists in the agreement of a cognition with its object, then this object must thereby be distinguished from others; for a cognition is false if it does not agree with the object to which it is related even if it contains something that could well be valid of other objects. (A58/B83; see also JL 9:51)

It seems, then, that in order for t-judgments to be true they must contain representations that truly refer to their objects. It follows, under the uncontroversial assumption that knowledge entails truth, that to have knowledge of an object one must have representations that truly refer to it.³⁹ The key to my interpretation, then, is the additional claim that it is *only* possible for representations to truly refer if they have intuitional content.⁴⁰

The argument for this key claim proceeds by elimination, as do many of Kant's other arguments to the conclusion that sensibility has a certain feature. We start with the observation that we have representations that truly refer to

³⁷ Note that this means that Kant does not hold a causal (or in this case “grounding”) theory of reference. The object of the t-judgment is the ground of the t-judgment's truth or falsity, but whether the t-judgment fails or succeeds at referring to that object depends only on the informational features of its representations.

³⁸ I am left with the difficult task of explaining how certain representations describe one object and no other. I believe that Kant solved this problem by postulating a *thoroughgoing* correspondence between a true t-judgment and its object; that is, if a t-judgment about an object is true then it must contain a representation that expresses accurately and exhaustively the features of the object. This would be a natural choice given Kant's doctrine of thoroughgoing determination, according to which, given a predicate *P*, any object falls under the extension of *P* or its negation. See, for example, A571/B579. I think it is possible to avoid worries about the finiteness of our cognitive capacities by claiming that this thoroughgoing correspondence obtains between the object and the *intuitional* content of the representation, which might not be introspectible in its entirety. This would agree with our claim here that only representations with intuitional content can truly refer to objects. The defense of this claim, however, will have to await another occasion.

³⁹ For example, in his analysis of Kant's notion of knowledge (*Wissen*), Andrew Chignell includes the requirement of truth. See Andrew Chignell, “Kant's Concepts of Justification,” *Noûs* 41, no. 1 (March 2007): 57.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that, for Kant, the ability to distinguish objects from each other is not only necessary for knowledge but also epistemically beneficial for other lower, less demanding propositional attitudes, such as hypothesis and, more broadly, opinion, the epistemic merits of which come in degrees. That is, insofar as agents have representations that *better* distinguish objects from others, their cognition of these objects is epistemically improved. Elaborating on this would be part of the fuller project hinted at in note 30.

objects – this much is required, as we have seen, for the truth of substantive judgments. We know, too, that the mind contains two cognitive faculties: *sensibility* – the receptivity to the world that results in sensations and ultimately intuitions – and *understanding* – the ability to spontaneously think about the objects of these intuitions by way of concepts (A50/B74). Furthermore, these faculties are independent of one another: neither can perform the functions of the other (A52/B76). Through either the understanding or sensibility, then, we must be able to form representations that truly refer to objects. So if it can be shown that the understanding is incapable of providing these representations – as I believe it can – then our result follows.

In my view, the best way to show this is to highlight the hierarchical structure of concepts that Kant introduces in his lectures on logic and in a section of the Appendix to the *Dialectic* titled “On the regulative use of the ideas of pure reason.”⁴¹ This structure is based on the extensional notion of a “*mark* contained under a concept,” which means a representation that instantiates the concept but is not identical to it. For example, the concept “Siamese cat” is contained under the concept “cat” (see VL 24:911; JL 9:95). Kant proceeds to define the following hierarchy on these marks: “concepts are called *higher* (*conceptus superiores*) insofar as they have other concepts under themselves, which, in relation to them, are called *lower* concepts” (JL 9:96).

For present purposes, the relevant point is that each of our representations of objects has a determinate, well-defined location in this hierarchical structure. That is, it is a fact about logic that for any representation r of a given individual object, and given any concept F , either r falls under F or it does not.⁴² In the *Vienna Logic* Kant presents the following examples: “All [humans] are virtuous or vicious as to character, men or women as to sex, young or old as to age, learned or unlearned as to cognition” (VL 24:927; see also JL 9:147). If this is right, then for any representation of an individual object there corresponds a unique list of concepts under which it falls.⁴³

⁴¹ For a discussion of Kant’s hierarchical structure of concepts, see Eric Watkins, “Kant on Infima Species,” in *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht: Akten des XI. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, ed. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca, and Margit Ruffing, 5 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 5:283–94.

⁴² For Kant’s doctrine of thoroughgoing determination, see A571/B579.

⁴³ In fact, uniqueness is only guaranteed if we consider *ordered* lists of concepts, that is, lists such that, for every two contiguous concepts in them, the second is a species of the first. For example, one’s representation of an individual cat is correlated to the following ordered list of concepts: thing, living thing, animal, mammal, four-legged, meowing, etc. We also require lists to be finite, given concerns about the finiteness of our conceptual cognitive capacities. For the sake of simplicity, this is left implicit here.

