

## AN APPRAISAL OF THE PHENOMENA-NOUMENA DICHOTOMY IN IMMANUEL KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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### **Abstract**

The epistemic relationship between the phenomena and *noumena* worlds in Kant's epistemology remains a huge problem among Kant's interpreters. Kant's critics have judged his passages on these topics to be irreconcilable. For Kant, we can only know the phenomena whereas, the human mind can never penetrate into the noumenal world. Kant's immediate successors in German Idealism rejected his noumenal conception as having no existence for human's intelligence. However, Kant insisted in defending the absolute reality of the noumenal world, arguing that the phenomenal world is an expression of power and that the source from which this power comes can only be through this noumenal world. If the noumenal world is not intelligible epistemologically, then of what use is the concept of the noumenal world? This work aims at examining Kant's notion of *noumena* as problematic, inconsistent, self-contradictory and limiting in concept.

**Keywords:** Phenomena, Noumena, Affection, Internalism, Externalism

### **Introduction**

In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason (CPR)*, Kant argues for a surprising set of claims about space, time, and objects thus:

- i. Space and time are merely the forms of our sensible intuition of objects. They are not beings that exist independently of our

- intuition (*things in themselves*), nor are they properties of, nor relations among, such beings (CPR A26, A33).
- ii. The objects we intuit in space and time are appearances, not objects that exist independently of our intuition (*things in themselves*). This is also true of the mental states we intuit in introspection; in “inner sense” (introspective awareness of my inner states) I intuit only how I appear to myself, not how I am “in myself” (CPRA37–8, A42).
  - iii. We can only cognize objects that we can, in principle, intuit. Consequently, we can only cognize objects in space and time, we cannot cognize *things in themselves* (CPR A239).
  - iv. Nonetheless, we can think about *things in themselves* using the categories (CPR A25).
  - v. *Things in themselves* affect us, activating our sensible faculty (CPRA190, A387).

Ever since the publication of Kant's *Critique*, “*doctrine of noumenal affection*” has been controversial since it apparently involves predicating a category (cause-effect) of *things-in-themselves*. The pre-occupation of this paper however is to examine Kant's distinction between *phenomena and noumena* and to evaluate Kant's notion of *noumena* as a problematic, inconsistent self-contradictory and limiting concept. To understand this, it is imperative we take a look at the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

### **Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason**

In the structure of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Transcendental Aesthetic is the section that considers the contribution of intuition to our knowledge or cognition. By aesthetics, Kant does not refer to the study of art and beauty, but to that of our sense perceptions; by

intuition, he simply means the capacity of our senses to perceive, and not a mysterious 'sixth sense'. The Transcendental Logic is that part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant investigates the understanding and its role in constituting our knowledge. The understanding is defined as the faculty of the mind that deals with concepts (CPR A51-52/B75-76). The Logic is divided into two parts: the Analytic and the Dialectic. In the Analytic Kant investigates the contributions of the understanding (*Verstand*) to knowledge. In the Dialectic, Kant investigates the limits of reason (*Vernunft*).

Kant posits that knowledge comes to us through two avenues: our sense perceptions in time and space, and our intellect's cognitive forms (or categories), such as the notions of causality and existence, which give shape to these sense perceptions. Both are needed to reach knowledge. In Kant's words, "without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind" (CPR B75).

Kant argues that space and time are a form of seeing and causality is a form of knowing. It is impossible for us to have any experience of objects that are not in time and space. Furthermore, space and time themselves cannot be perceived directly, so they must be the form by which experience of objects is had (CPR A230, B283).

Thus, things as they are "in themselves" are unknowable. For something to become an object of knowledge, it must be experienced, and experience is pre-structured by the activity of our own minds. Kant distinguishes between *phenomena* – things as they appear to our senses and *noumena* – things-in-themselves; things that

are purely objects of thought independently of sense perception, which by definition; we can never experience.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* is twofold: first, we are certain that knowledge can be true within the parameters of our own mind. We know that things do exist in time and space and that they follow the law of cause and effect and similar laws, but only “to the extent that they appear to us,” i.e., as phenomena. Second, we can never know what *things are in themselves*. Furthermore, we can never say anything meaningful about those things that do not exist within the framework of our sense perception, e.g., God and the immortality of the soul. Kant also continues that it is also utterly impossible to disprove their existence. These things are not part of our world and we can say nothing about them. The question now is if we can never know what *things are in themselves*, of what use is the epistemic value of the *noumena* world? This is the crux of this work which will be examined in the preceding section.

