

KANT'S "IN ITSELF": TOWARD A NEW ADVERBIAL READING

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Abstract: It is commonly assumed that the expression “an sich selbst” (“in itself”) in Kant combines with terms to form complex nouns such as “thing in itself” and “end in itself.” I argue that the basic use of “an sich selbst” in Kant’s German is as a *sentence adverb*, which has the role of modifying subject-predicate combinations, rather than either subject or predicate on their own. Expressions of the form “S is P an sich selbst” mean roughly that S is P ‘in its own right’ or without some further ‘condition’. Accordingly, “an sich selbst” should not be treated as forming complex nouns. This analysis has significant consequences for the interpretation of “thing in itself” in particular, for it implies that the latter is not a complete expression. Instead, one must treat ‘an sich selbst’ as expressing *how* some S is a ‘thing’, looking to the wider sentential context. I conclude with a brief account of the new significance granted to the concept of a ‘thing’ (Ding) according to the present interpretation.

Keywords: “an sich selbst” (in itself); thing in itself; end in itself; Prauss, Gerold; ontology

It is often, I believe, a long time before a student learns to use ‘thing-in-itself’ in the right sense, and meanwhile it seriously impedes his apprehension of the doctrines with which it is connected: for a good technicality is like a lamp in a dark thoroughfare; but a bad technicality emits a tenebrific radiance and deepens the obscurity.¹

Introduction

There are few more consequential expressions in Kant’s work than “thing in itself” (Ding an sich selbst) and its correlates. If we further consider the significance of such expressions as “end in itself” (Zweck an sich selbst) and “good in itself” (Gute an sich selbst), we can see that

¹ Read, Carveth: “On the English of *Ding-an-sich*”. In: *Mind* 8, 1883, 414.

those “little words”² that are part of all these expressions – “an sich selbst” (“in itself”) – are themselves lynchpins for understanding several central Kantian doctrines, both theoretical and practical. However, despite long-standing debate devoted especially to the first mentioned use of this expression, scholars have not devoted much attention to making explicit the generic sense of these ‘Wörtchen’ in Kant’s writings. Expressions like “things in themselves” or “ends in themselves” have been treated as conceptual or linguistic units; they have not usually been understood *compositionally* in a way that explains the independent contribution of the “in itself” to the sense of the larger expressions in which it appears. This analysis is long overdue, and its neglect, I believe, has stood in the way of understanding key Kantian doctrines. Without such an analysis, expressions like “things in themselves” function as a ‘black box’ in the interpretation of Kant’s philosophy. They have become, in the words of my epigraph, “bad technicalities”.

My aim in this paper is to offer an interpretation of “an sich” as it appears in Kant’s writings.³ Though my own motivation for carrying out the analysis to follow is specifically to make sense of “things in themselves”, my approach here is indirect. Instead of pursuing a new interpretation of “things in themselves”, I develop a *paraphrase* of “an sich” that first applies to ‘minor’ uses of the expression (by both Kant and some of his contemporaries), which can be extended to the more controversial case. Indeed, I do not think we can understand what “thing *an sich*”⁴ means unless we approach an understanding of arbitrary meaningful combinations of the form “*F an sich*”.⁵ Since a paraphrase expresses a rough equivalence in sense, if we find a

² Cf. KrV, A 574/B 602. Kant’s German is quoted from the standard Akademie edition of Kant’s works. The KrV is cited according to the standard A and B editions. Translations from Kant are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge 1992–.

³ Though I do not rule out a significant role for “selbst” in “an sich selbst” for brevity’s sake, I will often omit this word when mentioning the expression. See on this issue, Prauss, Gerold: *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*. Bonn 1974, 19f.

⁴ Throughout “an sich” will be italicized when functioning as a kind of operator, or when accompanying English expressions.

⁵ Here I follow the basic idea of Gareth Evans’ “Generality Constraint” (*The Varieties of Reference*. Ed. John McDowell. Oxford 1982, 100–104). According to Evans, in order to understand a term as used in one combination (say, that Joe is hungry), you should be able to understand the term used in arbitrary (non-equivocal) combinations (that Sarah is hungry). Whether or not the principle holds with full universality, it seems appropriate

generally applicable paraphrase of “*F an sich*” that we understand, we can be credited with understanding the target expression. Our interpretation of “things in themselves” will then stand on a more principled basis. As a consequence of this approach, it will be seen that an expression like “thing in itself” is, in a sense to be specified, *incomplete* – it does not function as an independent unit of thought.⁶

My plan is as follows. In section 1, I first consider some alternative approaches to understanding the sense of “an sich selbst” that seem to be incomplete. These either fail to respect the compositionality of the expression’s use, or they promote paraphrases that succeed only in privileged applications. I then develop a paraphrase through a discussion of the connection Kant develops between “in itself” and “absolute”. From this account, it emerges that “an sich” functions at the level of whole judgments, or subject-predicate combinations. In section 2, I account for this grammatically, arguing that “an sich” should be seen (in its basic role) as a sentence adverb (specifically, a ‘reflexive sentence adverb’). This grammatical account challenges the influential adverbial reading of “things in themselves” by Gerold Prauss in *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*.⁷ As a result of my proposed grammatical alternative, I conclude that expressions of the form “*F an sich*” are typically incomplete; they can be understood only by adding *what* grammatical subject is (or is not) *F ‘an sich’*. In section 3, I apply my semantic and grammatical account of “an sich” to the cases of both “end in itself” and “thing in itself”. While I believe in the former case, the account fits with standard interpretations, it has novel consequences for the latter case. Finally, in section 4, I discuss the interpretive direction for understanding Kant’s transcendental idealism and his critique of metaphysics which I believe is suggested by my proposal.

when applied to expressions that apply at the level of whole sentences, such as logical constants or sentence adverbs. Since I believe “an sich selbst” plays this kind of syntactic role (see section 2), Evans’ principle is especially apt.

⁶ This accounts for the need here (otherwise merely cumbersome) to *mention* the expression “things in themselves” as a unit rather than *use* it coherently as a unit.

⁷ I have focused on Prauss’ view, not because it is the most well-developed view of Kant’s transcendental idealism, but because it is still perhaps the most grammatically explicit. Other interpretations of “things in themselves” advance too quickly with implicit grammatical assumptions. This is not a generally faulty assumption: I am not claiming that problems in philosophy should normally be preceded by a grammatical analysis. In this case, however, I believe, there is a substantial grammatical issue to be resolved prior to an adequate interpretation.

1. The Sense of “an sich selbst”

My starting goal is to find an acceptable paraphrase of “an sich selbst” with the aim of elucidating the sense of the expression. As stated, though my primary interest is developing an understanding of “things in themselves”, I take it as a criterion of adequacy that the chosen paraphrase of “*F an sich*” could be acceptably substituted throughout Kant’s philosophy, theoretical and practical, and even in lesser known instances. An additional desideratum is that the chosen paraphrase could acceptably paraphrase the usage of “in itself” by some of Kant’s contemporaries.

1.1. Incomplete Accounts

Before my own task is pursued, it should be mentioned that many commentators give the impression that “things in themselves” should not be treated compositionally at all. They give this impression by rendering the expression as “things-in-themselves”,⁸ which this certainly has the look of being bound together into an insoluble unit, or even, as Gerold Prauss has complained, a “quasi-proper name”.⁹ This rendering may be only a stylistic measure in most cases, but it is worth being explicit that a non-compositional reading should be rejected. Linguistically, expressions like “things in themselves” are not always grouped as we might expect if the sense were non-compositional. For example:

We have therefore wanted to say that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us [...].¹⁰ (KrV, A 42/ B 59)

⁸ See, for example, Collins, Arthur: *Possible Experience: Understanding Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. Berkeley 1999; Chignell, Andrew: “Modal Motivations for Noumenal Ignorance: Knowledge, Cognition, and Coherence”. In: *Kant-Studien* 105, 2014, 573–597. An extreme form of this tendency is found in Heinz Heimsoeth (see his *Studien zur Philosophie Immanuel Kants*. Köln 1956, 231), who even renders the phrase “Dingansich”. Some English translations of Kant add the hyphenation where it is absent from the text. See, for example, Henry Allison’s translation of “On a Discovery...” in *Theoretical Writings after 1781*, ed. Henry E. Allison and Peter Heath, Cambridge 2002, 300–304.

⁹ Prauss: *Kant und das Problem*, 24.

¹⁰ “Wir haben also sagen wollen: daß alle unsre Anschauung nichts als die Vorstellung von Erscheinung sei; daß die Dinge, die wir anschauen, nicht das an sich selbst sind, wofür wir sie anschauen, noch ihre Verhältnisse so an sich selbst beschaffen sind, als sie uns erscheinen [...]” (KrV, A 42/ B 59).

Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are bodies outside us, i.e., things [Dinge] which, though completely unknown to us as to what they may be in themselves [an sich selbst], we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides for us, and to which we give the name body [...].¹¹ (Prol, AA, 04: 289)

We can see in these passages (and many more) that Kant does not treat “things in themselves” as an inseparable unit of thought. Additionally, Kant clearly treats “things” or “objects” when connected to “an sich” as inferentially related to uses outside this linguistic connection. For example, Kant claims that a consequence of treating space and time as “forms of things in themselves [Formen der Dinge an sich selbst]” would be that they would be “objective conditions of all things [objektiven Formen aller Dinge]”, including even God (KrV, B 71f.).¹² Likewise, if the principle of causality were to apply to objects “as things in themselves [als Dingen an sich selbst]”, then this would entail that the principle applies to “all things in general as efficient causes [allen Dingen überhaupt als wirkenden Ursachen]” (KrV, B XXVII). In these passages, Kant seems to assume a connection between “things in themselves” and “all things”.¹³ But if there is some inferential connection between “things in themselves” and “things” (or “things in general”¹⁴) the most natural explanation of this fact is that the meaning of “things”

¹¹ “Demnach gestehe ich allerdings, daß es außer uns Körper gebe, d.i. Dinge, die, obzwar nach dem, was sie an sich selbst sein mögen, uns gänzlich unbekannt, wir durch die Vorstellungen kennen, welche ihr Einfluß auf unsre Sinnlichkeit uns verschafft, und denen wir die Benennung eines Körpers geben” (Prol, AA, 04: 289).

¹² Desmond Hogan (“Three Kinds of Rationalism and the Non-Spatiality of Things in Themselves”. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47, 2009, 355–382) discusses this connection at some length (372–375), though without arriving at an explanation of it. Hogan admits that he cannot understand why a feature of some ‘things in themselves’ would have to apply to ‘all things in themselves’. This connection will become intelligible on the view advanced below, though I do not have space to develop it. See section 4 for brief discussion.

¹³ Other passages maintain a similar relation. See, e.g., KrV, B 70f., A 241f./B 299, B 274; V-Met-L2/Pöhlitz, AA 28: 567; Prol, AA 04: 291f.

¹⁴ Among those who have drawn attention to the important connection between “things in themselves” and “things in general,” see especially Allison, Henry E.: “Transcendental Realism, Empirical Realism and Transcendental Idealism”. In: *Kantian Review* 11, 2006, 1–28. While I differ from Allison’s rendering of “things in themselves,” I accept a similar view of the implications between “things in themselves” and “things in general”: “Nevertheless, it should now be clear why Kant moves so seamlessly from the thought of things in general to that of things in themselves. Since whatever is predicated of the former is predicated of things absolutely or in every relation, it must also be predicated of them as they are in themselves” (9). See my comments on Allison below, in section 4.

plays a compositional role in the larger expression. This is, of course, obvious. But if so, we must assume that “in itself” makes a compositional difference in the larger expression as well.

Those who treat “an sich” as a meaningful independent unit, however, tend to assume that it takes on a narrow meaning in the expression “things in themselves”. When appended to terms like “things” or “objects”, Kant often seems to gloss “in itself” with a phrase that might be seen as giving its sense:

Our expositions accordingly teach [...] the *ideality* of space in regard to things when they are considered in themselves through reason, i.e., *without taking account of the constitution of our sensibility*.¹⁵ (KrV, A 28/B 44; my emphasis in last clause)

[A]pppearance, which always has two sides, one where the object is considered in itself (*without regard to the way in which it is to be intuited* [...]) [...].¹⁶ (KrV, A 38/B 55; my emphasis)

Now in this way our understanding [...] limits [sensibility] by calling things in themselves (*not considered as appearances*) *noumena*.¹⁷ (KrV, A 256/B 312; content of parentheses emphasized)

Some readers take these glosses to define “an sich selbst” roughly to mean “not as an appearance”,¹⁸ or to suggest that Kant takes “things in themselves” to mean ‘mind-independent

¹⁵ “Unsere Erörterungen lehren demnach [...] die Idealität des Raums in Ansehung der Dinge, wenn sie durch die Vernunft an sich selbst erwogen werden, d. i. ohne Rücksicht auf die Beschaffenheit unserer Sinnlichkeit zu nehmen.” (KrV, A 28/B 44)

¹⁶ “Erscheinung [...], welche jederzeit zwei Seiten hat, die eine, da das Object an sich selbst betrachtet wird (unangesehen der Art, dasselbe anzuschauen [...])” (KrV, A 38/B 55).

