

The Transcendental Object, Experience, and the Thing in Itself

Abstract: Kant's doctrine of the "transcendental object" has always puzzled interpreters. On the one hand, he says that the transcendental object is the object to which we relate our representations. On the other hand, he declares the transcendental object to be unknowable and identifies it with the thing in itself. I argue that this poses a problem that Kant only in the B edition of the *Critique* solves in a satisfactory manner. According to this solution, we ascribe sensible predicates to things in themselves, but only insofar as they appear. I conclude that this could motivate a phenomenalist account of Kant's idealism, but one that gives due weight to the role of things in themselves.

The notion of the 'transcendental object'¹ is certainly among the most enigmatic terms of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the one hand, he says that the transcendental object is "something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general" (A250).² This suggests that the transcendental object is the unknowable, non-spatiotemporal thing in itself. On the other hand, Kant writes that the transcendental object "is that which in general can give all of our empirical concepts relation to an object" (A109) and to which we "can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions" (A494/B522f.). Since this gives the impression that the transcendental object is the object to which we refer our cognition, this has led some readers to assume that the transcendental object cannot be the thing in itself, but must be something else.³ However, I shall take the side of those scholars

¹ This term is a translation either of '*transscendentales Object*' or '*transscendentaler Gegenstand*'. Since I can detect no difference whatsoever in the meaning of these varieties, I do not note which of them Kant uses in my translations.

² If available, the translations are from the Cambridge edition, though I often modified them without notice; other translations are mine. Quotations are made according to the page numbers of the first and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and with reference to volume and page number of the *Akademie-Ausgabe* for all other works. I use the following abbreviations for work titles: Anth = Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, C = Correspondence, CprR = Critique of Practical Reason, De Mundi = De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis (Inaugural-Dissertation), Gr = Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals, JL = Jäsche Logic, MM = Metaphysics of Morals, M-x = Metaphysics x (lecture), NM = Negative Magnitudes, OD = On a Discovery, OP = Opus Postumum, PM = On the Progress of Metaphysics, Prol = Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Rx = Reflexion x.

³ For instance, Prauss (1974: 120-4) holds that the transcendental object is the content that is thought in a cognition. Allison (2004: 59) thinks that the concept of the transcendental object is the genus to thing in itself and appearance (similarly de Boer 2014: 238-47, although she distinguishes various meanings of the term). And Kitcher (2012: 28f.) claims that the transcendental object is the empirical object outside our mind, to which we, however, can infer only indirectly by the given in intuitions. This is only a small sample of readings – the literature is vast (albeit with few contributions recently) and I cannot hope to give a full overview of the debate here.

who hold that the transcendental object is *both* the thing in itself and the object of empirical cognition, or experience.⁴ As Rolf George puts it, the concepts ‘transcendental object’ and ‘thing in itself’ are intensionally different, but have the same extension.⁵

However, there is a paradox about this account: if the transcendental object is the thing in itself, how can we relate empirical cognition to it? In this paper, I shall argue that Kant does not offer a satisfying solution to this problem in the first edition of the *Critique*. Although he abandons the concept of the transcendental object after 1781⁶, it is only in the *Prolegomena* and especially the second edition of the *Critique* in which he responds to the problem in a satisfactory manner. On this account, we do cognize things in themselves, but not as they *are* in themselves, but only as they *appear*. This allows Kant to make things in themselves the intentional correlate of empirical cognition while at the same time acknowledging their unknowability as regards the properties that things in themselves have aside from the way they appear.

My plan for this article is as follows. In section 1, I characterize the transcendental object as an unknowable thing in itself which is the object that is given in intuition and thought in cognition. But as I argue in section 2, Kant does not provide a plausible account in the first edition of the *Critique* of how these characteristics can be combined. Section 3 quickly summarizes my view of a core problem of Kant’s transcendental idealism: he both distinguishes between things as they are in themselves and as they appear on the one hand and things in themselves and appearances on the other hand. As I discuss in section 4, this helps to understand Kant’s account of “formal idealism” in the *Prolegomena* and his analogy to traditional secondary qualities. For we cognize things in themselves as they appear to us.

⁴ See George 1974: 192-4, Willaschek 1992: 287f.n2, Rosefeldt 2007: 203, forthcoming. – Kemp Smith (1923: 204f.) holds that the transcendental object is identical to the thing in itself, but considers this notion a pre-Critical residue that disappears after 1781.

⁵ See George 1974: 192-4. However, I disagree with George’s definition of the terms. According to him, the thing in itself is the object through which we are affected, whereas the transcendental object is the object of cognition. My disagreements with him shall become clear in the course of the paper. – Some readers hold that, while in some cases the meaning of these expressions is different, they are identical in other cases (see e.g. Adickes 1924: 100, Allison 1968: 166). I see few reasons to accept this view and hope that my reading provides a coherent, non-ambiguous account of the transcendental object.

⁶ See Kemp Smith 1923: 204f., Robinson 2001: 418f. One can only speculate why Kant drops this term. Perhaps the reason is the same why he abandoned the term ‘transcendental idealism’, of which he suspected that it makes him sound like Berkeley.

Section 5 shows that the second edition of the *Critique* presents a clear account of this. Section 6 concludes by suggesting that my account could motivate a phenomenalist approach, but one that gives due weight to things in themselves.

1. The Transcendental Object and Its Paradox

Kant begins to discuss the transcendental object in the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding – more specifically, in the sub-section “On the Synthesis of Recognition in the Concept”. Even in this part, the transcendental object plays only a minor role, for Kant focuses on the unity of apperception. My aim is not to give an account of the complex issues that are involved in the Transcendental Deduction. However, Kant thinks that the notion of the transcendental object is in important ways involved there. Let us start with a passage that motivates the need of this concept:

And here then it is necessary to make understood what is meant by the expression of an object of representations. We have said above that appearances themselves are nothing but sensible representations, which must not be regarded in themselves, in the same way, as objects (outside the power of representation). What does one mean, then, if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? It is easy to see that this object can be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it. (A104)

To give a rough summary of this passage, Kant holds that there must be an object outside our representations that corresponds to them, but is for this reason unknowable in some ways. While Kant does not use the term “transcendental object” here, he introduces and defines it a few pages later:

All representations, as representations, have their object, and can themselves be objects of other representations in turn.⁷ Appearances are the only objects that can be given to us immediately, and that in them which is immediately related to the object is called intuition. However, these appearances are not things in themselves, but themselves only representations, which in turn have their object, which therefore cannot be further intuited by us, and that may therefore be called the non-empirical, i.e., transcendental object = X. (A109)

Thus, Kant’s definition of the transcendental object is that it is the non-empirical object that corresponds to appearances.⁸ But there is a lot to unpack here and it seems wise to start with some basic points.