### **Kant's Noumena and Phenomena Dichotomy**

Kant made a traditional distinction between the sensory and intellectual objects. He does this by introducing a new concept to the *First Critique*: the *noumenon* (plural, *noumena*) and *phenomenon* (*phenomena*). A noumenon is purely an intelligible entity (intelligible being Kant's term of contrast for sensible), a thing of a purely intellectual nature, the constitution of which can be grasped only through the intellect(CPR A 248-9/B306).

Lacking all sensible features, it follows that a subject with a discursive intellect, such as ours, could cognize a *noumenon* only if it could employ the categories independently of sensibility. But how

can we employ the categories independently of sensibility? The concept of an object exclusive from understanding is of course closely related to that of a *thing-in-itself*, in so far as a *thing-in-itself* is also a thing considered apart from human sensibility.

Phenomena on the other hand, are objects of sensible intuition, sensible entities co-existing with appearances. Virtually all that Kant says about phenomena is that they are appearances 'so far as they are thought as objects according to the unity of the categories' (CPR A248). The question is: of what use is the concept of *noumenon*? Many accounts of Kant's philosophy treat "*noumenon*" and "*thing-in-itself*" as synonymous, and there is textual evidence for this relationship. However, Stephen *Palmquist* holds that "*noumenon*" and "*thing-in-itself*" are only loosely synonymous, in as much as they represent the same concept viewed from two different perspectives. Other scholars also argue that they are not identical (121–151).

Schopenhauer criticized Kant for changing the meaning of "*noumenon*" (Samuel Stumpf and James Fiesser, 327). Kant's writing show points of difference between *noumena* and *things-in-themselves*. For instance, he regards *things-in-themselves* as existing; though we cannot know these objects as *things-in-themselves*, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as *things-in-themselves*; otherwise, we should be landing in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears. A crucial difference between the *noumenon* and the *thing-in-itself* is that to call something a *noumenon* is to claim a kind of knowledge, whereas Kant insisted that the *thing-in-itself* is unknowable. Interpreters have debated whether the latter claim

makes sense.

According to Sebastian Gardner, the two concepts are not the same. *The thing-in-itself* is a bare ontological concept; it is the concept of an object as it is constituted in itself, without reference to our (or any other subject's) knowledge of it. (A *thing-in-itself* is thus a thing considered even apart from the categories. *Noumenon* by contrast is an epistemological concept, the concept of an object of a certain mode of cognition, namely intellectual intuition. In moving from the concept of the *thing-in-itself* to that of *noumenon* we thus reconceived transcendent reality as determined for cognition - as individuated and characterized in ways that is knowable. The concept of *noumenon* thus provides a way of taking up the question of what would be required for *things-in-themselves* to become objects of knowledge. It also encapsulates what is presupposed by Leibniz's epistemology and metaphysics, since *Leibnizian* monads clearly satisfy the definition of *noumena* (Gardner, 201).

Kant may seem to be arguing that the existence of *things-in-themselves* follows from the concept of appearance: that *things-in-themselves* exist because appearances are necessary by virtue of their concept of things which cannot be identified with appearances, and so must be identified with *things-in-themselves* (CPR A251-2). But this cannot be right since Kant's concept of appearance certainly implies the concept of the *thing-in-itself*, and there are objects satisfying the concept of appearance and none of this imply that there are objects satisfying the concept of the *thing-in-itself*. Any conceptual argument for the existence of *things-in-themselves* as implicated by that of appearances would, in any case, renders question-begging Kant's original description of empirical objects as

appearances.