¹⁷ “Unser Verstand bekommt nun auf diese Weise eine negative Erweiterung, d. i. er wird nicht durch die Sinnlichkeit eingeschränkt, sondern schränkt vielmehr dieselbe ein, dadurch daß er Dinge an sich selbst (nicht als Erscheinungen betrachtet) Noumena nennt.” (KrV, A 256/B 312).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Prauss: *Kant und das Problem*, 39–43, who quotes these passages. Perhaps the most thoroughly developed recent example of such an approach is Colin Marshall’s “qua-object” reading of appearances and things in themselves (“Kant’s Appearances and Things in Themselves as Qua-Objects”. In: *Philosophical Quarterly* 63, 2013, 520–545). Marshall believes “things-qua-in-themselves are things-qua-having-only-properties-other-than-appearance-properties” (530). Rae Langton proposes the paraphrase “Things that have intrinsic natures” or things “as” having such natures (*Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, Oxford 1998, 22f.). Though it also runs into a similar problem as those I discuss here, I treat her reading separately in section 1.3.

reality’.¹⁹ This view corresponds, presumably, to a grammatical reading of the “an sich” as an adjective,²⁰ so that “thing in itself” would be a kind of compound noun.

The elucidatory remarks just quoted do not, however, demand to be read as paraphrases of the expression “an sich”, still less as expressions of a definition of “things in themselves”. These remarks can equally well be seen as contextually appropriate implications: it may be generally appropriate to conclude, for example, that if something is true of a thing ‘in itself’ it will not (or not just) be true of it ‘as an appearance’. If so, it would not be surprising that Kant can frequently add the implication when appropriate.

In any case, I would make the stronger claim that such elucidatory remarks *cannot* define the general sense of “in itself”. That this is the case is clear enough if we notice a few examples of Kant’s less studied use of this expression:

[R]epresentation in itself [Vorstellung an sich selbst] (for we are not talking about its causality by means of the will) does not produce its object as far as its *existence* is concerned [...].²¹ (KrV, A 92/B 125)

In order to refute empirical idealism [...], it is already sufficient that outer perception immediately proves a reality in space, *which space, though in itself [an sich] it is only a mere form of representations*, nevertheless has objective reality in regard to all outer appearances [...].²² (KrV, A 376f.; my emphasis)

These examples make clear that even if “not as appearance” may elucidate “in itself” in some contexts, the two are by no means interchangeable. For we could not render “space in itself” as ‘space, i.e., not as an appearance’, since space for Kant is the very form of outer appearance. Nor could these uses be elucidated with a paraphrase (equally common) referencing the ‘mind-independent’. For we should not suppose that Kant believes that *representation* (not to mention

¹⁹ This is common among recent interpreters. See (e.g.) Van Cleve, James: *Problems from Kant*. Oxford 1999: 7, 214; Hogan: “Three Kinds of Rationalism”; Marshall: “Kant’s Appearances”; Allais, Lucy: *Manifest Reality: Kant’s Idealism and His Realism*. Oxford 2015.

²⁰ The adjectival reading is described by Karl Ameriks as “traditional” (See *Interpreting Kant’s Critiques*. Oxford 2003, 77), but I am not aware of an interpretation that spells this out in explicitly grammatical terms.

²¹ “[...] Vorstellung an sich selbst (denn von deren Causalität vermittelt des Willens ist hier gar nicht die Rede) ihren Gegenstand *dem Dasein nach* nicht hervorbringt” (KrV, A 92/B 125).

²² “Den empirischen Idealismus [...] zu widerlegen, ist schon hinreichend: daß äußere Wahrnehmung eine Wirklichkeit im Raume unmittelbar beweise, welcher Raum, ob er zwar an sich nur bloße Form der Vorstellungen ist, dennoch in Ansehung aller äußeren Erscheinungen (die auch nichts anders als bloße Vorstellungen sind) objective Realität hat [...]” (KrV, A 376f.).

space) is mind-independent! At the very least, these cases show that “an sich” cannot be equated with the elucidations Kant sometimes provides. In addition, though perhaps more controversially, it does not seem to be part of Kant’s *meaning* in referring to “ends in themselves” or what is “good in itself” to emphasize the mind-independence of ends or the good (whatever his view on that matter may be). All these cases suggest that those who think things ‘in themselves’ are *defined* as things as they are not appearances (or mind-independent things) must explain how “an sich” gains a specific sense in one context that it does not share in these others. Perhaps they could explain this, but it would be much better to show that a more general use could have an implication along the lines of ‘not as an appearance’, without that representing the very *meaning* of the expression.

1.2. A general paraphrase of “an sich”

The meaning of “an sich” has typically been interpreted in light of a substantive interpretation of “things in themselves”. As we have just seen, this approach does not yield a generally applicable account of the expression. In this section, I will suggest that the most generally applicable paraphrase of “an sich” involves the notion of ‘absoluteness’, where this notion is understood primarily in contrast to what is affirmed under a limiting *condition*. A passage from Kant’s “On the Transcendental Ideas”, in the first Book of the *Critique*’s Transcendental Dialectic, provides a good starting point for this interpretation. Kant writes:

The word “absolute” [*absolut*]²³ is now more often used merely to indicate that something is valid of a thing [Sache] considered *in itself* and thus *internally*. In this meaning, “absolutely possible” would signify what is possible in itself (internally), which is in fact the *least* one can say of an object.²⁴ (KrV, A 324/B 381)

In this passage, Kant’s main concern is to disambiguate his use of “absolute”. He notes that there are two distinct uses of the term that are often confused. It is the weaker, first sense of “absolute”

²³ It is important to note that “absolut” could here be translated as an adverb. In the context, Kant uses “absolutmöglich” as an example, in which “absolut” must be thought adverbially. It is true that the term can also take an adjectival meaning in the context; my point is that both translations are possible.

²⁴ “Das Wort *absolut* wird jetzt öfters gebraucht, um bloß anzuzeigen, daß etwas von einer Sache *an sich selbst* betrachtet und also innerlich gelte. In dieser Bedeutung würde *absolutmöglich* das bedeuten, was an sich selbst (*interne*) möglich ist, welches in der That das *wenigste* ist, was man von einem Gegenstande sagen kann.” (KrV, A 324/B 381)

sketched here (call it ‘absolute_w’), that is of primary interest to us. It is this sense that Kant paraphrases with “considered in itself”, though also with “internally” (innerlich). This is to be contrasted with a *strong* sense (‘absolute_s’), which Kant goes on to describe:

On the contrary, however, it is also sometimes used to indicate that something is valid in every relation (unlimitedly) (e.g., absolute dominion); and in this meaning “absolutely possible” would signify what is *possible* in all respects *in every relation*, which is again the *most* I can say about the possibility of a thing.²⁵ (KrV, A 324/B 381)

The absolute_s is the *unconditional*: something that holds of a subject in every possible condition or relation. Though Kant is interested in preserving the strong sense of “absolute” for his own philosophical purposes, he only uses “considered in itself” to paraphrase the *weak* sense. I take this contrast to be an important clue.

We can gather from Kant’s comments the apparent equivalence of these cases: ‘S is possible (considered) in itself’; ‘S is absolutely_w possible’; ‘S is internally possible’. This brings us at least to see the close connection of Kant’s usage with that of Alexander Baumgarten, who writes in his *Metaphysica*:

Whatever is considered, but not in a nexus with those things that are posited externally to it, IS CONSIDERED IN ITSELF. Whatever is not even something representable when considered in itself is IMPOSSIBLE IN ITSELF (intrinsically, absolutely, *per se*). Whatever is possible considered in itself is POSSIBLE IN ITSELF (intrinsically, absolutely, *per se*, simply).²⁶

That Baumgarten also endorses similar near-equivalences in the expressions helps show how we, too, might verbally replace the “in itself” with some other expression, but these equivalences do not yet help explain the sense of the expression.

The clue I wish to pursue in finding an acceptable paraphrase is Kant’s use of the term “conditions” (Bedingungen) (and its correlates) in this and related contexts. After distinguishing the two senses of “absolute” discussed above, Kant writes:

²⁵ “Dagegen wird es auch bisweilen gebraucht, um anzuzeigen, daß etwas in aller Beziehung (uneingeschränkt) gültig ist (z. B. die absolute Herrschaft), und absolutmöglich würde in dieser Bedeutung dasjenige bedeuten, was in aller Absicht, *in aller Beziehung möglich* ist, welches wiederum das *meiste* ist, was ich über die Möglichkeit eines Dinges sagen kann.” (KrV, A 324/B 381)

²⁶ Baumgarten, Alexander: *Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant's Elucidations, Selected Notes, and Related Materials*. Trans. and ed. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers. London 2013 [orig. 1757], §15. Prauss: *Kant und das Problem*, 2011, had already drawn attention to this passage in Baumgarten.

It is in this extended meaning that I will make use of the word “absolute”, opposing it to what is valid merely comparatively or in some particular respect; for the latter is restricted to conditions [Bedingungen], while the former is valid without restrictions.²⁷ (KrV, A 326/B 382; translation modified)

This passage only gives us a contrast between the absolute, and the “comparative” in general, and so does not by itself elucidate the target *weak* sense, rendered by “an sich selbst”.

Nevertheless, Kant’s logical concept of ‘conditions’, which is otherwise a major topic in the chapter under discussion, can be a resource in our project.

Following philosophers like Christian Wolff and G.F. Meier, Kant uses “condition” in its logical sense to refer to the “ground” (Grund) of a judgment’s truth.²⁸ As Kant says in the *Wiener Logik*: “This [sc. the condition] is the determination of the subject in a categorical judgment, which [determination] contains the ground of truth.”²⁹ (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 932) A few pages prior to Kant’s discussion of “absolute”, he explains that the judgment “Caius is mortal” has the concept “human” as its condition (KrV, A 322/B 378). This means that it is in virtue of being human that Caius is mortal. The judgment can express the ground by being rendered: ‘Caius, since he is a human, is mortal’. The condition is here what must be added to the subject term to explain the truth of the judgment; it is only explicated in the syllogism that can be constructed from the judgment.

However, Kant mainly uses “condition” not when a concept expresses the ground of a judgment’s *universal* truth, but in cases in which a condition must be added to *restrict* the scope of a judgment or narrow the content of a concept. This is sometimes called an “accidental” or “special” condition, or indeed a “determination”.³⁰ Following his definition of a condition, Kant gives the following example:

²⁷ “In dieser erweiterten Bedeutung werde ich mich denn des Worts *absolut* bedienen und es dem bloß comparativ oder in besonderer Rücksicht Gültigen entgegensetzen; denn dieses letztere ist auf Bedingunge restringirt, jenes aber gilt ohne Restriction.” (KrV, A 326/B 382)

²⁸ See Longuenesse, Beatrice: *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*. Trans. Charles T. Wolfe. Princeton 1998, 93–105, for a fuller treatment of “condition” among Kant and the Wolffians.

²⁹ “Diese [sc. die Bedingung] ist die Bestimmung des Subjectes in einem categorischen Urtheile, welche den Grund der Wahrheit enthält.” (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 932)

³⁰ See Meier: “When the accidental conditions of a judgment are connected with the subject of the same, then it is called the *determination* or *restriction of the judgment (determinatio et limitation iudicii)*” (Meier, Georg Friedrich: *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*. Halle 1752, § 298. This and other translations from Meier are my own.