But does the converse also hold? That is, can some such list correspond to a *unique* individual object? If so, then this list would be a conceptual representation that truly refers to its object, since it would accurately represent it and no other. In turn, this would mean that the understanding has the capacity to form representations which truly refer, since through it we can represent objects under the hierarchy of concepts.⁴⁴

It will come as no surprise that I think that this is not the case. According to Kant, the human understanding “needs manifoldness and variety in things despite their agreement under the same genus” (A654/B682); that is, it requires that every concept, regardless of its specificity, contain under it a multitude of numerically distinct marks. We could always envisage by means of concepts distinct possible individuals falling under conceptual descriptions – even those as specific as “a Roman general who crossed the Rubicon and defeated Pompey,” for example. This has the important consequence that “every **genus** requires different **species**, and these **subspecies**, and since none of the latter once again is without a sphere [*eine Sphäre*], (a domain as *conceptus communis*), reason demands in its entire extension [*Erweiterung*] that no species be regarded as in itself the lowest” (A655/B683; see also VL 24:911; JL 9:97).⁴⁵

Since every genus can be divided into subspecies, and since these subspecies necessarily have a non-empty extension, there can be no lowest species, that is, no species that is not also a genus.⁴⁶ This is enough to guarantee that any given list of concepts in the hierarchical structure cannot truly refer to a unique object – the last concept on the list will always contain further marks under it, each of which has a non-empty extension, and so the list will accurately describe a multitude of objects.

⁴⁴ It is necessary to note that the understanding orders concepts in this hierarchical structure because it abides by the logical principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity (A658/B686). Given that these logical principles are *regulative*, they are also necessary rules about the features of representations and the relations between them. From this it follows that the understanding *must* order concepts in this way, and so there is no way, independently of the hierarchical structure, in which the understanding could form representations that truly refer.

⁴⁵ The idea here seems to be that it is always possible to conceive of numerically distinct marks under a given concept, regardless of its content. In accordance with this reading, Kant states that the reason why there is no lowest species is that “as soon as I have a concept that I apply to *individua*, it would still be possible for there to be still smaller differences among the *individua*” (VL 24:911). If this interpretation is correct, this lends credence to Chignell’s views, as presented in the next section, that Kant’s *Noumenal Ignorance* is at least partly informed by his views on modality.

⁴⁶ Note that this marks a departure from Leibnizian doctrine, according to which each individual object has a *complete concept* such that, if one understood it perfectly, one would be able to derive from it all concepts under which it falls. For example, see G. W. Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics,” in *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 51.

As promised, then, we have established that through the understanding alone we cannot form representations that truly refer to objects. As I have argued above, this entails that only representations with intuitional content can truly refer. There is also clear textual evidence that Kant was thinking along these lines. Kant's denial of a lowest species is frequently accompanied by remarks suggesting that intuitions play the logical role that lowest species would perform if they existed and, in particular, that they succeed in referring to actual individual objects. Kant explicitly condones this conclusion in his argument against a lowest species in the *Vienna Logic*, where he places intuition at the root of the hierarchical structure *because* sensible representations are related to individual objects:

The *conceptus infimus* cannot be determined. For as soon as I have a concept that I apply to *individua*, it would still be possible for there to be still smaller differences among the *individua*, although I make no further distinction. Now in this gradation, one concept is always higher than another, until I come to the highest. *The lowest cognition is intuition, because it is always concerned with something unique.* (VL 24:911, final emphasis added; see also A656/B684)⁴⁷

At the beginning of this section, we considered the following question: why do we need intuitions of objects in order to know them? The answer that I have defended here is, in short, that for truth – and hence for knowledge – epistemic agents require representations that truly refer to objects and that only representations with intuitional content can be said to truly refer (where “to truly refer” has the technical sense of accurately describing an object and no other).⁴⁸ This type of reference is part of what allows t-judgments to be candidates for knowledge. Because our representations of things in themselves do not contain intuitional content, then, they cannot truly refer to actual individual objects and thus cannot constitute substantive knowledge about them.

⁴⁷ Note that I am not only claiming that intuitions are required for representations to refer to a *single* object. This is what commentators have called the *singularity* of intuitions. See, for example, Michael Friedman, “Kant’s Theory of Geometry,” *Philosophical Review* 94, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 455–506. Rather, I am making the stronger claim that (some) representations with intuitional content contain all the information required for distinguishing the object from all others – this is the sense in which they are at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of concepts.