⁷ Kant’s claim that representations can be the object of other representations suggests that self-cognition is not directed to a transcendental object outside our representations. However, I disregard self-cognition in this paper.

⁸ The last sentence of the quote shows that the transcendental object is called “transcendental” because it is “non-empirical”. Note though that being non-empirical is not part of the definition, although this property follows from it (more on that below).

To begin with, Kant states that all representations, as such, have an object.⁹ This clearly means that the “object” is something outside the representation to which the representation is related¹⁰, which must be distinguished from the content of the representation.¹¹ But before we can turn to that, we have to note that Kant uses the term ‘relation to an object’ in two different ways: First, it can mean a *causal* relation, which is that the object causes representations by affecting us. I will say more on that later. Second, the relation to the object can be an *intentional* relation. Consider the judgment “The stone is heavy”: the understanding thereby represents something *as* something – in this case, the stone as heavy. Intentionality means that the representation is *about* an object.¹² We can see this relation most clearly exhibited in the following passage:

All our representations are in fact related to some object through the understanding, and, since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a something, as the object of sensible intuition: but this something is to that extent only the transcendental object. (A250)

This relation to an object is not merely passive: the understanding relates the representation to an object through an act. But this object is already the “object of sensible intuition”. Here we should remind ourselves of Kant’s famous dictum that cognition consists of two elements, intuition and concept, which only together can yield cognition [*Erkenntnis*].¹³ Through intuitions objects are “given”, through concepts they are “thought” (A50/B74). I assume that givenness means two things: first, we have intuitions (or at

⁹ See also C 11:395. – This at least holds for veridical representations. I do not take Kant to mean that even falsidical representations (like dreams or hallucinations) correspond to an existing object. While I am optimistic that he can deal with falsidical representations adequately, I wish to set this issue aside in this paper.

¹⁰ I have no strong commitments about the notion of content except that the content is different from the object of representation (unlike what direct realists about intuition hold) and that some kinds of representation (at least intuitions) have content without being intentional. For a recent discussion of Kant’s conception of content with which I agree in important respects, see Tolley 2011.

¹¹ However, it is not difficult to find passages where Kant uses the term of an ‘object’ of representations, intuitions, or cognitions for objects as the content of our representations, as opposed to the object that corresponds to representations (see e.g. A20/B34, A27/B43, A48/B65, B73). His terminology is just unstable, or at least ambiguous.

¹² I cannot provide a detailed account of intentionality in Kant here, but see Pereboom 1988 and Jankowiak 2016 for helpful discussion. One crucial point for my reading of Kant is that intentionality is not object-dependent: we can ascribe properties to objects that they do not in fact have, and perhaps the object does not even exist. In this case, our attempt of intentionally relating to an object remains unsuccessful. This also reveals that intentionality is not really a relation to an object, but rather directedness towards an object.

¹³ See A51/B75f., PM 20:273.

least sensations)¹⁴, second, these intuitions (or sensations) are caused by an object external to representations (and are not hallucinations or dreams).¹⁵ Thinking just means to form a judgment. While concepts have content, they are part of an intentional representation only by their connection in a judgment.¹⁶ If cognitions – or empirical cognitions, at least¹⁷ – are the union of givenness and thought, and hence of intuition and judgment, we can say, as a first approach, that a cognition is a judgment about an object that is given in an intuition. As a result, I agree with the emerging consensus in the debate that empirical cognition is different from knowledge, partly in that cognition can be false.¹⁸ And returning to the quote from A250, the transcendental object is both the object of intuition and of cognition. (I will also use the term ‘experience’, which Kant defines as “empirical cognition”.¹⁹)

However, intuition is not cognition in this sense because intuition does not meet the thought condition. This seems to conflict with the classification of intuition as cognition in the famous *Stufenleiter* passage.²⁰ For this reason, Watkins and Willaschek distinguish a broad and a narrow sense of cognition. In the

¹⁴ The question how sensations are related to intuitions and what this means for the way intuitions are given depends, among others, on whether intuitions have conceptual content and on whether the understanding is required to produce intuitions. This is the topic of a vast and ongoing debate, in which I take no side. All that matters here is that intuitions are given in some way.

¹⁵ This is only a rough sketch of the notion of the “given”; for a recent extended and fruitful exchange, see Watkins and Willaschek 2017a, 2017b, Chignell 2017, Grüne 2017.

¹⁶ See MFNS 4:475n: According to “the precisely determined definition of a judgment in general”, a judgment is “an action through which given representations first become cognitions of an object”. Also see George 1981: 242f., who quotes this passage.

¹⁷ While there is a tendency in the debate about cognition to model all instances of cognition (including practical and analytic cognition) on the basis of empirical cognition (see George 1981, 1982, Chignell 2014, Tolley 2017, Watkins and Willaschek 2017a, Schafer forthcoming), it is not clear that Kant wants to apply the givenness and thought conditions to cognition in general. At one place at least, he appears to exempt practical cognition from these conditions (see PM 20:273). For this reason, we should be skeptical about Tolley’s claim that Kant accepts only one notion of cognition (see Tolley 2017: 3n4). However, in this paper I am solely concerned with empirical cognition.

¹⁸ I am sympathetic to George’s claim though that there is a sense of ‘cognition’ that entails truth and is hence at least close to knowledge (see George 1982: 35). However, most mentions of ‘cognition’ in this paper are not truth-entailing.

¹⁹ See e.g. A124, B147. There may be other senses of ‘experience’ that are not relevant for my purposes, though.

²⁰ See A320/B376f.

broad sense, cognition is a “conscious representation that represents an object” (Watkins and Willaschek 2017a: 85), whereas in a narrow sense cognition is defined in terms of the givenness and thought conditions as above²¹. They hold that intuition is cognition in the broad, but not the narrow sense.²² Tolley objects that it is not forced on us to read intuition as cognition at all: Kant usually does not gloss intuition as cognition, but only says that intuition is an element of cognition; so we could read the *Stufenleiter* in this manner.²³ This is also suggested by passages in which Kant denies that intuitions have *any* relation to an object:

If I take all thinking (through categories) away from an empirical cognition, then no cognition of any object at all remains; nothing is thought through mere intuition, and that this affection of sensibility in me does not constitute a relation of such representation to any object.
(A253/B309)²⁴

While I am sympathetic to Tolley’s reading, it is still necessary to reconcile it with Kant’s claim in A108 that all representations, as such, have objects.²⁵ I take it that in passages like the above quote Kant only denies that intuitions have an *intentional* relation, but not that they have a *causal* relation through which an object is given.²⁶ So intuitions have an object even if they are not cognitions, and intuitions have content without relating the content to an object as their intentional correlate – in other words, intuitions lack aboutness. For example, if I have an intuition that has the content of a heavy stone, I do

²¹ See Watkins and Willaschek 2017a: 86.