Alternatively, Kant may seem to be basing the existence of *things-in-themselves* on a causal inference, the existence of appearances as effects, to that of *things-in-themselves* as their causes (A494/B522, A496/B524, A695-6/B723-4) This cannot be right either because Kant has argued that the deployment of the causal principle outside the sphere of experience is illegitimate. An alternative tack is to suppose that the existence of *things-in-themselves* follows somehow from the consideration that there must be an ultimate end to the explanation of things, and that the realm of appearance is not ultimately self-explanatory.

### **The Problematic Nature of *Things-in-Themselves* in Epistemology**

No discussion of Kant's transcendental idealism would be complete without a discussion of F.H. Jacobi's famous objection to the critique: “without the presupposition of the [thing in itself] I cannot enter the [critical] system, and with that presupposition I cannot remain in it” (Proleg. 353-4.) Here, Jacobi is referring to a number of quite serious problems for Kant's transcendental idealist theory. The problems with the concept of *Things-in-Themselves* are:

#### **a) The Unknowability of *Things-in-Themselves***

Kant is committed to both of the following theses: (*Existence*) There are *things-in-themselves*. (*Humility*) We know nothing about *things-in-themselves*. Kant does not merely claim that *things in themselves exist*, he also asserts that:

- i. Things in themselves are not in space and time (non-spatiality).
- ii. Things in themselves causally affect us (Affection).

Many of Kant's early readers concluded that Kant's philosophy is inconsistent going by his claims that we cannot know the very assertions he makes about *things-in-themselves*. Thus, Kant's own theory renders itself unknowable(Stang Nicholas F. "Kant's Transcendental Idealism", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

**b) *Things-in-themselves* as causes**

The issue of *things-in-themselves* affecting us raises another problem about Kant's theory, for Kant also argues that categories like *cause-effect* cannot be meaningfully applied to *things-in-themselves*. Without an intuition “[the category] has no sense, and is entirely empty of content”(CPR A239/B298). Since *things in themselves* cannot be intuited, categories (including *cause-effect*) have no sense or content when applied to *things-in-themselves*. Thinkers like Jacobi thought this was yet another inconsistency in Kant's philosophy: "he denies that categories can be applied to *things in themselves*, but then he applies the category, *cause-effect* to them.

However, one has to be careful in interpreting Kant's denial of “sense” or “meaning” to categories as applied to *thing-in-themselves*. It is tempting to read this as meaning that the thought of *things in themselves* falling under categories is literally nonsense, but there is textual evidence that Kant is making a weaker point: thinking of *things in themselves* under the categories has no *cognitive* sense, i.e., in making such judgments we do not *cognize* anything.

We can think of any objects whatsoever using the categories. In fact, this is unavoidable; the categories are the most basic concepts of

objects in general, so we cannot think about anything whatsoever without using some categories to do so. But in thinking about the things in themselves using categories we do not *thereby* (a) know that there are things in themselves falling under the categories or (b) even that it is *possible* for there to be things in themselves falling under the categories. The strongest form of Jacobi's objection—that Kant's view entails that the categories cannot be applied, even in thought, to *things-in-themselves*—may rest on a misunderstanding. This still leaves, though, the pressing problem of how, given Kant's Humility doctrine, he could have any epistemic warrant for making the various substantive claims he does about *things-in-themselves*—Existence, Non-spatiality, Affection (Van Cleve 1999: 137).

### c) The Problem of Affection

Jacobi raises yet another problem about Kant's theory of experience. He notes Kant's definition of sensibility as the capacity “to receive representations through the manner in which we are affected by objects” (A19/B33) and poses a dilemma: are the objects that affect our sensibility appearances or things in themselves? They cannot be appearances, Jacobi argues, because that would involve applying the categories to things in themselves. And they cannot be things in themselves, because appearances exist in virtue of the very experiences they are (allegedly) causing. He concludes that Kant's system is inconsistent (Jacobi, *Werke*, vol. II, 291–310; Fichte raises the same objection in the Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*; cf. Fichte, *Werke* I, 488).

### Negative and Positive Senses of Noumenon

The negative sense of *noumenon* is that of 'the entirely indeterminate concept of an intelligible entity', 'something outside our sensibility',

and so converges on the concept of a *thing-in-itself*. The positive sense is that of the 'determinate concept of an entity that allows being to be known in a certain manner' (B307). The two senses thus identify different epistemological aspects of *noumena*: respectively, their unknowability for us and their knowability for a species of subject other than ourselves. By virtue of its negative sense, *noumenon* is a 'limiting concept' (CPR A255/B310-11).