E.g., if I say that a man is deserving of punishment, then I see that this does not apply to the concept of man without condition. If I say, however, that a man *who is vicious* is deserving of punishment, then the viciousness is the determination of the subject.³¹ (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 932; my emphasis)

The italicized portion is the condition that must be added to make the original judgment true, since the judgment is not true in virtue of the concept ‘man’ alone. We find a similar usage in Meier. He writes: “[I]f I judge: that the sun lights up my living room; then the condition of this judgment consists in the relations of the sun, namely *when it is risen*.”³² Kant is explicit about the role of limiting conditions in an important passage from the Transcendental Aesthetic. He writes:

The proposition “All things are next to one another in space” is valid only under the limitation that these things be taken as objects of our sensible intuition. If I here *add the condition to the concept* and say: “All things, *as outer intuitions*, are next to one another in space,” then the rule is valid universally and without limitation.³³ (KrV, A 27/B 43; my emphasis)

Though any true judgment has a condition in the sense of a ground of its truth, in many cases Kant uses “condition” to refer to a concept or predicate that must be added to a judgment to restrict its scope and explain its truth. Linguistically, the condition is represented as a relative clause that can be added to the subject term.

Consequently, a judgment that is *unconditional* (Kant’s absolute_s) would be true without requiring any such condition or restriction:

S is P unconditionally \equiv S is P in any condition possible for S

Conversely:

S is not P unconditionally \equiv there is a condition possible for S such that S is not P

On this reading, analytic judgments (at least) are absolutely_s or unconditionally true. Since they are true in virtue of the identity of the subject, they are true whenever the subject can exist, or

³¹ “Z.E. wenn ich sage: ein Mensch ist sträflich, so sehe ich, daß ohne Bedingung dieses dem Begriffe des Menschen gar nicht zukommt. Sage ich aber: ein Mensch, der lasterhaft ist, ist sträflich: so ist das Lasterhaft seyn die Bestimmung des Subjectes.” (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 932)

³² Meier, Georg Friedrich: *Vernunftlehre*. 2nd ed. Halle 1762, § 331; my emphasis.

³³ “Der Satz: Alle Dinge sind neben einander im Raum, gilt unter der Einschränkung, wenn diese Dinge als Gegenstände unserer sinnlichen Anschauung genommen werden. Füge ich hier die Bedingung zum Begriffe und sage: Alle Dinge als äußere Erscheinungen sind neben einander im Raum, so gilt diese Regel allgemein und ohne Einschränkung.” (KrV, A 27/B 43)

even when it is merely possible. But these formulas are helpful in again providing points of contrast to the “in itself” or absolute_w. For some property that pertains to a being considered in itself does not seem to be unconditional in this way, or at least not necessarily; for an absolute_w property might *not* hold if some relation or qualification is added. The following example from Meier helps make the point. He writes approvingly:

Thus, intellectuals [die Weltweisen] say that in and for itself³⁴ it is possible that the soul would die. For when one considers the soul not in connection with the wisdom and goodness of God, and with the whole world, then its life and actuality is something accidental, which can be lost to it, and that means: it is in itself possible that the human soul would die.³⁵

According to Meier, the human soul “in itself” is mortal³⁶; but it is not absolutely_s or unconditionally mortal, for it is not mortal in every possible condition. Meier believes that in its actual state (in which it is connected to the wisdom and goodness of God, etc.) the soul is immortal: the judgment, ‘The human soul, if supported by the wisdom and goodness of God, etc., is immortal,’ is true. However, it is potentially false if the condition is omitted. The same pattern seems to hold when Kant says (in the example from the previous section) that representation (Vorstellung) “in itself” does not cause the existence of its object. Kant believes that some representations (practical in nature) *do* cause the existence of their objects.³⁷ But they do not do so *only* in virtue of being representations, but as representations qualified by the faculty of desire, an added ‘condition’.

The Meier-Kant notion of a condition enables us to paraphrase “in itself” in terms of its role in judgments. In short, when a claim is made of something ‘in itself’, the judgement is true *without* requiring the addition of any condition or further qualification. Though such a judgment

³⁴ Meier uses “an und vor sich betrachtet” to translate Baumgarten’s “spectatur in se.” See Baumgarten, Alexander: *Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens Metaphysik*. Translated by G.F. Meier. Halle: 1766, § 15. This suggests that Meier uses “an und vor sich” as a variant (perhaps only stylistic) for the same phrase Kant renders as “an sich selbst.” The same variant is acknowledged in the Grimm *Wörterbuch*. See Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm: *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*. Vol. 1. Leipzig 1971 [orig. 1854], 287.

³⁵ Meier, Georg Friedrich: *Metaphysik. Erster Teil*. Halle 1755, § 29.

³⁶ As it happens, this position of Meier’s was quite controversial. See Dyck, Corey. “G.F. Meier and Kant on the Belief in the Immortality of the Soul”. In: Dyck, Corey and Falk Wunderlich (eds.): *Kant and His German Contemporaries. Volume I: Logic, Mind, Epistemology, Science and Ethics*. Cambridge 2018, 80–83.

³⁷ Cf. MS, AA 06: 211.

still has some ‘condition’ (a ground of its truth), since its condition cannot be added externally, it must be contained in or entailed by the subject of the judgment. Thus:

S is P *an sich* \equiv S is P and P is a condition contained in or entailed by S

Conversely:

S is not P *an sich* \equiv either (a) S is unconditionally not P (S is not P in any possible condition for S) or (b) S is P only if S is C (where C is any condition not contained in or entailed by S)

These equivalences are perhaps not formally precise enough to be used without reservation, but they enable us to adequately paraphrase the examples we have so far witnessed. Thus:

S is possible *an sich* \equiv S is possible when its possibility is entailed by S (i.e. S does not contradict itself)

Representation *an sich* does not cause the existence of its object \equiv representation causes the existence of its object only in connection with the faculty of desire.

The human soul *an sich* can perish \equiv imperishability is not entailed by the human soul itself

Some elucidation is perhaps required. First, the presence of “an sich” on this reading affects not the *content* of the judgment, but the *grounds* on which it is asserted. Is the judgment asserted in virtue of an added condition, or is the judgment asserted in virtue of the subject alone? If it is asserted only in virtue of the subject, then “an sich” is appropriately added. Second, the kind of ‘entailment’ should vary appropriately with the nature of subject term. If “S” refers to a concrete individual or individuals (“N”), then presumably any true judgment of the form ‘N is P *an sich*’ requires a commitment to conditions entailed by the identity or real nature of N, and the relevant entailment will be synthetic. By contrast, if “S” denotes a general kind or concept, then the entailment may be an analytic (or otherwise a priori) one.³⁸ The difference may be illustrated in the following way. The judgment ‘The employee does not have a job *an sich selbst*, but because someone hired him’ seems likely to be true. Any employee (as a concrete individual) is not employed only in virtue of his or her own self or activity, but also because of the employer. On the other hand, the judgment ‘Employees *an sich selbst* have a job’ (or: ‘To be an employee is *an*

³⁸ I have in mind the conception of analyticity offered in terms of the principle of contradiction: KrV, A 151f./B 190f. Compare my examples below with Kant’s at KrV, A 153/B 192. Analytic entailments certainly offer the clearest illustrations of entailments that depend on the subject alone, but I do not want to rule out that there may be synthetic a priori entailments that also pertain to something ‘in itself’. Expounding on this difficult possibility goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

sich selbst to have a job’) seems also to be true. This is because the second judgment is not primarily about individuals who happen to be employees, but about employee-hood (the general concept); and ‘having a job’ is entailed by ‘being an employee’. It will thus often be important to determine the kind of reference the subject-term of a judgment modified with the “an sich” has.³⁹ What is important is that the judgment expressing “in itself” has the condition of its truth in the subject-term, however understood.

A more familiar expression of the present interpretation involves the “*qua*” locution: S is P *an sich* when S *qua* S is P.⁴⁰ This should perhaps be expected, given that “an sich” was adopted in philosophical German as a translation of the scholastic Latin “*per se*”.⁴¹ It could often be put more colloquially as ‘in [its] own right.’ Such expressions have a wide use in philosophy and ordinary life, and though the notion of a ‘condition’ is not the only way to explain them, it seems appropriate for the variety the cases we have discussed so far and is closely tied to an important element of Kant’s own conception of logic.

1.3. The ‘Intrinsic’ Reading of “an sich”

Before looking at the grammatical status of “an sich” more explicitly, I want to compare the present proposal to those which emphasize the close connection between the “an sich” and

³⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for requesting clarification on this point. The response here is necessarily open-ended. Whether the entailment is a synthetic or analytic one will depend on whether the terms of the judgment are understood in real or conceptual terms. This may be a matter for significant interpretation in particular cases.

⁴⁰ My view is thus in some ways close to Marshall’s “qua-object” reading of “things in themselves” (Marshall: “Kant’s Appearances and Things in Themselves as Qua-Objects”). However, Marshall treats “qua-in themselves” as a specific qualification, meaning “qua-having-only-other-than-appearances-properties” (530). By contrast, I think the “an sich” is more akin to “*qua* itself” or “*per se*”, which *removes* qualification from the term. (On the historical foundation of this point, see Bäck, Allen: *On Reduplication: Logical Theories of Qualification*. Leiden 1996, 34). Furthermore, I do not follow Marshall (and thus Kit Fine) in the view that “*qua*” locutions represent a new “*qua*-object”. Rather, as I will subsequently explain, I think such qualifications should be read at the level of judgments or predication.

⁴¹ The Grimms’ entry (under “an”) reads: “an *neben pronomen*: an sich, *per se*, an sich selbst; an und für sich; die tugend ist an und für sich begehrenswerth, *virtus per se expetenda est*” (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 1, 287). See Read: “On the English of *Ding-an-sich*,” on the connection to “*per se*” and problems with the use of “in” in translating “an”.

the *intrinsic*, understood in contrast to what is relational.⁴² This reading looks plausible if we accept “intrinsic” as a translation of “innerlich,” which Kant sometimes treats synonymously with “an sich.” There is, indeed, a close fit in many cases. As Kant writes in the Amphiboly chapter of the *Critique*:

According to mere concepts the inner [das Innere] is the substratum of all relation or outer determinations. If, therefore, I abstract from all conditions of intuition, and restrict myself solely to the concept of a thing in general, *then I can abstract from every outer relation, and yet there must remain a concept of it, that signifies no relation but merely inner determinations.*⁴³ (KrV, A 283/B 339; my emphasis)

Given such passages, it seems that “intrinsic” or “intrinsically” are in many contexts acceptable paraphrases for “an sich”. This seems undeniable. However, I think such notions fail to offer a fully general paraphrase, especially as “intrinsic” is understood by modern readers. First, as used by some commentators, “intrinsic” attaches to “properties,” and intrinsic properties appear to be those that apply *necessarily* to something. This, however, is close in meaning to Kant’s use of “unconditional”. For if an intrinsic property is one that a thing has necessarily, it is one it must have in every relation or condition.⁴⁴ But since, as we have seen above, Kant takes the unconditional to be a stronger notion than the “in itself”, the ‘intrinsic property’ interpretation of “in itself” is too strong. While everything that holds in every relation (and thus necessarily) holds also ‘in itself’, the converse is not the case; a proper paraphrase must express this difference.

Secondly, advocates of the “intrinsic” paraphrase have typically applied it narrowly in terms of properties of individual *substances* or *individuals*. For Langton, “Things in themselves

⁴² See especially Langton: *Kantian Humility*; Warren, Daniel: *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant’s Philosophy of Nature*. New York 2001, Ch. 2; Allais: *Manifest Reality*, Ch. 10.

⁴³ Nach bloßen Begriffen ist das Innere das Substratum aller Verhältniß oder äußeren Bestimmungen. Wenn ich also von allen Bedingungen der Anschauung abstrahire und mich lediglich an den Begriff von einem Dinge überhaupt halte, so kann ich von allem äußeren Verhältniß abstrahiren, und es muß dennoch ein Begriff von dem übrig bleiben, das gar kein Verhältniß, sondern bloß innere Bestimmungen bedeutet.” (KrV, A 283/B 339)

⁴⁴ For example, in a different context, Christine Korsgaard seems to equate the unconditional and intrinsic/in itself: “A thing is unconditionally good if it is good under any and all conditions, if it is good not matter what the context. In order to be unconditionally good, a thing must [...] have its goodness in itself (be an end in itself). Kant’s notion of unconditional value therefore corresponds to the notion of intrinsic goodness as nonrelational that I have been discussing.” (*Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge 1996, 257) See also Van Cleve: *Problems from Kant*, 152.

are substances that have intrinsic properties.”⁴⁵ The intrinsic properties of a substance are those that the substance could have independent of any relation, or when it is “lonely”: “If a substance can exist on its own, it must have properties that are compatible with its existing on its own.”⁴⁶ In thinking about individual substances, the contrast between a property that it has as “lonely” and one it has in relation finds legitimate application.⁴⁷ However, even if Langton were right about “things in themselves”, we have already seen that Kant uses “an sich” to discuss a much wider range of entities than individual substances: representation, space, ends, and the good, for example. These are not naturally thought of as substances or individuals that can have intrinsic and relational properties in the sense Langton and others have in mind. If “thing in itself” means ‘a substance that has intrinsic properties’, what does, for example, “good in itself” mean? A ‘good that has intrinsic properties’ doesn’t seem to work.