²² See Watkins and Willaschek 2017a: 86.

²³ See Tolley 2017: 16f.

²⁴ See also A247/B304, MFNS 4:554f., MM 6:211n.

²⁵ To be sure, we may need to make an exception for “sensations”, of which Kant says, in a phrase that is hard to decipher, that a sensation “is merely related [*bezieht*] to the subject as the modification of its state” (A320/B376). (The Guyer/Wood translation of “*bezieht*” with “refers” predetermines that the relation to the subject is intentional, a view that seems absurd.)

²⁶ One might wonder whether intuitions entertain a third kind of relation to objects: a *perceptual* relation (see George 1981: 243-5). However, in this case one probably would have to assent to George’s claim that Kant’s account of that relation would be “very much alike” the intentional relation of judgments to objects (George 1981: 244). It is not clear why the objections to the view that intuitions are cognitions should not apply here as well. What is more, the view that intuitions have a perceptual relation to objects (or an intentional relation of any sort) potentially becomes unattractive if this object is the thing in itself (see below). However, even then one could say that intuitions are about things in themselves, but do not represent them as they are in themselves (see Baldner (1990) and Jankowiak (2016) for versions of this view). Hence, my reading that the transcendental object is the thing in itself would not be rendered absurd if intuitions were intentional in some sense.

not represent something *as* a heavy stone by the intuition. Thus, cognitions are intentional, while intuitions are not.²⁷

So far we have seen that the transcendental object is both the object that is given in intuition and the object to which we refer a cognition. More precisely, the cognition is about the very transcendental object that is given in intuition. But what does it mean that the transcendental object is only “something in general = X” (A104)? This clearly implies that the transcendental object, which Kant also calls “non-empirical” (A109), is in some way unknowable. The continuation of the quote from A250 reads:

This signifies, however, a something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general [...], but is rather something that can serve only as a correlate of the unity of apperception for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition, by means of which the understanding unifies that in the concept of an object. (A250)²⁸

This is a baffling claim – why do we relate our cognitions to objects of which we can know nothing? What is the point of saying “This is a heavy stone” if we do not know that there is a heavy stone?²⁹ However, Kant’s account becomes more comprehensible (though no less baffling) when we consider that the transcendental object is the thing in itself. He writes:

The understanding [...] thinks of an object in itself, but only as a transcendental object, which is the cause of appearance (thus not itself appearance) [...]. (A288/B344)

To be sure, what matter is as a thing in itself (transcendental object) is entirely unknown to us [...]. (A366)

Kant also speaks about the affecting object “considered as noumenon³⁰ (or better, as transcendental object)” (A358³¹) and equates the thing in itself and the transcendental object more implicitly on other occasions^{32, 33}. That the transcendental object is the thing in itself is also suggested by passages in which

²⁷ For such a view see also Prauss 1971: 31, Willaschek 1997: 560. While this view is controversial, it is impossible to defend it in detail here.

²⁸ See also A190f./B235f., A278/334, A379f., A393.

²⁹ It will be crucial for my reading, though, that the transcendental object is not utterly unknowable.

³⁰ I take it for granted that, at least in this case, ‘noumenon’ can be used interchangeably with ‘thing in itself’.

³¹ See also R5554 18:230.

³² See A361, A372, A390, A393f., A494/B522, A538/B566, A540/B568.

³³ Some readers (e.g. Prauss 1974: 126-8, Kitcher 2012: 29f.) think that this textual evidence is counterweighed by Kant’s claim that the transcendental object “cannot be called the noumenon; for I do not know anything about what it is in itself, and have no concept of it except merely that of the object of a sensible intuition in general, which is therefore the same for all appearances” (A253). However, Kant earlier introduces the concept of noumena

the term 'transcendental object' does not occur. For example, Kant says that the thing in itself is "the true correlate" of our representations (A30/B45).³⁴ All these passages refute the claim that the transcendental object is not the thing in itself. Rather, they give support to George's reading that the concepts 'transcendental object' and 'thing in itself' are intensionally different, but extensionally identical. While the former has the meaning of the object of representations (be it intuition or experience), the latter is that of a thing that exists independently of a relation to cognizing subjects.³⁵ But this is really startling, for this means that empirical cognition, or experience, is intentionally related to things in themselves!³⁶

In summary, there are three marks of a transcendental object, according to which it is:

- a) the mind-transcendent³⁷ object that is given (by intuitions) and cognized (by empirical judgments),
- b) a thing in itself, and
- c) unknowable as it is in itself.³⁸

as "things that are merely objects of the understanding and that, nevertheless, can be given to an intuition, although not to sensible intuition" (A249). Later he introduces another "concept of a noumenon, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of any sort of thing" (A252). This clearly is the distinction between a noumenon in the negative and the positive sense that Kant makes more explicit in the B edition (see B307). It is hard to see how the transcendental object could not be the noumenon in the negative sense; so I take it that what Kant denies is that the transcendental object is the noumenon in the positive sense (see also Willaschek 1992: 287f.n2, Allison 2004: 59).

³⁴ See also A38/B55, A42/B59, A44/B61, B164, A251f., A372, A391.

³⁵ See sect. 3 for more discussion of the thing in itself.

³⁶ It is not easy to reconstruct Kant's motivation for this view. A hint is his view that, since appearances are only representations, they must have an object that is not representation. From this he infers that this object cannot be appearance and must be an unknowable thing in itself (see also A249). One way to understand this would be that Kant is a phenomenalist – we must relate cognition to things in themselves or else we could not intentionally refer to things outside our mind. But for my purposes it does not matter much why Kant has this view.

³⁷ The term 'mind-transcendent' just means that the object is outside our mind; it is a different question (that I do not attempt to settle in this paper) whether mind-transcendent objects can be mind-dependent in some way, according to Kant.

I think Kant's account of the transcendental object is coherent and non-ambiguous. Notwithstanding this, it is quite paradoxical. For if the transcendental object is a), how can it be b) or c)? As it seems, either the transcendental object is the intentional correlate of empirical cognitions, but then the transcendental object must have empirical properties – for example, when we say “This stone is heavy”, the judgment is true only if it refers to a heavy stone.³⁹ (This is not a problem for intuitions – as we will see in more detail later, the affecting object can be the cause of spatiotemporal representations without itself being spatiotemporal.) Or the transcendental object is spatiotemporal and knowable, but this would run against Kant's view that cognition is intentionally related to things in themselves. I call this the *paradox of the transcendental object*. While I will ultimately argue that Kant manages to overcome the apparent dilemma, in the next section I want to show that he does not offer a satisfying solution for it in the A edition of the *Critique*.