By virtue of its positive sense, the concept is 'problematic', meaning that it is a concept forced on us by our reason and hence not arbitrary, and yet the 'representation of a thing of which we can say neither that it is possible nor that it is impossible' (CPR A286-7/B343).

Thus, rationalism is throughout an attempt to know reality as a world of *noumena*, and so presupposes the application of the concept of *noumenon* in the positive sense as Kant himself had held in the days of his Dissertation (Gardner, 204).

The existence of a *noumenal* world limits reason to what Kant perceives to be its proper bounds, making many questions of traditional metaphysics, such as the existence of God, the soul, and freewill unanswerable by reason. Kant derives this from his definition of knowledge as "the determination of given representations to an object" (CPR B137). As there are no appearances of these entities in the phenomenal, Kant is able to make the claim that they cannot be known to a mind that works upon "such knowledge that has to do only with appearances" (B/xx). These questions are ultimately the "proper object of faith, but not of reason".

## The Dual-Object and Dual-aspect Interpretations

Does Kant envisage *things-in-themselves* and appearances as composing two worlds, in the sense of two ontologically distinct sets of objects? Or is the language of *things-in-themselves* and appearances an expression of two points of view on a single set of objects? On many occasions Kant talks of 'viewing the same objects from two different points of view – on the one hand, in connection with experience . . . and on the other hand . . . as objects which are thought merely' (Bxviii-xix). Thus, Kant says that the 'object as appearance is to be distinguished from itself as object in itself (B69).

Kantian scholars have long debated two contrasting interpretations of the *thing-in-itself*. One is the dual object view, according to which the *thing-in-itself* is an entity distinct from the phenomena to which it gives rise. The other is the dual aspect view, according to which the *thing-in-itself* and the *thing-as-it-appears* are two "sides" of the same thing. This view is supported by the textual fact that "Most occurrences of the phrase 'things-in-themselves' are shorthand for the phrase, 'things considered in themselves'. Although we cannot see things apart from the way we do in fact perceive them via the physical senses, we can think them apart from our mode of sensibility (physical perception); thus, making the *thing-in-itself* a kind of *noumenon* or object of thought.

The two object theorists may claim that Kant talks as if *things-in-themselves* and appearances were two aspects of one thing, only in order to bring out their incompatibility and thereby underline the necessity of distinguishing them ontologically. The two-object view is coupled with a complex doctrine of 'double affection' (elaborated by Erich Adickes). Here, the subject is originally affected

transcendentally by *things-in-themselves*, and then re-affected - this time as an empirical being endowed with sense organs - by the empirical objects which are the products of the first affection.

From of the two conceptual views, it may be observed that one cannot be sure that any of Kant's statements that *things-in-themselves* 'are not objects of our senses' (B306), that they are 'totally distinct' from appearances' carries a two-object commitment. Since the distinctness that Kant asserts may not be ontological, 'object' can be read in a purely epistemological sense. It has also been argued in support of the two conceptual views that Kant's use of the phrase 'thing in itself' (*Ding ansich*) is an elliptical form of the expression, which he also sometimes uses, 'thing considered in-itself' (*Ding ansichselbst betrachtet*). 'In-itself' is held to function adverbially, as qualifying how a thing is considered or conceived. Since Kant's text itself does not decide between the two views, it is appropriate to consider the gains and losses attached to each from the point of view of arriving at a coherent interpretation of transcendental idealism.

Those who take the two objects view typically (though not exclusively) go on to charge transcendental idealism with incoherence, on account of the difficulties allegedly surrounding the application of the categories outside experience and the notion of affection by a super sensible object. Consequently, those who defend Kant's doctrine of things-in-themselves (as allowing more than a polemical reading) tend to be proponents of the two-conception view (Gardner, 278).