The basic problem is that “in itself” has a wider use than the “intrinsic” paraphrase would suggest. In some cases, to say that S is P *an sich selbst* might imply that P is an intrinsic property of S. But that would not be true in virtue of the meaning of “an sich selbst” alone, but rather also because S is the kind of thing that has properties. By contrast if S refers to a general kind or concept, then the use of “an sich selbst” might not express an intrinsic property in the normal use of that term. Recall my earlier example: ‘Employees *an sich selbst* have a job’. This statement does not ascribe an intrinsic property to individual employees; it says that a certain feature, having a job, is proper to being an employee. This feature is, incidentally, relational. But this is

⁴⁵ Langton: *Kantian Humility*, 20.

⁴⁶ Langton: *Kantian Humility*, 19. See Warren, Daniel: *Reality and Impenetrability in Kant’s Philosophy of Nature*. New York 2001, 46–52, however, on the important contrast between absolutely and comparatively intrinsic.

⁴⁷ See Daniel Warren: “In interpreting the ‘in itself’ locution in terms of inner determinations, it is important to note that the ‘in itself’ is not in the first instance identified with reality, in contradistinction to appearance. Rather the contrast between reality and appearance (in itself vs. in its relation to us) is taken to be a special case of a more general formulations of the distinction, viz., how something is in itself vs. in its relations to other things” (Warren: *Reality and Impenetrability*, 46). While I agree with the first part of Warren’s claim, I think the contrast with the “relational” is still too narrow, since it has clear application primarily in terms of individual substances.

completely permissible usage, I believe, outside certain narrower contexts where “in itself” is connected to individual substances.⁴⁸

What accounts, then, for the frequent appropriateness of the “intrinsic” reading? I believe it stems from the fact that a thing’s standing in relations is one way in which it is qualified or ‘conditioned’. When a thing stands in a contingent relation, a judgment about it cannot be made without some qualification; for the thing may have different properties outside that relation than it has in that relation. This is why Meier can combine the two notions, in a quotation already given: “[I]f I judge: that the sun lights up my living room; *then the condition of this judgment consists in the relations of the sun*, namely when it is risen.”⁴⁹ Thus, relations, when expressed in a judgment, are often instances of logical conditions. But it seems that not every logical condition is a relation. The intrinsic/relational contrast is just one species of the ‘in itself’/‘under a condition’ contrast.

Thus, despite significant overlap with the “intrinsic” reading, an advantage of the present account is its greater generality. The “an sich” is not defined exclusively in terms intrinsic properties, since it applies in cases where the property/relation contrast is unnatural. On the other hand, “an sich” is close in meaning to “intrinsically” and can well express something about intrinsic properties in specific contexts.

2. The Grammatical Role of “an sich selbst”

The account so far has not been grammatically explicit, even though the paraphrase so far adopted is far from grammatically innocent. It may have been noticed that I have offered *adverbial* translations of “an sich”, such as “absolutely” and “intrinsically”. More specifically, I have offered *sentence adverb* translations. Before explaining the relevance of this feature of my account, I wish to remark on a competing adverbial analysis of “an sich”.

2.1. Prauss’ adverbial reading

In his 1974 work *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, Gerold Prauss offered a provocative and still-influential analysis of Kant’s use of “things in themselves” and related

⁴⁸ Kant himself speaks of relations of things “in themselves: cf. KrV, A 42/B 59. For discussion of the issue with respect to freedom as a relation, see Ameriks: *Interpreting Kant’s Critiques*, 148–152.

⁴⁹ Meier: *Vernunftlehre*, § 331; my emphasis.

expressions.⁵⁰ Prauss argued that “an sich selbst” functions as an adverb in philosophical German. He believes that Kant’s expression “Dinge an sich selbst” is a contracted version of a standard expression among his contemporaries: “Dinge an sich selbst betrachtet” (or “erwogen”).⁵¹ We have already seen that Baumgarten and Meier speak of things “considered in themselves”. As Prauss points out, Kant uses this and similar expressions at several points: “Our expositions accordingly teach...at the same time the *ideality* of space in regard to things when they are considered in themselves through reason”⁵² (KrV, A 27f./B 43f.); “[Appearance] always has two sides, one where the object is considered in itself”⁵³ (KrV, A 38/B 55).⁵⁴ Prauss took it that in these full statements, “an sich selbst” modifies “betrachtet” or “erwogen”; thus, “in itself” expresses how something is being *considered*.⁵⁵ Prauss then claims that even passages where no intentional verb like “considered” is used involve a tacit reference to such a verb, so that “an sich selbst” maintains a generally adverbial role. This interpretation underwrites Prauss’ effort to show that Kant’s “things in themselves” are (for the most part) the same as empirical things but considered from a different “transcendental” point of view.

Some critics have argued that the assumption of a tacit intentional verb cannot be made in every case, and that, in other cases, it seems that a different verb may be modified, such as “existing”.⁵⁶ However, I think that even in the best instances it is not clear how “an sich selbst” can modify an intentional verb, or at least not in the way Prauss thinks. Let’s compare two different kinds of case. I can consider something *carefully*, by which I perform a careful consideration. Here the adverb “carefully” characterizes the act expressed by the verb. But if I

⁵⁰ This position is affirmed in the *Kant-Lexikon*. See Baumgarten, Hans-Ulrich: “Ding an sich”. In Marcus Willacschek, Jürgen Stolzenberg, Georg Mohr, Stefano Bacin (eds.), *Kant-Lexikon*. Vol. 1. Berlin 2015, 426–429.

⁵¹ Prauss: *Kant und das Problem*, 20f.

⁵² Unsere Erörterungen lehren demnach [...] die *Idealität* des Raums in Ansehung der Dinge, wenn sie durch die Vernunft an sich selbst erwogen werden” (KrV, A 27f./B 43f.).

⁵³ “[...] Erscheinung [...], welche jederzeit zwei Seiten hat, die eine, da das Object an sich selbst betrachtet wird” (KrV, A 38/B 55).

⁵⁴ See also KrV, A 324/B 381, discussed in detail above.

⁵⁵ Prauss, *Kant und das Problem*, 22f.

⁵⁶ See especially Aquila, Richard: *Representational Mind: A Study of Kant’s Theory of Knowledge*. Bloomington 1983, 88–93. For example: “the notion of the ‘in itself’ primarily modifies that of existence, not that of a certain sort of a consideration or regard” (91).

consider something *important*, that does not make the performance an important consideration. Even more to the point: considering something green does not make the consideration green. In this case, “important” or “green” do not modify “consider” and are not adverbs at all; for they characterize the *object of consideration*, the object of my judgment (grammatically a noun), rather than the act or verb.

If “an sich selbst” were more like “carefully”, then the sense in which it could be an adverb is clear. But on Prauss’ interpretation, “an sich selbst” seems to characterize the content, not the manner, of the consideration. Prauss says “an sich selbst” has for Kant a tacitly negative sense, meaning roughly ‘not as an appearance’.⁵⁷ Notice that this interpretation makes “an sich selbst” closer to “important” than “carefully”; it characterizes the object of consideration, rather than the act of consideration. We can move from ‘I consider something as important’ to ‘I consider that something is important’; in the latter case, “important” is clearly a predicate adjective. The same seems to be true on Prauss’ reading: ‘This thing is considered (as if) not as an appearance’ seems to entail ‘It is considered that this thing is (as if) not an appearance’.⁵⁸ Prauss’ view thus does not conform to the pattern of adverbial modification of “consider”; it is, ironically, closer grammatically to the adjectival views he aims to reject.

2.2. The Sentence Adverb Analysis

I believe that “an sich selbst” functions as an adverb, but it does not modify a *verb* or *predicate* at all, so we do not need to posit any tacitly modified verb. As far as I know, the best way to characterize the basic role I have so far carved out for the expression is as a *sentence adverb*. Sentence adverbs do not modify predicates, but whole *predications*. The basic role of such expressions is to state *how* some S is P. A number of other expressions play this sentential role, such as epistemic words like “probably”, modal words such as “necessarily”, and quantifiers such as “sometimes”.⁵⁹ A sentence adverb can often (though not always) be

⁵⁷ Prauss: *Kant und das Problem*, 37–43.

⁵⁸ I add the “as if” because Prauss believes that this consideration is carried out problematically (at a level of “second-level reflection”), not assertorically. See Prauss, *Kant und das Problem*, 62–85.

⁵⁹ See Jackendoff, Ray S.: *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass., 1972, for an extensive account of the semantics of sentential adverbs (“S-Adverbs”). Related territory is covered in David

recognized in English by the permissibility of moving it to the initial position of a sentence: thus ‘Cats probably understand our thoughts’ maintains its sense when rendered ‘Probably, cats understand our thoughts’. Adverb position is more flexible in German, but the same syntactic category is certainly recognized and is perhaps even more widespread.⁶⁰

In fact, Kant himself recognizes a unique role for some of the words now classified as sentence-level modifiers: terms for modality and negation. While the present proposal does not rest on Kant’s own grammatical self-awareness, the agreement is nonetheless remarkable. First, of modality Kant says it “contributes nothing to the content of the judgment [...] but rather concerns only the value of the copula in relation to thinking in general”⁶¹ (KrV, A 74/B 99f.). He says something similar of negation: “Logical negation, which is indicated solely by the little word ‘not,’ is never properly attached to a concept, but rather only to its relation to another concept in a judgment, and therefore it is far from sufficient to designate a concept in regard to its content.”⁶² (KrV, A 574/B 602) Kant seems to see modal concepts and negation as representing the relation of subject and predicate (via the copula), rather than adding any content to subject or predicate. The concepts function at the level of whole judgments. Thus, though Kant is not grammatically explicit about “an sich”, he recognizes correlates of the same grammatical role.⁶³

Lewis’ treatment of “adverbs of quantification” (“Adverbs of Quantification”. Reprinted in: *Papers in Philosophical Logic*. Cambridge 1998, 5–20).

⁶⁰ See Scheffler, Tatanja: *Two-dimensional Semantics: Clausal Adjuncts and Complements*. Berlin, 2013, Ch. 3.3, for a contemporary treatment of sentence adverbs in German.

⁶¹ “[...] sie nichts zum Inhalte des Urtheils beiträgt [...], sondern nur den Werth der Copula in Beziehung auf das Denken überhaupt angeht” (KrV, A 74/B 99f.).

⁶² “Die logische Verneinung, die lediglich durch das Wörtchen Nicht angezeigt wird, hängt eigentlich niemals einem Begriffe, sondern nur dem Verhältnisse desselben zu einem andern im Urtheile an und kann also dazu bei weitem nicht hinreichend sein, einen Begriff in Ansehung seines Inhalts zu bezeichnen.” (KrV, A 574/B 602)

⁶³ The same is true of Meier: “The representation of the way in which the predicate pertains or does not pertain to the subject is the *determination of the copula* [*Verbindungsbegriffe*: cf. § 293 of the same work] and the *negation of it (modus formalis)*. A judgment either has such a determination or not” (Meier, *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, § 309). This shows that he is aware of modifiers that affect the judgment but neither subject nor predicate.

If our hypothesis is correct, we can think of the “an sich” as modifying the core predication of a judgment, roughly as follows:

an sich (S is P)

A negation of an “an sich” judgement would usually fall outside the scope of the “an sich”. Thus:

Not (*an sich* (S is P))

These schemata stand in contrast to renderings such as ‘S-*an-sich* is P’ or ‘S is not P-*an-sich*’, where the “an sich” expression is thought as modifying a particular noun or predicate phrase and creating a new compound term.

Evidence for the sentence-adverb reading of “an sich” can be found in the passage we have already been considering in section 1.2. Kant said, “The word ‘absolute’ is now more often used merely to indicate that something is valid of a thing considered *in itself* and thus *internally*.”⁶⁴ (KrV, A 324/B 281) The allusion to “something [being] valid of a thing” is a clear reference to predication: that some predicate holds of some subject. Recall that Kant’s example is about the logical predicate “possible” being attributed to something. Kant is saying that “an sich” indicates that such a predication holds “absolutely” in our weak sense, that is, it holds if no further condition is added.