2. The Paradox of the Transcendental Object in the A Edition

In the A edition of the *Critique*, Kant's response to the paradox of the transcendental object is to deny that we need epistemic access to the transcendental object to have cognition of it. Directly after the quoted passage from A104, he writes:

We find, however, that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object carries something of necessity with it, since namely the latter is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily rather than being determined a priori in a certain way, since insofar as they are to relate to an object our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object.

It is clear, however, that since we have to do only with the manifold of our representations, and that X which corresponds to them (the object), because it should be something distinct from all of our representations, is nothing for us, the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of the

³⁸ Note that only a) constitutes the concept of the transcendental object, whereas b) and c) merely belong to its extension. As I will argue later, Kant does not think that things in themselves are completely unknowable, but only as they are in themselves. This opens the door for a solution to the paradox.

³⁹ Kant defines truth as the “agreement of cognition with its object” (A58/B82, see also A191/B236, A237/B296; for related formulations, see A157/B196f., A643/B670, A820/B848), which means that he, at least broadly, accepts the correspondence theory of truth. See Vanzo 2010 for discussion, although he rightly notes that it cannot be based on the nominal definition of truth alone that Kant would endorse a full-blown correspondence theory of truth.

representations. Hence we say that we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition. (A104f.)⁴⁰

Although Kant is not perfectly clear here, the idea seems to be this: Cognitions must meet formal and material conditions. The material conditions are set up by the object.⁴¹ Consider the judgment “The stone is heavy” – on the common sense view (that is, if you think that the intentional object of the judgment is an ordinary stone), this judgment is made necessary by a heavy stone, as the stone provides the truth conditions of the judgment. But since the transcendental object is unknowable, the material properties of the object are epistemically inaccessible – it is “nothing for us”. However, we can determine the formal properties of the cognition a priori. That is, the cognition must agree with itself (it must not have contradictions), but it must also have “synthetic unity”. This is, of course, the aim of the transcendental deduction: to show that categories are needed for this synthetic unity, which proves their objective reality.⁴²

Nonetheless, even if this strategy of the transcendental deduction should work, Kant’s view that synthetic unity is *sufficient* for cognition (as implicated by the last sentence of the quote) seems problematic. One could understand this claim in two ways. First, it could mean that that synthetic unity is sufficient for forming true empirical judgments. Second, it could mean that synthetic unity is sufficient for forming empirical judgments, regardless their truth. Since truth is the agreement of cognition with its object, the object must provide material conditions for the content of cognition, which implies that formal conditions alone are not sufficient for truth. Thus, we should opt for the second reading.⁴³ But then the question arises: how do we deal with the material conditions of truth, given that the transcendental object is epistemically inaccessible?

While Kant is committed to the view that empirical cognitions have an intentional relation to things in themselves, we will now see that his answer to the question is quite vague in the A edition. Consider this passage:

⁴⁰ See also A109.

⁴¹ Compare this to Kant’s discussion of truth, where he holds that the objects provide conditions for the content of a judgment, whereas logic (both general and transcendental logic) provides conditions as to its form. In contemporary parlance, one could say that the object is the ‘truth maker’. See A58-60/B83-5.

⁴² See A111f., A119, A125, A130.

⁴³ See A59/B84. – George opts for the second reading, too, and quite aptly remarks that, if ‘cognition’ were truth-entailing, no plausible reading of this passage would be available. See George 1981: 242, 1982: 36.

The non-sensible cause of these representations is entirely unknown to us, and therefore we cannot intuit it as an object; for such an object would have to be represented neither in space nor in time (as mere conditions of our sensible representation), without which conditions we cannot think any intuition. Meanwhile we can call the merely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object, merely so that we may have something corresponding to sensibility as a receptivity. To this transcendental object we can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions, and say that it is given in itself prior to all experience. (A494/B522f.)

Here Kant says that the thing in itself affects us, but we can neither know nor intuit it as it is in itself. For this reason, we can only think it as a transcendental object. Nevertheless, Kant argues that we “can ascribe the whole extent and connection of our possible perceptions” to it. What does this mean? Since he denies that the transcendental object has sensible properties, he arguably cannot mean that we form a judgment like “This stone is heavy”. However, Kant gives no alternative account of how we could “ascribe” sensible properties to the transcendental object. And it does not help much that, in another passage, he claims that the concept of a transcendental object is “determined” by sensible predicates:

This transcendental object cannot even be separated from the sensible data, for then nothing would remain through which it would be thought. It is therefore no object of cognition in itself, but only the representation of appearances under the concept of an object in general, which is determinable through the manifold of those appearances. Just for this reason, then, the categories do not represent any particular object given to the understanding alone, but rather serve only to determine the transcendental object (the concept of something in general) through that which is given in sensibility, in order thereby to cognize appearances empirically under concepts of objects. (A250f.)

What could it mean that the concept of a transcendental object, as an unknowable thing in itself, is “determinable through the manifold of those appearances”?⁴⁴ In this context, ‘determination’ is the determination of a concept: we start with the undetermined, non-empirical concept of the transcendental object as a something = x and then determine this concept by somehow adding sensible data.⁴⁵ For example, we determine the concept by adding the predicates of a heavy stone. But Kant gives

⁴⁴ See also A105, where Kant says that the “object = x ” can be thought “through the aforementioned [*gedachte*] predicates of a triangle”. (Note that he does not say that the predicates are *referred* to a triangle.) I take it that mathematical properties (which are non-empirical) can be referred to the transcendental object because appearances necessarily have the forms of mathematical objects, which makes mathematics applicable to experience (see A46-9/B64-6, A165f./B206f., Prolegomena 4:287f.).

⁴⁵ The term ‘determination’ (and its cognates) has different but related meanings in Kant that cannot be fully analyzed here. With regard to the transcendental object, not the object, but its concept is ‘determined’ (both as a property and an action). Recall the “principle of thoroughgoing determination”, according to which “among *all possible* predicates of *things*, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it”

no account of how we could intentionally relate sensible predicates to the transcendental object (assuming again that we do not judge that the object has sensible predicates).⁴⁶ Although he considers the formal unity of apperception sufficient for relating a cognition to the transcendental object, he still holds that cognitions must satisfy the material cognition of truth that is provided by the unknowable transcendental object. But as long as Kant just vaguely says that we “ascribe” sensible properties to it, or that we “determine” the concept of a transcendental object by sensible predicates, it remains unclear how this is supposed to work.