### **Immediate Criticism of *the First Critique***

The reception of the *First Critique* in the years immediately

following its publication saw it rapidly installed at the centre of German philosophical interest, gaining reputation that was soon to spread abroad. However, some critics launched attack on some aspects of Kant's doctrine like the notion of the *noumenal* world. Most prominent of these was Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1758-1823). His 'principle of consciousness' was intended to prove the existence of a unified faculty of representation divided by Kant. This was something which Kant had always denied could be known in *Kant's and the Critique of Pure Reason*(CPR A15/B29). Reinhold holds that Kant's philosophy failed the test of *systematicity* and was shortly taken up by other philosophers of greater stature, the absolute idealists (CPR A328).

Explicit and increasingly heated criticism of Kant came from several quarters. In the very first ('Göttingen') review that appeared in 1782 with merely rehashing Berkeley's idealism, the review's authors, Christian Garve (1742-98) and J. G. H. Feder (1740-1821), who were basically *Lockeians* maintain that the Critical philosophy was evidently unacceptable. Heine describes the *First Critique* as 'the sword that slew deism in Germany' and Kant as 'the arch-destroyer in the realm of thought'. Jacobi, for instance made a specific objection that *things-in-themselves* render transcendental idealism contradictory, thus enabling skepticism to assume a new and more sophisticated form Gardner 269-70).

Salomon Maimon (c.1755-1800), attempted to show that due to Kant's uncompromising heterogeneity of sensibility and understanding, all of the old problems of skepticism reproduce themselves in the context of Kant's Copernicanism. Maimon concluded that, in order to avoid skepticism, recourse must be made

to epistemological materials, the very kind that Kant had sought to discredit in the rationalists. This was another important lesson soon to be taken up by the absolute idealists. The *thing-in-itself*, for Maimon becomes problematic because, in Kant's system, one is left in the situation that one can only speculate about, but not known. The problem here is that knowledge – in Kant's sense of the term – requires *things-in-themselves* but the very positing of *things-in-themselves* appears to be a contradiction because this seems to involve the extension of concepts to realms into which they are not allowed to be extended.

Hamann and Herder - like Jacobi, also engaged in criticism of Kant. Hamann wrote a brief Meta-critique of the Purism of Reason (1781) and Herder, an extremely lengthy Meta-critique of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1799). Their 'meta-critical' attack was directed at Kant's very conception of his project. Hamann claimed that the misguidedness of Kant's undertaking is demonstrated by the fact that, in order for the isolation of pure reason to be consistently carried out, reason would need to be purified of all linguistic elements, since language has a necessarily sensory aspect. Language is 'the first, only and last instrument and criterion of reason'. Kant's distinction of sensibility and understanding, Hamann asserted, rests on an 'arbitrary, improper and self-willed divorce of that which nature has joined together' in a primordial unity of which language is the central manifestation. Herder similarly protested against Kant's hypothetical of reason, claiming that there is no such thing as 'the faculty of reason' to be made an object of investigation. Kant's failure to grasp the methodological primacy of language, according to Hamann and Herder, leads to the word-jugglery of transcendental philosophy.

**The Post-Kantian Criticism of Kant: Fichte, Schelling and Hegel**

The notion of *the thing-in-itself* or *noumenon* was promptly rejected as unsatisfactory by Kant's immediate successors, the German Idealists. Johann Gottlieb Fichte was the first to part ways with his mentor on this point. Fichte came to the conclusion that Kant's retention of the *thing-in-itself*, unknowable and yet affirmed, was a left-over of dogmatism. Kant had maintained this notion to avoid falling into Berkeleyan subjective idealism, the denial that there is a reality outside of our perception. For Fichte, that solution amounted to an illusion. It is not possible for consciousness, he thought, to find a grounding in a supposed real outside world represented by the *noumenon*.

The absolute idealist complained that Kant had failed to ground the faculties. It seemed to mean that according to Kant, our cognitive power as a whole is nothing but a collection of disjointed faculties - a 'sack full of faculties', as Hegel put it – and thus that the unity of subjectivity reposes on sheer contingency (Gardner, 332). To the absolute idealists this seemed unacceptable. In the same vein, they claimed that Kant had failed to establish the unity of theoretical and practical reason in a satisfactorily strong sense: because it had not been derived from a single source for the gulf between sense perception and reason still retained.