⁴⁸ For a similar interpretation of *Noumenal Ignorance*, see Watkins and Willaschek, “Kant’s Account of Cognition.” However, our accounts differ in important respects, including, for example, the way we understand reference and our arguments to the conclusion that we can only refer through intuitions.

Modal motives for ignorance (Chignell)

My view of these issues is grounded in Kant's evolving picture of modality and our knowledge of it.⁴⁹ In the *Nova Dilucidatio* (1755), *The Only Possible Argument* (1763), and other pre-critical texts, Kant simply assumes that things can be "given" to the mind as possible and compossible – given to us in thought, so to speak, just by way of conceiving them (see OPA 2:77). This is a classic rationalist assumption: think of Descartes clearly and distinctly conceiving the possibility of a distinct immaterial mind or a supreme being, or of contemporary modal rationalists taking something like "ideal positive conceivability" as a guide to possibility. The early Kant goes on to generate a theistic proof according to which all of these possibilities we can conceive must be grounded in an *actual* supreme being.⁵⁰

By 1781, however, Kant had given up the assumption that real possibilities are "given" to thought in a non-problematic way such that we can go on to demand a ground or explanation for them in actuality. We can *think* up (*denken*) various things, and we can individuate at least some of them by appeal to the different predicates in our concepts of them. So the concepts are not genuinely *empty* or nonsensical, despite Kant's rhetorical flourishes to that effect. The problem in the critical period is that Kant comes to regard such thoughts as unable to "give" objects about which we can make knowledge-claims, even on the basis of otherwise "irrefutable" arguments. So what changed?

What changed, I think, is that during the 1760s Kant became convinced that there is a metaphysical difference between "logical" and "real possibility," and he also came to think that what he there calls "real opposition [*reale Entgegensetzung*]" or "real repugnance [*Realrepugnanz*]" sometimes obtains between logically consistent positive properties. In the *Negative Magnitudes* essay of 1762, for instance, Kant cites numerous examples of a kind of real opposition between two or more properties that "cancels out" (the verb here is *aufheben*) their respective effects: opposed winds on a sail, opposed physical forces, opposed emotions, and so forth.

⁴⁹ For the full description of this account, from which some of the material in this section is drawn, see Andrew Chignell, "Modal Motivations for Noumenal Ignorance: Knowledge, Cognition, Coherence," *Kant-Studien* 105, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 573–97.

⁵⁰ For the whole argument, see Andrew Chignell, "Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91, no. 2 (Jan. 2009): 157–92.

Having noticed that there can be non-logical opposition in empirical contexts like this, Kant starts to worry (in my view) that something similar might obtain between supersensibles, too, and that non-logical opposition in that context might make the thing *absolutely* impossible. Thus in *Negative Magnitudes* and more clearly in the *Only Possible Argument* of 1763, he cites a few cases that involve what I have elsewhere called *subject-* rather than merely *predicate-*canceling real repugnance. This is a metaphysical opposition between properties that makes any being that would jointly instantiate them really *impossible* (think of your favorite Kripke-style cases here: *being red all over* and *being green all over*). Kant's own examples include the putative fact that "the impenetrability of bodies, extension and such like, cannot be attributes of that which has understanding and will [*die Undurchdringlichkeit der Körper, die Ausdehnung u.d.g. können nicht Eigenschaften von demjenigen sein, der da Verstand und Willen hat*]." It is not that *being extended* and *having a mind* are logically inconsistent: there is no way to generate a contradiction from their conjunction using standard rules and definitions. Rather, it is that "these predicates *can by no means co-exist together* as determinations in a single subject [*nimmermehr in einem einzigen Subject als Bestimmungen neben einander können statt finden*]" (OPA 2:85, emphasis added). The "cannot" and "can" in these sentences refer to real modalities: a thing that is both extended and has a mind *cannot really be*.⁵¹

By the time of the *Critique*, Kant saw the rationalist's neglect of non-logical constraints on possibility as one of their most serious sins. In the Phenomena/Noumena chapter, for example, he points out that the real possibility of something simply cannot be established by mere thinking:

That the not-being of a thing does not contradict itself is a lame appeal to a logical condition, which is certainly necessary for the concept but *far from sufficient for real possibility*. (A244/B302, emphasis added)

In the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection he likewise complains that with respect to the concept of God they

find it not merely possible but also natural to unite all reality in one being without any worry about opposition, since they do not recognize any

⁵¹ For further defense of these claims about subject-canceling real repugnance in the pre-critical period, see Andrew Chignell, "Kant and the 'Monstrous' Ground of Possibility," *Kantian Review* 19, no. 1 (March 2014): 53–69.

opposition except that of contradiction (through which the concept of a thing would itself be canceled out), and do not recognize the opposition of reciprocal destruction. (A273–74/B329–30)