In summary, in the A edition of the *Critique*, Kant attempts to solve the paradox of the transcendental object by arguing that formal unity of apperception is sufficient to establish an intentional relation to it. Nonetheless, his account of how we attribute sensible properties to unknowable things in themselves remains too vague. Fortunately, Kant will find a satisfying solution in later years. But before leaving this section, let me address a seemingly easy way out of the paradox. It is tempting for so-called “two aspect”-interpretations to argue that, since they hold that the distinction between things in themselves and appearances is not one between two kinds of objects, but two aspects of one and the same object, the paradox is just a pseudo-problem. For the same object that has unknowable properties belonging to its in-itself-aspect also has knowable, sensible properties that belong to its appearance-aspect. That is, when judging “This stone is heavy”, we are referring to a transcendental object that has some unknowable noumenal properties, but also phenomenal properties that make it a heavy stone.⁴⁷

However, although I will ultimately argue that the solution to the apparent dilemma consists in some version of a two aspect-reading, it is not clear how the version of the reading that I just sketched could help. For the question would again be why we relate our cognitions to the in-itself-aspect and not to the appearance-aspect. In fact, this would be much harder to explain if the object that we represent by sensible properties really had sensible properties. If the object of the judgment “This stone is heavy” is a heavy stone, why should its unknowable noumenal properties determine the truth of the judgment,

(A571f./B599f.). A concept of a thing is determined with regard to a pair of positive predicates and their respective negations if one of them belongs to the concept. The concept of the transcendental object is “undetermined” because it does not contain any predicates aside from those that already belong to the concept of the transcendental object. We determine this concept by adding positive or negative sensible predicates to it. The question then is how this can be done without judging that the thing in itself instantiates sensible predicates.

⁴⁶ His claim in this passage that we thereby “cognize appearances” (instead of the transcendental object) just adds to the confusion.

⁴⁷ Such a strategy is pursued by Willaschek (1992: 23f., 287f.n) and Rosefeldt (forthcoming).

instead of the stone's sensible properties? I am not arguing here that the two aspect-reading is wrong; but it would make Kant's account of the transcendental object only more paradoxical.

3. Things in Themselves as They Appear

Before we can talk about Kant's later views, I have to explain how I read the relation between things in themselves and appearances and why the notion of "appearing" is central. Since I have dealt with that at length elsewhere⁴⁸, I provide only a summary of my views here.

There is a well-known disagreement in Kant scholarship about the relation between things in themselves and appearances: two-world readers hold that appearance and thing in itself are two distinct objects; two-aspect readers, on the contrary, claim that Kant only distinguishes between a way things are in themselves and a way they appear to us. I hold that he in fact makes both distinctions⁴⁹ and that they even condition each other. According to Kant, appearances are always appearances of something that appears – otherwise "the absurd proposition would follow that there is appearance without something that appears" (Bxxvif.). This something cannot itself be appearance:

This was the result of the entire Transcendental Aesthetic, and it also follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing in itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word 'appearance' must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something, i.e., an object independent of sensibility. (A251)

To avoid the "constant circle" (which would more adequately be described as an infinite regress), it is necessary to stop somewhere, so we need objects that are not in turn appearances.⁵⁰ In fact, Kant thinks that it follows analytically from the concept of 'appearance' that the appearing object "is not in itself appearance", but "an object independent of sensibility". This is why Kant holds that things in themselves must be the "ground" of appearances.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See [REDACTED].

⁴⁹ For the first distinction, see A20/B34, A35/B52, A46/B63, A109, B164, A238/B298, A357, A359, OP 22:19; for the second distinction, see A30/B45, A42/B59, B69, A124, A147/B186, A249, A251, A258/B313, A394, B427, B429.

⁵⁰ See also ProL 4:314f., 4:355, Gr 4:451.

⁵¹ See A49/B66, A350, ProL 4:336, 4:337, Gr 4:453.

The notions of ‘appearance’ and ‘appearing’ are difficult to analyze, though. Roughly, appearance is the representation of an object in intuition or experience, and appearing is the process of giving appearances. But there are two kinds of appearances: appearance as intuition (*apparentia*) and appearance as a concept of a physical object that is formed by reflection on intuition according to the unity of categories (*phaenomenon*).⁵² Correspondingly, there are two kinds of appearing: one is to give us appearances in intuition⁵³, the other adds that we form the concept of a *phaenomenon*⁵⁴. Nonetheless, when Kant speaks of empirical cognition as cognition of “things as they appear”, this solely employs the meaning of ‘appearing’ in the second sense.⁵⁵ For, as we have seen, the relation of a cognition requires the thought of an object according to the unity of apperception, and hence of categories. I will consider Kant’s account of cognition of things as they appear in detail in section 5. But we can already understand in rough outline what this means: when we cognize things as they appear, this is cognition of the way things in themselves affect us, thereby produce intuitions and ultimately appearances in both senses of the term.

4. The *Prolegomena* Account: “Formal Idealism” and Secondary Qualities

Let us now consider how Kant treats the paradox of the relation between cognition and the transcendental object in later works, beginning with the *Prolegomena* from 1783. Unfortunately, there is a complication: Kant no longer uses the term ‘transcendental object’ after the first edition of the *Critique*. However, this does not mean that he dispenses with the conception of the transcendental object altogether. I will argue in this section that Kant’s account of “formal idealism” and his analogy with Lockean secondary qualities, which Kant presents in the *Prolegomena*, retains the conception of the transcendental object. Furthermore, he makes significant progress in solving the paradox of the

⁵² See De Mundi 2:394, A248f., PM 20:269. I thus follow Longuenesse’s (1998: 25) seminal interpretation.

⁵³ For instance, Kant says that we intuit the thing as it “affects our senses, i.e., as it appears” (B69), and defines ‘appearing’ as being “empirically intuited and given” (A93/B125). See also A27/B43, A93/B126, A124.

⁵⁴ Kant says that “in the empirical use of our understanding things are only cognized *as they appear*” (A249f.), and writes: “If, therefore, we say: The senses represent objects to us *as they appear*, but the understanding, *as they are*, then the latter is not to be taken in a transcendental but in a merely empirical way, signifying, namely, how they must be represented as objects of experience, in the thoroughgoing connection of appearances” (A258/B313f.). See also A147/B186, Anth 7:141.

⁵⁵ Kant says that the “things are only cognized as they appear”, and not “as they are” (A249f., see also A27/B43, B69, A277/B333, MFNS 4:507, Anth 7:141). Nonetheless, he also speaks of “cognition of appearances” (see Bxxvi, Bxxix, A39/B56, B307). But this seems to be just his usual terminological instability with respect to these terms.

transcendental object, even though the final solution has to wait for the second edition of the *Critique*. I first present Kant's account of formal idealism and then return to the transcendental object.