For Hegel, *things-in-themselves*, as understood by Kant, are "mere abstractions, void of truth and content". Hegel's key innovation consists in reversing the relation between thought and subjectivity in such a way that the concepts which constitute reality are no longer representations in the subject but rather entities with a real, semi-platonic status, to which subjectivity is subordinated; human

theoretical knowledge then becomes a matter of discerning (rather than, as in Kant, bringing about) the relation of concepts to objects.

On the first reading, Hegel's move is to distinguish subjectivity as such from the subjectivity of individual thinkers. On the second, it is to distinguish thought as such from subjectivity and to replace subjectivity with conceptuality as the ground of philosophical explanation and reality itself. The verdict in the *First Critique*, that pure reason has only subjective validity, is for Hegel invalidated by Kant's empiricist prejudice in favour of 'possible experience' as arbiter of philosophical disputes. This mere dogma Hegel believes is all that lies behind Kant's claims for the superiority of the Critical over speculative philosophy. The speculation of pure reason is thus reinstated by Hegel.

Schopenhauer claimed that Kant used the word *noumenon* incorrectly. He explained this in his "Critique of the Kantian philosophy", which first appeared as an appendix to *The World as Will and Representation*. Unlike the German idealists, Arthur Schopenhauer identified himself as a direct heir to Immanuel Kant and he took over Kant's notion of *noumenon*, identifying it with "the Will". Schopenhauer noted that the opposition between *noumena* and phenomena had a long history dating back to Greek philosophy and continuing with the opposition between realism and *nominalism* in Scholastic philosophy (Samuel Stumpf and James Fiesser, 327). The phenomenal world, which Schopenhauer calls the World as "Representation", in his eyes, was nothing but the representation of our mind, as was the case for Berkeley, whom he greatly admired. The *noumenon*, Schopenhauer felt had to be sought on an entirely different level- "the World as Will". Even though he identified the

unknowable *noumenon* as an entity to which we can directly relate, Schopenhauer ended up with a problem similar to that of Kant. It became difficult for him to explain the relationship between the *noumenal* “world of the Will” and the phenomenal “world of Representation”.

Schopenhauer holds that the empirical world, what he calls the 'world as representation', has for him non-ultimate reality. Where Schopenhauer departs most dramatically from Kant is in his claim to have discovered, by means of 'away from within' overlooked by Kant, the nature of the *thing-in-itself*. (Gardner, 341). There is therefore in Schopenhauer a double metaphysic in my opinion: an idealism regarding the world as representation lay alongside a realism regarding the world as will, preserving Kant's bifurcation of appearances and *things-in-themselves*. Schopenhauer's view of “will” as intrinsically blind directly contradicts the absolute idealist's view of reality as inherently rational and purposive.

### **Conclusion**

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* A235-48/B294-305, Kant spelled out at some length how the Analytic has confirmed the thesis that cognition of transcendent objects is impossible and our knowledge is limited to the realm of experience. The nature of the categories is such that they 'can never be applied to the transcendental but only to empirical realm(CPR A246/B303).

Because they cannot be applied transcendently, the categories cannot give us knowledge of *things-in-themselves*(CPR A287/B343).For Kant, the categories are forms of thought/judgment, and concepts of objects in general, they are not

merely concepts and forms of judgment of empirical objects (A290/B346-7).

What one would expect Kant to say is that the traditional division (made sharply by Plato and Leibniz) of objects into two classes, those that can be grasped by sense perception and those that can be grasped by the intellect, must be replaced with a unitary and exhaustive conception of all objects as necessarily both sensible and intelligible, instead of creating the dualism of the *phenomena* and *noumena* world, a world that is known according to Kant but not accessible. Kant's whole procedure of prefacing a theory of knowledge with a self-critique of reason seemed fraught with paradox: how can there be a knowing (of reason) before any knowing (of objects)? How can reason engage in any activity, including its critique? How can reason be a judge over itself? This becomes an incomprehensible doctrine which has thrown the process of human cognition into an intellectual dilemma. Thus, the major aim of the *First Critique* was to strike a point of equilibrium between reason and sense perception; whether or not Kant achieved this goal, his noumenal doctrine made his mission irreconcilable.

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