We can now see that the addition of “considered” in this and other cases is consistent with the sentence adverb analysis, while not being obligatory (as it was for Prauss’ adverbial reading). For if I judge that S is P in some way, then I am *also* considering that S is P (or S *as* P) in some way. If “an sich” modifies the judgment made, it expresses indirectly how something is being considered, though without *modifying* the verb “considered”. Moreover, if the predicate of a judgment is “exist(s)”, then it is certainly possible on the present account to say that something exists ‘in itself’, though this does not mean that ‘existence-in-itself’ is a kind of existence.⁶⁵ Thus, the sentential account covers the cases supporting Prauss’ analysis, while also covering those cases often proposed as exceptions to his.

If “an sich” is a sentential adverb, it nevertheless has a feature that is grammatically peculiar, though by no means anomalous. It is, we can say, a *reflexive* sentence adverb, in that it contain components (“sich selbst”) that refer back ‘anaphorically’ to another part of the

⁶⁴ “Das Wort *absolut* wird jetzt öfters gebraucht, um bloß anzuzeigen, daß etwas von einer Sache *an sich selbst* betrachtet und also *innerlich* gelte.” (KrV, A 324/B 381)

⁶⁵ Contrary to Aquila: *Representational Mind*, 90–93, who also follows Wilfrid Sellars on this point.

sentence.⁶⁶ In a basic case, we should expect this reflexive component to refer either to the subject or the predicate. Our paraphrase from 1.2 implies that this anaphora should typically go to the subject:

S is P *an sich* \equiv S is P if P is a condition contained in or entailed by S

This to say that whether S is P *an sich* depends on what S is, on whether S itself entails P. If this is correct, then “an sich” is not attached to a predicate in such cases, despite being placed next to a predicate. It also implies that “P *an sich*” in this paraphrase is not, despite appearances, a complete expression, or even a schema for a concept. For when removed from a context, it contains an anaphora for some expression (“S”) that does not appear in “P *an sich*”.⁶⁷ By contrast, in cases where “an sich” accompanies a subject (or grammatical object), I believe that “S *an sich selbst*” is self-reflexive (= ‘S *qua* S’ or ‘S in its own right’). The cases differ only superficially, however, since “an sich selbst” refers back to the subject (or grammatical object) despite difference in placement. In either case, the adverb has its use in expressing something about the grounds of the judgment as a whole, rather than modifying either term adjectivally.

Let us preview the interpretative implications of such a grammatical proposal. Consider a statement occasionally repeated by Kant: “Appearances are not things in themselves [Erscheinungen sind keine Dinge an sich selbst].” (KrV, A 165/B 206)⁶⁸ Where a separate analysis of “an sich” is lacking, it may seem most natural to read this statement as a denial that appearances are ‘things-in-themselves’ (however interpreted). Thus:

⁶⁶ In his seminal discussion of sentence adverbs, Jackendoff argues that clauses and prepositional phrase can “function as sentence adverbials” (*Semantics in Generative Grammar*, 58). He provides examples that include reflexive or anaphoric (or ‘cataphoric’) components (i.e., “his” and “he” in these examples): “In spite of his mother’s admonitions, [...]” or “Now that he is married to Sally, [...]”, etc. This is enough for my purposes to show that ‘reflexive sentence adverb’ is a plausible grammatical category, though Jackendoff does not provide the name.

⁶⁷ Though it would take us too far afield to correlate our interpretation of Kant with scholastic and ancient philosophy, it is worth pointing out a similar claim made by Allen Bäck with respect to the Aristotelian “*kath auto*” (often translated “per se”). He writes, “I think Aristotle holds that a [*kath auto*] phrase has an argument that depends grammatically on the subject term of the proposition to which the phrase is attached. However, what [*auto*] means depends on the predicate and its relation to the subject. [...] The incomplete sentence, ‘Callias [*kath auton*] [...], does not fix the meaning of [*auton*]; the predicate is needed to do this.” (*On Reduplication*, 41f.) Bäck’s purpose is not to characterize the expression grammatically, but his recognition that it has sense only considering the *relation* of the predicate to the subject is very much in line with a sentence adverb reading.

⁶⁸ Cf. KrV, A 190/B 235.

Not (Appearances are things-in-themselves)

However, according to the sentence adverb reading, the “an sich” modifies the core judgment.

Thus:

Not (*an sich* (Appearances are things))

We could paraphrase the statement

It is not that case that appearances are, in virtue of being appearances (or: without some further condition), things.

This paraphrase implies that “things” has independent significance as a predicate, and the question at issue is whether appearances are things in that sense. As I will discuss below (see section 4), I believe Kant’s transcendental idealism can be stated equally in terms of the distinction of appearances and things (*simpliciter*), rather than ‘things in themselves’. My present aim is not to emphasize the doctrinal importance of this point, but only its grammatical plausibility: that we can read the “an sich” as pertaining to the predication rather than the predicate. We can add to this plausibility with an example that alters the relevant word-order:

For if the senses merely represent something to us *as it appears*, then this something must also be in itself a thing and an object of a non-sensible intuition, i.e., of the understanding [...].⁶⁹ (KrV, A 249)

In this passage, it is clear that “an sich” is not grammatically bound to a subject or predicate. In particular, “an sich” is not modifying “thing”, but rather modifying a judgment that something is or is not a thing. It functions at the level of predication.

The grammatical claim advanced here is that in basic subject-predicate judgments, “an sich” functions as a reflexive or anaphoric sentence adverb. What is essential about this grammatical claim is that the expression functions in combinations of subjects and predicates, rather than by modifying subjects or predicates on their own. Nevertheless, this claim does not imply that “an sich” is bound to a single syntactic role. Sentential adverbs are naturally subject to certain normal transformations. Compare the use of “probably”, which we have already observed as a sentence adverb. (It is a decidedly epistemic adverb, but the grammatical points should carry over.) Though the adverb plays its sentential role in

(1) Tim probably committed the burglary,

⁶⁹ “Denn wenn uns die Sinne etwas bloß vorstellen, *wie es erscheint*, so muß dieses Etwas doch auch an sich selbst ein Ding und ein Gegenstand einer nichtsinnlichen Anschauung, d. i. des Verstandes, sein [...]” (KrV, A 249).

this does not prevent it from appearing in relative clauses

(2) The man who probably committed the burglary is Tim

or

(3) Tim, as the man who probably committed the burglary, is bound to testify.

These transformations maintain the primacy of the sentential role of “probably”, even though in (2)-(3) it no longer modifies the whole sentence, since it appears within relative clauses. The primary sentential role is compatible with the adverb appearing in this derivative role.

Likewise, we should be prepared to encounter in Kant not only the basic forms “S is P *an sich*” or “S *an sich* is P”, but also (e.g.),

P is (or is not) a predicate (or property) of S *an sich*

S, as P *an sich*, is (or is not) Q

Though these are not equivalent to the primary cases, they are clearly derivative from and compatible with the sentential role of the “an sich”. More difficult, but no less derivative, is a case like the following:

I know nothing about S *an sich*.

This is a case where we might be very tempted to supposed that “S *an sich*” was the whole direct object of the verb (‘S-in-itself’). But there is a promising reading on the sentential account.

Roughly, the sentence admits the paraphrase (with “ ϕ ” as a predicate variable):

There is no ϕ such that I know (non-trivially)⁷⁰ that S is ϕ *an sich*.

This paraphrase shows that the use of “an sich” in the original claim assumes a predicative context: the “nothing about” alludes to the lack of any known predicate (i.e., ‘no ϕ ’). Thus, my claim that “an sich” is a sentential adverb is a claim only about the basic case; but other uses of the expression should likewise depend for their sense on a relation to some combination of subject and predicate.

⁷⁰ This qualification is not arbitrary because it would not normally be a convincing rebuttal of a claim of ignorance about some S to say, “Well, you know that S is S don’t you?” Or, “Well, you know S isn’t the highest number, don’t you?” Applying trivially applicable predicates to S (and many negative predicates) would not normally be taken as counted as *knowing* something about S at all. See Kant’s remark to this effect: “But it is not yet a genuine cognition if I merely indicate what the intuition of the object *is not*, without being able to say what is then contained in it [...] [Allein das ist doch kein eigentliches Erkenntniß, wenn ich bloß anzeige, wie die Anschauung des Objects *nicht sei*, ohne sagen zu können, was in ihr denn enthalten sei [...]]” (KrV, B 149).

The sentence-adverb reading of “an sich” (which would be more accurately described as the predication-level reading) has a number of important implications. I will summarize some of them as principles for interpretation:

- I. Whenever “an sich selbst” is used, one should look for the subject-predication combination in which it is involved, whether a whole sentence or a sub-sentential predication or identification.
- II. The sense of “an sich selbst” can be expressed with the paraphrases articulated above (See sec. 1.2.).
- III. The expression “ ϕ an sich selbst” in a predicate position is usually incomplete in sense; its sense depends on the anaphoric referent of “sich”, which is usually other than “ ϕ ”.
- IV. The expression “ ϕ an sich selbst” in the subject (or direct/indirect object) position is self-reflexive, meaning something like ‘ ϕ *qua* ϕ ’, ‘ ϕ *per se*’, or ‘ ϕ in its own right’.
- V. The conceptual content of “ ϕ an sich selbst” does not alter the conceptual content of “ ϕ ” (for reasons of III and IV).

A consequence of these principles is that we have been wrong to treat expressions such as “things in themselves” or “ends in themselves” as compound nouns or independent units of interpretation.

3. Applications

3.1. “Zweck an sich selbst”

Let us now see how the above semantic and grammatical hypothesis works naturally in a case that has drawn perhaps less controversy than the case of “things in themselves,” namely, “end in itself”. While there is some substantive interpretive difficulty regarding this notion, it has not (to my knowledge) led to systematic semantic controversy in the same way “things in themselves” has. In any case, I want only to show how an application of the principles above leads to a natural and plausible grammatical reading of “end in itself”. With any luck, this reading need not lead to substantive doctrinal revisions, though perhaps it may give some opportunity for clarification.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant introduces his use of “end in itself” as follows:

The ends that a rational being proposes at his discretion as *effects* of his actions (material ends) are all only relative; for only their mere relation to a specially constituted faculty of desire on the part of the subject gives them their worth. [...] But suppose there were something the *existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, something which as an *end in itself* could be the ground of determinate laws; then in it, and in it alone, would lie

the ground of a possible categorical imperative, that is, of a practical law.⁷¹ (GMS, AA 04: 427f.)

According to our principle I, we must look for a subject-predicate combination whenever “*an sich*” is used. Here we find the subject as “something” (etwas, was), of which “end” is predicated through “as”, in a copula-like role.⁷² Indeed, in Kant’s usage we will find that it is always “something” or “the existence of” something which is an end, or treated or regarded *as* an end. According to principle III, it is this “*something*” (or its “existence”) which provides the content of the anaphoric reference of “in itself”. This becomes clear in another case of word-order change. On the same page, Kant speaks of persons as beings “*the existence of which is in itself an end*, and indeed one such that no other end, to which they would serve *merely* as means, can be put in its place, since without it nothing of *absolute worth* would be found anywhere”⁷³ (GMS, AA 04: 428). Here it is the “existence” of persons to which “itself” refers. The “in itself” is explaining *how* the existence of a person is an end; it works at the level of predication.

What does it mean to predicate “end” of something “in itself”? Our principle II permits us to use the paraphrase we developed above: S is P *an sich* \equiv S is P and P is a condition contained in or entailed by S. According to this schema, the judgments

The existence of a rational being is an end *an sich*,

or

The existence of a rational being is *an sich* an end

can both be paraphrased (since they are, on my view, semantically equivalent)

The existence of a rational being is an end and its being an end is entailed by the existence of the rational being.

⁷¹ “Die Zwecke, die sich ein vernünftiges Wesen als *Wirkungen* seiner Handlung nach Belieben vorsetzt, (materiale Zwecke) sind insgesamt nur relativ; denn nur bloß ihr Verhältniß auf ein besonders geartetes Begehungsvermögen des Subjects giebt ihnen den Werth [...]. Gesetzt aber, es gäbe etwas, *dessen Dasein an sich selbst* einen absoluten Werth hat, was *als Zweck an sich selbst* ein Grund bestimmter Gesetze sein könnte, so würde in ihm und nur in ihm allein der Grund eines möglichen kategorischen Imperativs, d. i. praktischen Gesetzes, liegen.” (GMS, AA 04: 427f.)

⁷² On this use of “as” see Strawson, Peter F.: “Concepts and Properties or Predication and Copulation”. In: *Philosophical Quarterly* 37, 1987, 405.