After having been compared to Berkeley in the so-called Feder/Garve-review, Kant was in search of an alternative term for "transcendental idealism".⁵⁶ In the *Prolegomena*, the perhaps most meaningful expression Kant considered as replacement is "formal idealism".⁵⁷ This term is contraposed to "material idealism"⁵⁸, which denies or raises doubts about the existence of the matter of cognition (namely the object), whereas formal idealism does not question the existence of the matter at all, but merely denies that the form of cognition belongs to the objects that we cognize.⁵⁹ For this reason, Kant says his idealism insists that "real objects correspond to our representations of outer things", while, nonetheless, "the form of intuition does not attach to the objects, but only to the human mind" (CprR 5:13n).⁶⁰ Consequently, Kant dissociates himself from Berkeley:

Mr. Eberhard's and Garve's view that the Berkeleyan idealism is identical to the critical one, which I could more aptly call the principle of the ideality of space and time, does not deserve the slightest attention: for I speak of ideality in regard of the form of representation, but those make of it ideality in regard of the matter, i.e., the object and its existence. (C 11:395)⁶¹

Since Kant takes Berkeley to deny the existence of outer things⁶², the "ideality in regard of the matter" means that the outer object does not exist. Correspondingly, the "ideality in regard of the form" must be

⁵⁶ See PrL 4:293, 4:375.

⁵⁷ See B519n, PrL 4:337, 4:375.

⁵⁸ See B274, B519n, PrL 4:337.

⁵⁹ "Matter" is not to be understood in a metaphysical sense as that which is connected by forms here, but rather in an epistemic sense as the object that is cognized in a specific epistemic form. See JL 9:33: "In all cognition, one must distinguish matter, i.e., the object, from form, i.e., the way we cognize the object."

⁶⁰ Keep in mind that "outer things" do not need to be spatial, but can also be things in themselves. Kant distinguishes between empirically and transcendently outer objects and identifies the former with outer appearances, but the latter with things in themselves (see A373, also MM 6:245). He argues that outer appearances are transcendently in us (see, e.g., A370, A373). One possible interpretation of this distinction – and this would be in line with the account suggested here – is that empirically outer objects are transcendently in us because they belong to the content of our mind, whereas only transcendently outer objects are objects outside our mind. I defend this interpretation elsewhere.

⁶¹ See also R5653 18:310, R6316 18:621f.

⁶² According to Kant, Berkeley declares "things in space for mere imaginations" (B274) and degrades them to "mere illusion" (B70).

that outer things do exist, yet do not have the form in which we cognize them.⁶³ Kant thereby distinguishes his formal from material idealism, which he calls the “real” one (Prol 4:289).⁶⁴ When he polemically opposes to calling his philosophy “idealism”⁶⁵, this is merely directed against traditional forms of it.

“Formal idealism” is sometimes taken to have the anodyne, merely epistemic meaning that the forms of cognition are transcendental conditions of cognizing an object.⁶⁶ This makes it tempting to think that the object of our cognition could be spatiotemporal. However, this understanding of formal idealism does not pay sufficient attention to the way Kant uses the term. A passage from the *Prolegomena*, in which Kant opposes material idealism and defends formal idealism, sheds further light on it:

I say in opposition: there are things given to us as objects of our senses existing outside us, yet we know nothing of what they may be in themselves, but are acquainted only with their appearances, i.e., with the representations that they produce in us by affecting our senses. Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are bodies outside us, i.e., things which, though completely unknown to us as to what they may be in themselves, we are acquainted with them through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides us, and to which we give the name of a body – which word therefore merely signifies the appearance of this object that is unknown to us but is nonetheless real. (Prol 4:289)

Although Kant does not literally speak of ‘things in themselves’, it is easy to see that the “things”, or the things “existing outside us”, are things in themselves because he says that the “things” do not have the forms of space and time in themselves. Thus, Kant’s characterization confirms the results from section 3: Things in themselves appear to us, and appearances are only representations by which things in themselves appear. We can also see that, despite the disappearance of the term ‘transcendental object’, its conception survives. For the “thing” meets the three marks of the transcendental object outlined in section 1: it is a) given by intuition and thought by cognition, b) a thing in itself, and c) unknowable as it is in itself.

The paradox of the transcendental object was that a) is inconsistent with b) and c). But Kant’s comparison of formal idealism with Locke’s account of secondary qualities is an important step towards solving it:

⁶³ See also R6316, where Kant writes that the object “does not have the same form of space in which we intuit it” (18:621f., 1790-1).

⁶⁴ For similar designations see Prol 4:293, 4:374, R6316 18:621.

⁶⁵ See Prol 4:289, 4:293.

⁶⁶ See Pippin 1982: 188f., Allison 2004: 35f.

That one could, without detracting from the actual existence of outer things, say of a great many of their predicates: they [...] have no existence on their own outside our representation, is something that has been accepted and acknowledged long before *Locke's* time, though more commonly thereafter. To these predicates belong warmth, color, taste, etc. That I, however, beyond these include (for weighty reasons) also among mere appearances the remaining qualities of bodies, which are called *primarias*: extension, place, and more generally space with everything that depends on it (impenetrability or materiality, shape, etc.) is something against which not the least ground for inadmissibility can be raised [...]. (Prol 4:289)

As Kant summarizes *Locke's* distinction, primary qualities exist outside our representations, whereas secondary qualities do not. Kant argues that traditional primary qualities, like extension, should be treated the same way as traditional secondary qualities because the objects that appear to us are not spatially extended.⁶⁷ The quote goes on to make a distinction between “similar” and “conforming”:

I would very much like to know how then my claims must be framed so as not to contain any idealism. Without doubt I would have to say: that the representation of space not only is *perfectly conforming* [*vollkommen gemäß*] to the relation that our sensibility has to objects, for I have said that, but that it is even *fully similar* [*völlig ähnlich*] to the object; an assertion to which I can attach no sense, any more than to the assertion that the sensation of red is similar to the property of cinnabar that excites this sensation in me. (Prol 4:289f., emphases mine)

Just as our representation of redness is not similar to cinnabar, the representation of space is not “fully similar” to the objects, even though the representation “conforms” to them. The expressions “similar” and “conforming” are in need of explanation. In Kant's day, the expressions “similar” and “identical” [*gleich*] have often been used interchangeably.⁶⁸ Since, properly speaking, “similarity” only means

⁶⁷ As Allais (2007: 465f.) points out, there is a seeming tension of the *Prolegomena* with the *Critique*, where Kant calls the analogy with secondary qualities “inadequate” to explain the ideality of space (A29/B45). But Kant makes a distinction between an empirical and a transcendental difference between appearances and things in themselves that would allow him to make an analogous distinction between secondary qualities in an empirical and a transcendental sense. In the empirical sense, phenomena, as physical objects, are things in themselves and opposed to appearances as intuitions; but in the transcendental sense even phenomena are only appearances and representations (see A45/B62). Then Kant could say that colors are secondary qualities in an empirical sense because they do not belong to physical objects, whereas space is a secondary quality in a transcendental sense because space belongs to physical objects, but not to things in themselves. See [REDACTED]; for a similar argument see Rosefeldt 2007: 182f.