The error here is not just metaphysical but also epistemological: Leibniz and Wolff do not recognize the distinction between logical and real modality and so do not see that our grasp of the former may not be sufficient for “insight [*Einsicht*] into whether all realities could be united together in one object [*Objekt*], and hence into how God is possible” (LRT 28:1026).⁵²

This criticism of Leibniz-Wolff applies equally to Kant’s pre-critical self: the items with which Kant started his pre-critical proof (finite *possibilia*) and the item with which he ended it (the most perfect being [*ens perfectissimum*]) are presupposed *a priori* to be really as well as logically possible, simply because we can think consistently about them. But if there are non-logical constraints on real possibility – constraints that we do not reliably track in some other way – then that presupposition looks unmotivated.

In my view, it is this recognition of the logical/real modality distinction that moves Kant to endorse a new condition on cognition: “I can **think** whatever I like,” he says, “as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance as to whether or not there is a corresponding object [*Objekt*] somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities.” But “to **cognize** an object, it is required that I be able to prove its [real] possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason)” (Bxxvi note).

Things in themselves are not given in intuition as actual such that their real possibility is trivially entailed. They are also not given in mere thought such that their real possibility is established. Hence we cannot – “whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason” – prove that individual noumena are really possible. For all we know, our

⁵² In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant asks us to think of a case of “two motions” that are “combined in *precisely opposite directions* in one and the same point” (MFS 4:491). In such a case the two predicates do not cancel one another out and leave the point at rest (as they would do if we were merely thinking of opposed *forces* – see, for example, A265/B321 and OP 22:283). Rather, the opposition cancels the entire subject to which they are ascribed: “representing two such motions at the same time in exactly the same point within one and the same space would be impossible, and thus so would the case of such a composition of motions itself” (MFS 4:491). A few pages later, in a reflection on this case, Kant explains that “the representation of the impossibility of these two motions in one body is not the concept of its *rest*, but rather of the *impossibility of constructing* this composition of opposite motions” (MFS 4:494). Similarly, later in the *Metaphysical Foundations* Kant indicates that a material being “is impossible through mere attractive forces without repulsive forces,” and that this impossibility has its basis in “the essence of matter” rather than in a logical contradiction (*Demnach ist Materie durch bloße Anziehungskräfte ohne zurückstoßende unmöglich*) (MFS 4:511).

speculative thoughts about such entities are mere flights of fancy – will o’ the wisp fantasies about things that are really impossible. Furthermore, if substantive knowledge about particular things in themselves (that is, knowledge that goes beyond saying that they exist, are not in space and time, are the ground of appearances, etc.) would have to be based in cognition, and substantive judgments about such things cannot meet the modal condition, then *Noumenal Ignorance* turns out to be true.⁵³

In my view, this concern about our ability to track real modality in mere thought – a concern that arose out of Kant’s career-long wrestling with rationalist metaphysics – is crucial to his development of *Noumenal Ignorance*. But it is worth noting that this account coheres nicely with the one put forward by Naranjo Sandoval in the previous section.⁵⁴ Perhaps the best thing for us to say, together, is that Kant requires *both* that we be able to truly refer to particular entities *and* that we be able to prove that they are really possible, in order to have substantive knowledge of them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced various interpretations of Kant’s doctrine of *Noumenal Ignorance*. In some cases, we have discussed its relation to other key theses of the critical philosophy, such as the existence of epistemic conditions, or the distinction between appearances and things in themselves; in others, we have examined theses that previous commentators have not associated with *Noumenal Ignorance*, for example, Kant’s doctrine regarding the difference between real and logical possibility, or his claim that we know that we are free.

So instead of a unified picture of Kant’s commitment to *Noumenal Ignorance*, according to which this doctrine is *clearly* the result of some single

⁵³ A more precise articulation of the modal condition:

Necessarily, S cognizes that *p* only if, for any object referred to in *p*, if it is really possible then S is in a position to prove its real possibility, and if it is really impossible then S is in a position to prove its real impossibility.

Obviously more needs to be said about what “proving” real possibility amounts to in this context. For my latest efforts in that regard, see Andrew Chignell, “Knowledge, Discipline, System, Hope: The Fate of Metaphysics in the Doctrine of Method,” in *Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”: A Critical Guide*, ed. James R. O’Shea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 259–79.

⁵⁴ See note 45 for a further way in which these two views might complement each other.

argument in the Analytic or the Aesthetic, a much more complicated picture has emerged. Although commentators can reasonably differ about which of them is most significant, it seems clear that, for Kant, there are many theoretical and practical tributaries that lead to the same ocean of *Noumenal Ignorance*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this material, we would like to thank Derk Pereboom and Desmond Hogan.