⁷³ “[...] *deren Dasein an sich selbst Zweck ist* und zwar ein solcher, an dessen statt kein anderer Zweck gesetzt werden kann, dem sie *bloß* als Mittel zu Diensten stehen sollten, weil ohne dieses überall gar nichts von *absolutem Werthe* würde angetroffen werden [...]” (GMS, AA 04: 428).

This can be expanded negatively:

The existence of a rational being is an end and its being an end is entailed (without the addition of any further condition) by the existence of the rational being.

This paraphrase helps bring out the contrast with the “relative ends” that Kant mentions in the context. The existence of a relative end such as the satisfaction of an inclination is not entailed just by the nature of a rational being; it is only an end on the condition that we have a certain biological constitution, or because it is adopted as a means to a further end: “for only their mere relation to a specially constituted faculty of desire on the part of the subject gives them worth”⁷⁴ (GMS, AA 04: 427). By contrast, Kant believes that the representation of oneself and anyone else requires thinking of rational nature as an end in itself: “But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that also holds for me”⁷⁵ (GMS, AA 04: 429). According to the present proposal, rational nature by itself entails its being an end. Though the precise nature of this entailment would require some further explanation, I think the basic proposal is consistent with standard accounts of the *meaning* of “end in itself”, and it follows naturally from the account of “in itself” we have provided.

This example can also illustrate how “in itself” does not modify the conceptual content of the expression it accompanies, such as “end”. According to our proposal, “end in itself” is not a *kind* of end; rather, “in itself” expresses *how* something is an end: not in virtue of something else, but in virtue of itself.⁷⁶ We need both the subject and the predicate to make sense of such an attribution, since “itself” refers back to the subject in virtue of which something is an end. But the sense of the (incomplete) expression “end in itself” depends on the same concept of an end involved in any specification of something as end. It is just that most ends are ends only with

⁷⁴ “denn nur bloß ihr Verhältniß auf ein besonders geartetes Begehrungsvermögen des Subjects giebt ihnen den Werth [...]” (GMS, AA 04: 427).

⁷⁵ “So stellt sich aber auch jedes andere vernünftige Wesen sein Dasein zufolge eben desselben Vernunftgrundes, der auch für mich gilt, vor [...]” (GMS, AA 04: 429).

⁷⁶ Pace Wood, Allen: *Formulas of the Moral Law*. Cambridge 2017, 62. However, Wood’s point is well-taken that the referent of “sich selbst” should not be taken to be the individual person and so should be translated “end in itself” (61f.). On our account, the referent of “sich selbst” depends on the place of “Zweck” in the predication. In some cases, “end in itself” is the appropriate translation because the expression is reflexive: ‘end qua end’ or ‘end in its own right’. See principle IV above.

some qualification, so that the existence of something as an end *in itself* – not requiring some further end to make it an end – is something remarkable.

3.2. “Dinge an sich selbst”

While I do not believe my grammatical proposal has any unsettling consequences for the interpretation of “end in itself”, the same may not be the case with its implications for the interpretation of “things in themselves”. Consider what a blind application of the above principles III-V to this case would have us say:

III-D. The expression “Dinge an sich selbst” in a predicate position is usually incomplete in sense; its sense depends on the anaphoric referent of “sich”, which is usually other than “things”.

IV-D. The expression “Dinge sich selbst” in the subject (or grammatical object) position is self-reflexive, meaning something like ‘Dinge *qua* Dinge’ or ‘Dinge *per se*’.

V-D. The conceptual content of “Dinge an sich selbst” does not alter the conceptual content of “Dinge.”

These are consequences of the general thesis that the sense of “an sich” is given only in the context of a subject-predicate combination.

A close inspection of Kant’s typical uses of the expression will confirm this dependence on the predicative context, I believe. However, it must be admitted that Kant rarely uses it in simple subject-predicate judgments, such as the one we sampled above: “Appearances are not things *an sich selbst*.” Instead, a predicative context is involved in two other primary ways. The first comes in cases where the “an sich” is used in the context of intentional verbs, like “say” (sagen) or “represent” (vorstellen), so that it accompanies the direct or indirect object of these verbs.⁷⁷ In these cases, there is no specific subject-predicate combination, but the notion of predicating something about things is still directly involved. Here is a representative example:

⁷⁷ See on this sense, e.g., Searle, John: *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge 1983, 2. Similar cases occur in which “things” are the direct or indirect object: e.g., “one imagines that they [sc. principles] *pertain to* things in themselves [man sich vorstellt, daß sie Dinge an sich selbst *angehen*]” (KrV, A 186/B 229); “Further, this concept is not necessary in order not to *extend sensible intuition to* things in themselves, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensible cognition [...] [Ferner ist dieser Begriff nothwendig, um die sinnliche Anschauung nicht bis *über* die Dinge an sich selbst *auszudehnen* und also um die objective Gültigkeit der sinnlichen Erkenntniß einzuschränken [...]]” (KrV, A 254/B 310). My emphasis in theses quotations.

[A]bout these [objects or appearances], further, much may be said *a priori* that concerns their form but never the least *about the things in themselves* that may ground these appearances.⁷⁸ (KrV, A 49/B 66; my emphasis; modified)⁷⁹

I would not claim that “an sich” in such a passage is playing a directly sentential role. That is evidently not the case. However, it nevertheless involves a predicative context in that it refers (indeterminately) to something said “about” things.⁸⁰ According to our principle IV, since “things” is here the grammatical object of the verb, the sense of “Dinge an sich selbst” is self-reflexive; it might be paraphrased either as ‘things qua things’ or perhaps ‘things in their own right’.⁸¹ On either construal, Kant is not, despite appearances, saying that ‘things in themselves’ ground appearances. Rather, he is saying that ‘things’ ground appearances, but that we do not know (cannot “say”) anything about those things merely as things, or in their own right.

This kind of case is consistent with the present account, since the intentional use of “an sich” derives its sense from the sentential use, even if indirectly. The same is true of a second prominent modification of the sentential role of “an sich”, which we have already observed in the case of “end in itself”. Namely, Kant often uses “things in themselves” in complex judgments with “as” playing a copula-like role. Doctrines that are typically framed by commentators in terms of “things in themselves” alone are often stated by Kant in terms of “objects as things in themselves”. Here is a sample:

(1) The concept of a *noumenon*, i.e., of a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather *as a thing in itself* [my emphasis] (solely through a pure understanding), is not at all contradictory [...].⁸² (KrV, A 254/B 310)

⁷⁸ “[...] was die Form derselben betrifft, vieles a priori sagen läßt, niemals aber das Mindeste *von dem Dinge an sich selbst*, das diesen Erscheinungen zum Grunde liegen mag” (KrV, A 49/B 66; my emphasis).

⁷⁹ See also A 276/B 332; B 306f.

⁸⁰ Recall the sample along these lines given in section 2.2. above.

⁸¹ These options are substantially different, corresponding roughly to an analytic or synthetic reading of the relevant entailment (see section 1.2. above). To lack knowledge of things qua things is to lack conceptual knowledge; to lack knowledge of certain things in their own right is to lack determinate knowledge of those individuals. Kant may well be concerned with both issues in various places; for my purposes, I do not need to decide the issue in a given case, since both are compatible with my main claim.

⁸² “Der Begriff eines Noumenon, d. i. eines Dinges, welches gar nicht als Gegenstand der Sinne, sondern als ein Ding an sich selbst (lediglich durch einen reinen Verstand) gedacht werden soll, ist gar nicht widersprechend [...]” (KrV, A 254/B 310).¹

(2) [...] we can have cognition of no object *as thing in itself*, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition.⁸³ (KrV, BXXVI; my emphasis)

(3) [The *Critique*] says that the objects *as things in themselves* [my emphasis] give the matter to empirical intuition (they contain the ground by which to determine the faculty of representation in accordance with its sensibility), but they *are* not the matter thereof.⁸⁴ (ÜE, AA 08: 215)

What explains the prevalence of these “as” expressions? Why could (2), for instance, not simply be phrased ‘we have no cognition of things in themselves’? Why could (3) not say ‘things in themselves give the matter to empirical intuition’?

I propose that this linguistic pattern corroborates the view according to which “an sich” has its use in subject-predicate combinations, so that it cannot function as (for example) a compound noun. Accordingly, “as” in these passages is playing the role of a copula, joining a subject-term like “object” to the predicate “thing”. This can be drawn out by a paraphrase (admittedly tendentious) of (2):

(2*) We cognize such that: $\forall x ((x \text{ is an object}) \rightarrow \neg (\text{an sich } (x \text{ is a thing})))$ ⁸⁵

According to our paraphrase, (2) says that if we cognize an object as a thing, we do not cognize it such that it is a thing absent from certain limiting ‘conditions’. By contrast, presumably, if we knew objects as things apart from those limiting conditions, we would know them as things ‘*an sich*’.

A rough paraphrase of the main claim of (3) looks like this:

(3*) $\forall x ((x \text{ is the matter of an empirical intuition}) \rightarrow \exists y ((y \text{ gives } x) \& \text{an sich } (y \text{ is a thing})))$

This says that, for anything that is the matter of an intuition, there is (at least one) object that is intrinsically or absolutely a thing – a thing such that we do not need to add some qualification, e.g., ‘a thing such that it is apparent vis-à-vis human sensibility’ – that gives the intuition its matter. It does not say that entities called ‘things in themselves’ give the matter to appearances; it

⁸³ “[...] wir von keinem Gegenstande als Dinge an sich selbst, sondern nur so fern es Object der sinnlichen Anschauung ist, d. i. als Erscheinung, Erkenntniß haben können [...]” (KrV, BXXVI).

⁸⁴ “Sie [sc. die Kritik] sagt: die Gegenstände als Dinge an sich *geben* den Stoff zu empirischen Anschauungen (sie enthalten den Grund, das Vorstellungsvermögen seiner Sinnlichkeit gemäß zu bestimmen), aber sie *sind* nicht der Stoff derselben.” (ÜE, AA 08: 215)

⁸⁵ The whole conditional should be read under the qualification about cognition, so that the denial in the consequent remains a claim about how something is cognized.

is just that ‘things’ do so. Rendering “an sich” adverbially and as attached to a subject-predicate combination, we have found that “things in themselves” does not function as a separable unit in these passages.

Some explanation of the significance of these paraphrases is perhaps required at this stage. According to the account of “conditions” above, when some predicate is attributed to a subject, it is often asserted with some implicit limiting condition. Recall that Kant thought the judgment “A man is deserving of punishment” is perhaps true but requires qualification. It is not because someone is a man that he deserves punishment, but only a man “who is vicious” (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 932). The judgment is true only under that condition. A judgment that is true without requiring such a condition is true because of what the subject is: it is true absolutely, or ‘in itself’.

Kant’s view is that our judgments about things are always of the first, conditioned type, and not of the second, absolute type. Recall a passage quoted above:

The proposition “All things are next to one another in space” is valid only under the limitation that these things be taken as objects of our sensible intuition. If I here *add the condition to the concept* and say: “All things, as outer intuitions, are next to one another in space,” then the rule is valid universally and without limitation.⁸⁶ (KrV, A 27/B 43; my emphasis)

This passage concerns the *qualification* of all our claims about things. Whenever a generalization is made about things, Kant is saying, it involves an implicit limitation to contingent conditions of human sensibility (“always only under the conditions originally depending on the subject, space and time [immer nur unter den dem Subjekt ursprünglich anhängenden Bedingungen, von Raum und Zeit]” [KrV, A 43/B 60]); and this means that the concept ‘thing’ cannot be attributed without the implicit qualification: ‘as given to the senses’. We do not know objects as things ‘in themselves’ in the sense that we do not know objects as things without such qualifying conditions. The features of things that we do know (for example, their spatiotemporality) cannot,

⁸⁶ “Der Satz: Alle Dinge sind neben einander im Raum, gilt unter der Einschränkung, wenn diese Dinge als Gegenstände unserer sinnlichen Anschauung genommen werden. Füge ich hier die Bedingung zum Begriffe und sage: Alle Dinge als äußere Erscheinungen sind neben einander im Raum, so gilt diese Regel allgemein und ohne Einschränkung.” (KrV, A 27/B 43)

without further ado, be attributed to things that would not be subject to certain ‘special’ conditions on our knowledge.