⁶⁸ See the dictionary entry “Ähnlich” in Adelung 1774-86: “In everyday life, however, ‘identical’ [*gleich*] and ‘similar’ are very often used interchangeably.”

imperfect identity, the expression “perfectly similar” was common to indicate complete identity.⁶⁹ Consequently, when Kant says that the representation of space is not fully similar to its object (and compares it to traditional secondary qualities), he denies that the object is spatial.⁷⁰ Locke’s term ‘resemblance’ is apparently another term for ‘identity’ in this sense. He says that “the *Ideas, produced in us by these Secondary Qualities, have no resemblance of them at all*” (Locke 1979: 137). This means that the ideas of secondary qualities are not identical to these qualities.⁷¹ When Kant denies the similarity of representation and object, this can be read as a radicalization of Locke’s account: all properties of our representations are like secondary qualities, they have ‘no resemblance’ to the object.⁷²

“Conformity”, by contrast, has a technical meaning that differs from ordinary German (or English).⁷³ A number of lectures give definitions of the term like the following:

*Conformity [Conformitaet] is the relation [respectus] of a grounded thing [rationati] to the ground [rationi], insofar as the grounded thing is posited by the ground. (M-Herder 28:16)*⁷⁴

⁶⁹For example, in a discussion of Leibniz’s “Principle of the Non-distinguishable” Kant writes that one part of space may be “perfectly similar and identical” to another part. A264/B320 (see also A272/B328). It goes without saying that, here or elsewhere, ‘identity’ is not used in the sense of numerical identity, but type-identity.

⁷⁰One might find the application of the concept of similarity to the relation between representation and object dubious – after all, how could a representation, as a mental item, be red or spatial? But Locke and Kant are clearly referring to the *content* of representation, as distinguished from the representation itself. No representation, as a determination of the soul, is red; when we speak of a red representation, we mean that the content is red.

⁷¹Note that, for Locke, secondary qualities are not the ideas of red, but their cause. Kant, by contrast, holds that secondary qualities “have no existence on their own outside our representation” (Prol 4:289), so I take it that he identifies colors etc. not with properties of things that appear to us, but with the content of representations. (Rosefeldt (2007: 187) holds that Kant uses terms that express secondary qualities in both senses. But I can see no convincing example for a use in a Lockean way.

⁷²For a different account of the secondary quality analogy that treats secondary qualities as “essentially manifest”, but subject-dependent properties of objects that are directly intuited (without representations as intermediaries), see Allais (2007, 2015: ch. 6).

⁷³In ordinary German, “conformity” is the relation in which one thing meets the conditions set by another thing, which is more general than the technical sense (see Adelung 1774-86: “Gemäß”). It should be noted that Kant’s use of ‘*gemäß sein*’ is slightly different from ‘*sich richten nach*’ (which can also be translated as “to conform”), which occurs in the discussion of the “Copernican Revolution”, where Kant argues that objects conform to [*sich richten nach*] our cognition (see Bxviff.).

The grounded thing is a consequence of the ground, and that the consequence is posited (or determined) by a ground just follows analytically from the concept of “consequence”; for a ground is that by which a determinate consequence is posited.⁷⁵ Hence, every consequence conforms to its ground. Things in themselves are grounds of representations by affecting the cognizing subject.⁷⁶ “Affection” is the relation by which a thing is the ground of intuitions.⁷⁷ Thus, intuitions conform to an affecting thing in itself.

With this in mind, we are finally in a position to return to the problem of the relation of cognition to the transcendental object. How much does Kant’s account of formal idealism and of secondary qualities help to solve it? Consider first the notion of conformity. In the famous letter to Marcus Herz, dating from Feb 21, 1772, he writes:

If the representation only contains the way in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how it can conform [*gemäß sey*] to the object as an effect to its cause and how this representation of our mind can represent something, i.e., have an object. (C 10:130)⁷⁸

Once intuitions are freed from the requirement to be similar to the affecting objects and conformity is enough to give them an object, there is no problem about their relation to the transcendental object. However, conformity is not an intentional relation – intuitions do not represent their object as something – but only a causal one. So when Kant writes “that the representation of space” is “perfectly conforming to the relation that our sensibility has to objects” (Prol 4:290)⁷⁹, would this also be a

⁷⁴ See also M-Herder 28:22, M-Volckmann, 28:427, M-L₂, 28:562, M-Dohna, 28:638. Kant follows Baumgarten’s use of ‘conformity’, see Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*, §80, 17:22f., §176, 17:52. Throughout the text, I translate ‘*Gemäßheit*’ (or ‘*conformitas*’) as ‘conformity’, and ‘*gemäß*’ (or ‘*conformis*’) as ‘conforming’, respectively, but ‘*Übereinstimmung*’ as “agreement”.

⁷⁵ See C 11:35, M-Volckmann 28:401, M-Schön 28:486, M-L₂ 28:549, M-Dohna 28:625, M-Mrongovius 29:806.

⁷⁶ More precisely, objects are *real* grounds of representations, that is, grounds on the level of things. *Logical* grounds are on the level of concepts or judgments, but this clearly does not apply here. For Kant’s discussion of logical and real grounds, see, e.g., NM 2:202, OD 8:195, C 11:35, M-Herder 28:11, M-Volckmann 28:403, M-L₂ 28:549, M-Mrongovius 29:807.

⁷⁷ See A68/B93, B129, A253/B309. Albeit controversial, I take it that affection is not only a relation of (real) ground and consequence, but also, more specifically, a relation of cause and effect (see, e.g., A494/B522f.). For this reason, I will speak interchangeably of ‘(real) ground’ and ‘cause’ with regard to affection.

⁷⁸ Similar passages, next to the one from the *Prolegomena*, can be found in R1676 16:76f. and R6314 18:616.

⁷⁹ Kant is apparently a bit imprecise in two ways here. First, he says that the representation of space conforms to the *relation* between representation and object. However, conformity is itself the relation between our sensible

plausible account of empirical cognition? Clearly no. For cognition is not the effect of affection, but an act of the understanding that relates representations to objects. It would make no sense to say that a cognition ‘conforms’ to objects.