What I wish to emphasize is that this lack of unqualified knowledge about things is important not for its own sake but because of its relation to further inferences or generalizations. A simple analogy may help illustrate this point. Contemporary psychologists have raised the methodological concern that most empirical psychological studies are conducted on undergraduate populations characterized as “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic).⁸⁷ The challenge is that *insofar* as these populations are WEIRD, they tell us nothing about the nature of *Homo sapiens*, since we know these populations are unique in the history of the species:

It is not merely that researchers frequently make generalizations from a narrow subpopulation. The concern is that this particular subpopulation is highly *unrepresentative* of the species. The fact that WEIRD people are the outliers in so many key domains of the behavioral sciences may render them one of the worst subpopulations one could study for generalizing about *Homo sapiens*.⁸⁸

For example, if psychologists run studies on mainly rich populations, they might draw some valid conclusions about ‘*Homo sapiens*, if they are rich’. However, *insofar* as this is known *not* to be a universal condition of the species, they cannot safely draw conclusions about the class of *Homo sapiens* that includes both the rich and poor. For there is no telling *a priori* whether observations drawn from *Homo sapiens* in the condition of wealth hold for the species as such.

Similarly, if our knowledge of ‘things’ is always only under a subjective limiting condition, namely human sensibility, it follows that we do not know what things *as such* are: things unqualified by some condition peculiar to our knowledge of them. Kant makes this point with striking clarity here:

Since we cannot make the special conditions of sensibility into conditions of the possibility of things, but only of their appearances, we can well say that space comprehends all things that may appear to us externally, but not all things in themselves, whether they be intuited or not, or by whatever subject they may be intuited. For we

⁸⁷ See Henrich, Joseph, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan: “The Weirdest People in the World?” In: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, 2010, 61–83.

⁸⁸ Henrich et al.: “The Weirdest People,” 79.

cannot judge at all whether the intuitions of other thinking beings are bound to the same conditions that limit our intuition and that are universally valid for us.⁸⁹ (KrV, A 27/B 43)

We know things under a certain limiting (or “special”) condition and not without some limiting condition.⁹⁰ This deficit in our knowledge is significant, I believe, not because of what it tells us about our empirical knowledge – Kant says that the thing “in itself” is “never asked after in experience [auch in der Erfahrung niemals gefragt wird]” (KrV, A 30/B 45)⁹¹ –, but what it tells us about our limits to make further *inferences* stemming from our knowledge as given. For if we know something only under a qualification, we may generally not infer what it is apart from that qualification. By analogy, we do not need to suppose that “WEIRD” psychology is inadequate when it comes to WEIRD populations themselves (‘humans *as* WEIRD’) – but only when these studies intend to draw conclusions transcending these populations (‘humans *qua* humans’). Likewise, our ignorance of things ‘in themselves’ is a lack of knowledge of things except as they are under conditions of sensibility. This ignorance prevents us from using our empirical knowledge of things to infer about any supposed thing outside experience.⁹² I thus suggest that

⁸⁹ “Weil wir die besonderen Bedingungen der Sinnlichkeit nicht zu Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der Sachen, sondern nur ihrer Erscheinungen machen können, so können wir wohl sagen, daß der Raum alle Dinge befasse, die uns äußerlich erscheinen mögen, aber nicht alle Dinge an sich selbst, sie mögen nun angeschaut werden oder nicht, oder auch von welchem Subject man wolle. Denn wir können von den Anschauungen anderer denkenden Wesen gar nicht urtheilen, ob sie an die nämlichen Bedingungen gebunden seien, welche unsere Anschauung einschränken und für uns allgemein gültig sind.” (KrV, A 27/B 43)

⁹⁰ This passage is probably not using “condition” in the strictly logical sense. In particular, the relation between the “conditions” of sensibility or the possibility of things and “conditions” in the logical sense (conditions of judgments) is not entirely clear. However, there are reasons to suspect an important relation between these uses. First, this is the same passage in which Kant describes conditions being added to a concept to limit a judgment. It would be odd if the uses of “condition” were unrelated. Second, it seems reasonable to posit a close relation between the conditions on a thing and conditions on a judgment made about a thing. For example, even if the “conditions of sensibility” pertain to our cognitive faculty more generally (and so not in the first instance to judgments), it seems that judgments about sensible objects imply logical conditions in the relevant sense; this is the point Kant himself makes in the context. Even so, my account of “an sich” pertains strictly to the logical use of “condition”. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging the importance of this issue and for suggesting a line of response. I hope to return to the issue of “conditions” in Kant more fully in future work.

⁹¹ Cf. KrV, A 277/B 333.

⁹² It may be objected that this claim is too weak. For Kant often tells what things ‘in themselves’ are *not*, i.e., spatial (e.g., KrV A 26/B 42). This phenomenon is compatible with the present account, though I can only

Kant's frequent use of "an sich" in epistemological contexts aims to draw our attention to the *inferential* limitations of cognition that is empirically conditioned.

4. Implications for Interpreting Transcendental Idealism

The main purpose of this paper is not to address substantive interpretive issues in Kant, but to offer analytical tools for addressing them in the future. However, it may be helpful to see some of the more direct interpretive implications of my analysis.⁹³ In particular, if the account of "an sich" I have offered is on the right track, what does this imply about Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism, especially his understanding of the distinction of appearances from "things as they are in themselves"? What follows can only be a first attempt at addressing such issues.

Though I have departed from them important ways, it seems clear that my analysis lends support to some form of 'one-object' or 'two-aspect' reading of transcendental idealism. First, if my linguistic analysis is correct, Kant cannot be using "things in themselves" to refer to a unique kind of thing, different from those that can appear to us. This is simply because "things in themselves" is not a well-formed referring expression. If "an sich" were an adjective, so that "things in themselves" were a specific determination of "things", much like "holidays in December" is a specific determination of "holidays", then we could make good sense of referring to 'things in themselves' as a certain kind of thing. But if the reading I have proposed is correct, "things in themselves" cannot function in this way at all. Given the sentence "Cats probably understand our thoughts", no one would think that "Cats probably" is a well-formed referring expression. No one would ask whether 'Cats probably' were the same things as cats. But this is an exaggerated version of the same problem with treating "things in themselves" as referring to a

sketch out an approach to it. The WEIRD analogy will help. Consider the following bi-conditional: someone educated if and only if they are literate. Now suppose I conduct a study of a WEIRD population (which includes the "E" of "educated"). Some of this study may carry over to *Homo sapiens*. But if I know that not all *Homo sapiens* are (or were) literate, then I know anything that follows from the literacy of my population does *not* hold of *Homo sapiens* as such. Similarly, Kant believes it is clear that human sensibility is not a necessary feature of the existence of things. So if anything follows from sensibility alone (spatiality, for example), Kant is justified in holding that it does not hold of things 'as such'.

⁹³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for requesting this addition.

kind of thing, if “in itself” depends, like “probably”, for its sense on a predicative context. Grammatical constraints, then, tell against treating “things in themselves” as referring to a second kind of object.

This alone does not resolve any substantive issue about Kant’s metaphysics. For there is still room to hold that Kant recognizes an important difference in kind within the class of things. For example, a distinction between simple and composite things might still be available. In this sense, for all that I have said so far, Kant might hold a metaphysical view very close to more traditional two-world readings.⁹⁴ My claim is just that his use of “things in themselves” is not his expression to refer to that other world (or objects). Without settling the debate, recognizing this might remove some evidence normally used in favor of the two-world reading.⁹⁵

Furthermore, if this claim about Kant’s usage is right, a new way to respond to an important objection to various one-object interpretations of transcendental idealism is open, though I cannot elaborate the response in its full detail. Several authors have relied on the Leibnizian principle of the indiscernibility of identicals to show that ‘things in themselves’ cannot be the same as the things that appear to us or affect our senses.⁹⁶ It is pointed out that Kant not only attributes different properties to things that appear to us and ‘things in themselves’, which would already rule out their identity by Leibniz’s principle, he also attributes incompatible properties to them. For example, things that appear are spatiotemporal, but ‘things in themselves’ are (as traditionally understood) not spatiotemporal. Therefore, the things that appear cannot be the same things as ‘things in themselves’.

We have seen, however, that the claim that things have a property *an sich selbst* is a claim about *how* things have some property (in virtue of themselves), not an attribution of a

⁹⁴ For example, Karl Ameriks maintains that the post-Critical Kant still affirms simple beings, though which cannot be known from spatiotemporal phenomena. See his “The Critique of Metaphysics: Kant and Traditional Ontology”. In: Guyer, Paul (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*. Cambridge 1992: 261. My interpretation only rules out using “things in themselves” as Kant’s designation for such beings.

⁹⁵ Helpful comments from a reviewer have convinced me to significantly chasten an earlier version of the previous two paragraphs.

⁹⁶ For versions of this criticism, see Van Cleve: *Problems from Kant*, 146–150; Marshall: “Kant’s Appearances and Things in Themselves”; Stang, Nicholas: “The Non-identity of Appearances and Things in Themselves”. In: *NOÛS* 48, 2014: 106–136.

property to a new, more specific concept: ‘things in themselves’. Accordingly, we have observed that on the present view:

S in itself is not P

does not entail

S is not P

We saw, for example, that representations do not cause their object ‘in themselves’, but they nevertheless can cause their objects with the faculty of desire. We saw that (for Meier) the soul ‘in itself’ is perishable, but it is imperishable thanks to the power of God. Thus, in general, we cannot assume that a property that does not pertain to *F an sich selbst* does not pertain to F.⁹⁷ This does not immediately solve our given issue about spatiotemporality, which raises complex questions of its own. But we can see that our analysis gives us new resources for resolving apparent inconsistencies in Kantian doctrines, once we are free to analyze the expression “things in themselves” into claims about ‘things’.

For another example, consider the following (seemingly inconsistent) triad:

- (1) The concept of causality is a category
- (2) Categories do not apply to things-in-themselves
- (3) Certain things-in-themselves causally affect our senses

These apparently inconsistent claims present a classic problem for Kant interpreters.⁹⁸ But consider these claims in analyzed form:

- (1*) The concept of causality is a category
- (2*) Categories do not apply to things *an sich selbst* (here: things qua things)
- (3*) Certain things causally affect our senses⁹⁹

Since “an sich” is no longer treated as attached to, or modifying, the concept of a thing, the restriction presented in (2*) does not rule out the application of the concept of causality to things that affect our senses. It only forbids us from supposing that a thing’s causal effect on our

⁹⁷ See Allais: *Manifest Reality*, 73f., for a similar response, though drawing on the notion of relations.

⁹⁸ On this general problematic, see recently Kohl, Markus: “On the Inapplicability of Categories to Things in Themselves”. In: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23, 2015, 90–114.

⁹⁹ Our analysis would not permit a bald use of “things in themselves” in the subject position here. But I believe this is consistent with the way Kant states such claims. Recall the treatment of some relevant passages (KrV, A 49/B 66; ÜE, AA 08: 215) from the preceding section.

sensibility is somehow entailed by that thing. And those committed to things affecting sensibility need not be committed to such a strong claim as that.¹⁰⁰

The general upshot here is that some of Kant's doctrines can be analyzed in terms of 'things' and that such analyses may help us avoid certain problems and apparent inconsistencies in their interpretation. This assumes, of course, that "thing" (Ding) plays a special role in Kant's thought. I believe this fact has often gone unrecognized because of the typical treatment of "things in themselves" as a unit. Whereas it is often thought that "things in themselves" is Kant's term for mind-independent reality, my own view is that Kant's use of "thing" is already sufficient for this purpose. Kant writes, "The only concept that represents this empirical content of appearances *a priori* is the concept of the *thing* in general [Der einzige Begriff, der a priori diesen empirischen Gehalt der Erscheinungen vorstellt, ist der Begriff des *Dinges* überhaupt] [...]" (KrV, A 720/B 748). Furthermore, when Kant confronts idealistic interpretations of his work, he often frames his claims merely in terms of 'things'. He says that idealism "doubts or denies the existence of external things [die Existenz äußerer Dinge selbst bezweifelt oder leugnet]" (KrV, B 519n). In the "Refutation of Idealism" he writes, "Thus the perception of this persistent thing [dieses Beharrliches] is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me."¹⁰¹ (KrV, B 276) Similarly, he writes in the *Prolegomena*,

I say in opposition: There are things [Dinge] given to us as objects of our senses existing outside us, yet we know nothing of them as they may be in themselves [an sich selbst], but are acquainted only with their appearances, i.e., with the representations that they produce in us because they affect our senses. Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are bodies outside us, i.e., things [Dinge] which, though completely unknown to us as to what they may be in themselves [an sich selbst], we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides for us, and to which we give the name body [...].¹⁰² (Prol, AA 04: 289)

¹⁰⁰ See Langton: *Kantian Humility*, 13, for a similar solution to a related inconsistent triad, though Langton preserves "things in themselves" where I speak merely of "things".

¹⁰¹ "Also ist die Wahrnehmung dieses Beharrlichen nur durch ein Ding außer mir und nicht durch die bloße Vorstellung eines Dinges außer mir möglich." (KrV, B 276)

¹⁰² "Demnach gestehe ich allerdings, daß es außer uns Körper gebe, d. i. Dinge, die, obzwar nach dem, was sie an sich selbst sein mögen, uns gänzlich unbekannt, wir durch die Vorstellungen kennen, welche ihr Einfluß auf unsre Sinnlichkeit uns verschafft, und denen wir die Benennung eines Körpers geben [...]" (Prol, AA 04: 289).

The objects of reference in this passage are simply ‘things’, which affect our senses and which we do not know as they are *an sich selbst*. Though Kant does sometimes use terms such as “Sache”, “Object”, and “Gegenstand” to refer to the mind-independent things that may be represented in empirical intuition,¹⁰³ these terms can also have merely cognitive or epistemic connotations that “Dinge”, I believe, never has. For example, there can be “empirical objects”,¹⁰⁴ since “empirical” modifies a representation, concept, or cognition of something, but “empirical thing” is, I believe, a solecism. In general, “Gegenstand” and “Object” have intentional uses, where “Ding” does not. The notion of an ‘object of a representation, cognition, etc.’ makes good sense, but the ‘thing of a representation’ does not.¹⁰⁵

If this is correct, then Kant’s affirmations that we intuit things,¹⁰⁶ they appear to us,¹⁰⁷ and that our sensible representations are affections due to them,¹⁰⁸ are sufficient to secure Kant’s empirical realism.¹⁰⁹ We do not need the phrase “thing in itself” to discuss the relation of mind to a mind-independent world. But I believe the role of the concept of “things” is significant not just

¹⁰³ Cf. KrV, A 104f.; A 197/B 242.

¹⁰⁴ For empirical object (Gegenstand), see KrV, A 545/B 573; A 582/B 610; KpV, AA 05: 141. For ‘empirische Objecte’: KrV, A 46/B 63. An electronic search of Kant’s work yielded no results for variations of “empirische Ding”.

¹⁰⁵ “Sache”, which is often translated “thing,” is I believe simply a more neutral and less existentially committal term than “thing,” often closer in meaning to ‘something’ (etwas). Cf. KrV, B 140, B 410, A 423/B 450f.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. KrV, A 42/B 59. Kant clarifies in his debate with J.A. Eberhard that things “give” the matter of intuition, but they “are” not the matter. See ÜE, AA 08: 215.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. KrV, A 277/B 333.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Prol, AA 04: 289; KrV, A 720/B 748.

¹⁰⁹ Defending the view of “appearances” that best fits the claims I have advanced about “things” goes beyond the scope of this paper, and I can only state it in briefest of terms. In short, I think that we should take as our starting point the claim that appearances are representations of things (cf. KrV, A 490f./B 518f.), and not themselves the things that are represented (cf. KrV, 492/B 520). Kant’s definition of appearances as the “undetermined object of an empirical intuition [Der unbestimmte Gegenstand einer empirischen Anschauung]” (KrV, A 20/B 34) is characteristically ambiguous. If we take this “object” to mean “thing” in this context, then Kant’s later claim that appearances are mere representations turns things into representations: and that is the version of idealism that Kant rejects. Instead, if appearances are defined relative to their place in cognition and treated as the appearing of something (which may be a thing) in representation, then their being representations is consistent with realism about the things that appear ‘in’ them.

because of its reference to what is represented in objectively valid experience, but because the concept extends to those things that may exist apart from experience as well.¹¹⁰ It is because “thing” refers neutrally to something mind-independently real, whether or not it is the object of an empirical intuition, that the term is of so much importance in Kant’s critique of metaphysics.¹¹¹ In the German rationalist tradition, ‘thing’ (translating the Latin “*ens*”) is the highest genus of anything that exists.¹¹² The study of ontology is the study of the general properties of these ‘things’. The assumption connecting ontology or general metaphysics to special metaphysics, in the latter’s pursuit of a priori knowledge of God, the soul, and the world as a whole, is that there are certain shared properties of all things as such, including but not limited to these ‘special’ things. Since we would not naturally assume that features pertaining uniquely to human sensible intuition represent such properties, the only way to succeed in metaphysics so conceived is to conceive of some purely general and indeed ‘absolute’ properties of things.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ By contrast, Prauss (*Kant und das Problem*, 30) seems to treat “Ding”, “Object”, and “Sache” more or less equivalently as designations for the object of empirical reference. Perhaps because of this, he does not stress the specific conceptual importance of “Dinge” in his account. Similarly, Allais stresses the significance of “things, understood neutrally” (*Manifest Reality*, 35), but it seems that she is primarily concerned with the things an empirical realist is committed to.

¹¹¹ See, relatedly, de Boer, Karin: *Kant’s Reform of Metaphysics: The Critique of Pure Reason Reconsidered*. Cambridge 2020, 111. Robert Greenberg likewise has an account putting “things” at the center of Kant’s ‘ontology’ (using that term in the Quinean sense). See his *Kant’s Theory of A Priori Knowledge*. University Park, Penn., 2001. However, Greenberg thinks that “things in themselves” are a different kind of entity over and above mere things.

¹¹² See especially Pichler, Hans: *Über Christian Wolff’s Ontologie*. Leipzig 1910: 2f., for an account emphasizing the distinctive character of Wolffian ontology vis-à-vis Aristotelian.

¹¹³ In several places, Kant alludes to the way that the concept of God was taken as a starting point in the construction of the concept of a thing, so that things that we may experience are regarded as diminished versions of the original. See especially Kant’s preface to Jakob’s work on Mendelssohn: “Now diminish all these realities (understanding, will, blessedness, might, etc.) in terms of degree, they will still remain the same in terms of kind (quality), and you will have properties of the things in themselves [Dinge an sich selbst: read ‘things qua things’] that you can apply to other things [Dinge] outside of God. [...] To be sure, it seems strange that we are only able properly to determine our concepts of things in themselves by first reducing all reality to the concept of God and only afterward are to apply the concept as it holds in that case also to other things as things in themselves. [Nun vermindert alle diese Realitäten (Verstand, Wille, Seligkeit, macht etc.) dem Grade nach, so bleiben sie doch der Art

Without a path for acquiring knowledge of things that is not conditioned by the sensibility of our knowledge (things as they are *an sich selbst*), traditional ontology is no longer possible. As Kant famously writes in “Phenomena and Noumena”, the principles of the understanding

are merely principles of the exposition of appearances, and the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general [Dingen überhaupt] in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality), must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding.¹¹⁴ (KrV, A 247/B 303)

Though we may have empirical knowledge of things, it is because we have no cognition or principles that apply to them *simply* as things (rather than ‘things as they may appear’) that the project of traditional ontology must be abandoned. Ignorance of things as they are *an sich selbst* is also ignorance of the fully general properties of things.¹¹⁵

The connection of the concept of ‘things’ as it occurs in Kant’s conception of empirical cognition and its role in his critique of metaphysics, I believe, better explains Kant’s interest in knowledge of things ‘in themselves’ than prominent ‘two-aspect’ readings. Allison rightly points out that ignorance of things “in themselves” implies ignorance of them apart from the sensible conditions on our cognition.¹¹⁶ However, since Allison thinks that desiring such knowledge is a kind of fantasy, it is hard to see how it is coherent to want it. Instead, I argue that our merely

(Qualität) nach immer dieselben, so habt ihr Eigenschaften der Dinge an sich selbst, die ihr auch auf andere Dinge außer Gott anwenden könnt. [...] Es scheint zwar befremdlich, daß wir unsere Begriffe von Dingen an sich selbst nur dadurch gehörig bestimmen können, daß wir alle Realität zuerst auf den Begriff von Gott reduciren und so, wie er darin statt findet, allererst auch auf andere Dinge als Dinge an sich anwenden sollen.]” (AA 08: 154) See also KrV, A 566f./B 594f.; A 576f./B 604f.

¹¹⁴ “Seine Grundsätze sind bloß Principien der Exposition der Erscheinungen, und der stolze Name einer Ontologie, welche sich anmaßt, von Dingen überhaupt synthetische Erkenntnisse a priori in einer systematischen Doctrin zu geben (z. E. den Grundsatz der Causalität), muß dem bescheidenen einer bloßen Analytik des reinen Verstandes Platz machen.” (KrV, A 247/B 303)

¹¹⁵ Recall Kant’s puzzling claims about how if space and time were a form of things “in themselves,” then they would be an objective form of all things (KrV, B 71f.; see section 1.1. above). I interpret such claims roughly as follows: if space and time were properties of things *an sich selbst*, they would be properties of things *qua* things. But if something is a property of things *qua* things, it is a necessary property of every thing, including (Kant’s concern in the context) God, if God exists.

¹¹⁶ Allison: “Transcendental Realism”, 10.

qualified knowledge of things is significant, not for its own sake (which is perhaps incoherent), but because of what it implies about our knowledge of things in general.¹¹⁷ Langton argues that our ignorance of things ‘in themselves’ is ignorance of their intrinsic properties as “lonely” individuals, apart from all their relations.¹¹⁸ We may indeed be ignorant of such properties, but it is, again, puzzling why this should be of fundamental interest for Kant’s project. Do the claims of traditional metaphysics rest on this kind of knowledge of individuals? I do not believe so. Instead, on the view recommended here, it is the ignorance of properties ‘intrinsic’ to being a thing at all and of principles that pertain to things as such that is of interest to Kant. We cannot know these properties through experience, since our experiences are always of objects under the special conditions of sensibility. These general properties of things are what concerns traditional metaphysics, and it is of these that Kant denies us knowledge. To draw on my previous example, it is not the intrinsic properties of an individual human that the psychologist or anthropologist requires to make valid inferences about humans. It is, rather, the properties intrinsic or essential to being a member of the species. Ignorance of humans ‘in themselves’ inhibits general psychology or anthropology. Ignorance of *things* as they are ‘in themselves’ inhibits metaphysics, or knowledge of things ‘in general’. Kant’s great destructive project is to show why no such absolute generality in our knowledge of things is possible.

5. Conclusion

It has not been my main aim here to provide a comprehensive interpretation of “things in themselves”. Instead, I have offered an explication of “an sich” that applies to the general use of the expression. This explication is straightforward: “an sich” is used to show that a judgment holds ‘absolutely_w’, or in virtue of the subject of the judgment. This account implies that the unit

¹¹⁷ On this point, the present account is close to, though makes an advance upon, a more recent point of emphasis of Allison’s work, in that he has drawn attention to the importance of “things in general” (Dinge überhaupt) in Kant’s project. See Allison: “Transcendental Realism”, 4–7. However, for Allison, the connection is still indirect: “the concepts of a thing (or something) in general and of a thing in itself occupy distinct spheres of philosophical reflection” (7f.). Apparently, ‘things in themselves’ are *instances* (or conceptual subordinates) of ‘things in general’ for Allison (8). This would explain how ignorance of things in general relates to ‘things in themselves’, but it does not explain why ignorance of things *an sich selbst* is important for our ignorance of things in general, which I have attempted to show here.

¹¹⁸ Langton: *Kantian Humility*, 13.

of analysis for the use of the expression is the level of subject-predicate combinations. If so, then there is no such thing as a *concept* of “things in themselves” or of an “end in itself”. For the “an sich” does not add any conceptual content in the way that an adjective does; it only restricts judgments to the content of the subject.

I have shown that this analysis fits the use of the expression in Kant’s less famous uses of it, in several of Kant’s contemporaries, and rather uncontroversially in the use of “end in itself”. However, if applied to “things in themselves”, the analysis would have the result that one of Kant’s most famous expressions is not a self-contained unit. Instead, all the conceptual content of the expression derives from “things” and the subject of the judgments in which it is embedded. The question is whether we know objects as “things” without some special conditions pertaining to human sensibility. Only if so, and only if we have some a priori principles about things as mere things, can we validly make claims a priori about objects (‘things’, by hypothesis) that may be outside experience. This interpretation implies that many doctrines traditionally considered in terms of “things in themselves” could be reductively stated in terms of “things”. This possibility of analytical paraphrase means that “things in themselves” could cease to function as a kind of ‘black box’ for Kant interpretations. It might even turn out to be a “lamp in the dark”.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Thanks to Yoon Choi, Phil Mack, Michael Olson, Caleb Reidy, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable discussion and feedback on this paper and/or its earlier versions.