Still, the secondary quality analogy could be helpful to understand empirical cognitions as well. For the traditional account of secondary qualities not merely holds that, say, the color red does not belong to the cinnabar, but also that the cinnabar has the power to cause red sensations. Now Kant holds that even traditional primary qualities are like this. Thus, when we say that the stone is heavy, it is tempting to think that, according to Kant, we thereby say that the thing that we cognize has the power to cause the appearance of a heavy stone in us. Since the thing is deprived of all empirical, spatiotemporal properties once we treat traditional primary qualities like secondary qualities, this explains why the thing is only an unknowable “X” and a non-spatiotemporal thing in itself. On this account, to cognize things in the forms of space and time means to attribute the power to cause spatiotemporal representations – that is, to appear in the forms of space and time.

However, while I will argue in the next section that Kant settles for this view in the end, he has not arrived at this point in the *Prolegomena* yet. He just vaguely says that we can conceive of the way we cognize things by analogy to secondary qualities, but does not spell this account out. Furthermore, a problem emerges if we reconsider this sentence:

Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are *bodies* outside us, i.e., things which, though *completely unknown* to us as to what they may be in themselves, we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides us, and to which we *give the name of a body* – which word therefore merely signifies the *appearance of this object* that is unknown to us but is nonetheless real. (Prol 4:289, emphases mine)

Kant usually understands “bodies” as spatially extended things.⁸⁰ However, in this sentence he first identifies bodies with mind-transcendent appearing things and then with the appearances of these things. Could this be a slip of the pen, or does this emerge from the secondary quality analogy? For, just as one might apply the term “red” both to the representation and to the properties that cause this representation, one might apply the term “body” both to the thing as appearance and to the thing that

representations and objects. Second, space, as pure intuition a priori, is not the consequence of affection, but the form of outer intuitions, which are these consequences. It would have been more precise to say that our spatial intuitions conform to things that affect us.

⁸⁰ See A7/B11, A342/B400.

causes the appearance.⁸¹ Nevertheless, this seems unlikely. If Kant in fact had this view, one should expect him not to use the word “body” in two different meanings in the very same sentence. Or else, he should at least make this distinction explicit elsewhere, which I do not see him doing. Absent an explicit distinction, he would be using terms like “body” equivocally within one sentence. If my interpretation is correct, however, things in themselves, and not appearances or “bodies” in whatever sense, appear to us. As we shall see now, Kant came to this conclusion in the B edition of the *Critique*.

5. Kant’s Solution in the B Edition: Limiting Judgments to the Appearing of Things in Themselves

In a section added to the B edition of the *Critique*, Kant stresses the difference between appearance [*Erscheinung*] and illusion [*Schein*]:

When I say: in space and time intuition represents both outer objects as well as the self-intuition of the mind as each affects our senses, i.e., as it *appears*, that is not to say that these objects would be a mere *illusion*. For in the appearance the objects, indeed even properties that we attribute to them, are always regarded as something really given, save that, insofar as this property depends only on the kind of intuition of the subject in the relation of the given object to it, then this object as *appearance* is to be distinguished from itself as object *in itself*. Thus I do not say that bodies merely *seem* [*scheinen*] to exist outside me or that my soul only *seems* to be given when I assert that the quality of space and time – in accordance with which, as condition of their existence, I posit both of these – lies in my kind of intuition and not in these objects in themselves. It would be my own fault if I made that which I should count as appearance into mere illusion.* (B69)

The distinction is quite subtle. Appearances depend on the way things are given to us in intuition; this may be either appearance as intuition (*apparentia*) or as reflected concept (*phaenomenon*, see sect. 3). When we say that things appear to us, this does not mean that we judge them to be as they appear. This is different for illusions⁸², which are “only in the judgment about [an object] insofar as it is thought”, as opposed to appearances (A294/B349f.).⁸³ In the footnote attached to the asterisk in the quote from B69, Kant elucidates this and again appeals to the analogy with traditional secondary qualities:

⁸¹ This is Rosefeldt’s (2007: 193-5) view.

⁸² However, in the quote from B69 Kant implicitly distinguishes between two kinds of illusion. The first concerns the existence of objects, the second their properties. Although the first sense is also involved here, only the second sense is relevant for the secondary quality analogy (see the following).

⁸³ A difficult point lies in Kant’s claim that illusion is not error, but only leads to it, and nonetheless belongs to judgments. Suffice it here that appearance is distinguished both from illusion and error in that having an

The predicates of appearance can be attributed to the object itself, in relation to our sense, e.g., the red color or fragrance to the rose; but the illusion can never be attributed to the object as predicate, precisely because that would be to attribute to the object *for itself* what belongs to it only in relation to the senses or in general to the subject, e.g., the two handles that were originally attributed to Saturn. What is not to be encountered in the object in itself at all, but is always to be encountered in its relation to the subject and is inseparable from the representation of the object, is appearance, and thus the predicates of space and of time are rightly attributed to the objects of the senses as such, and there is no illusion in this. On the contrary, if I attribute the redness to the rose *in itself*, the handles to Saturn or extension to all outer objects *in themselves*, without looking to a certain relation of these objects to the subject *and limiting my judgment to this*, then illusion first arises. (B69f.n, last emphasis mine⁸⁴)

The secondary quality analogy illustrates how we can avoid Illusion by limiting judgments to the relation that the objects have to our senses. Just as redness does not belong to the rose in itself, space and time are not properties of things in themselves, but only of the way they appear to us. While “the predicates of appearance can be attributed to the object itself”, we do not attribute them to the things as they are in themselves, but only as they appear.

But how do we limit our judgments to the way things appear? Apparently, Kant means that our judgments, whether explicitly or implicitly, must be given a particular form that differs from common

appearance is different from judging something to be the case. For the difference between illusion and error, see the classical discussion in Grier 2001: 117-30.

⁸⁴ My reading of this passage is closely related to Rosefeldt’s (see Rosefeldt 2007, in particular 175f., also forthcoming). There are three notable differences, though. First, although Rosefeldt recognizes that Kant sometimes uses the word ‘appearance’ only for the content of representations (see Rosefeldt 2007: 187), he does not consider its systematic connections to the notion of ‘appearing’. Second, Rosefeldt thinks that the appearance-aspect consists in “dispositions” or “response-dependent properties” (see Rosefeldt 2007: 188-92, forthcoming); thus, things have an appearance-aspect even if they do not actually appear. By contrast, I hold that appearing is the actual process by which appearances are given and produced; hence judgments about things as they appear are not about the potentialities of things to appear in a certain way. (Judgments about possible perceptions that we would have if we were in different perceptual situations are grounded on what is actually given (see A225f./B272-4, A376, A492f./B520f.); so merely possible perceptual states that are inferred from the actually given belong to the way things *actually* appear.) Third, Rosefeldt holds that we can say that a rose (or another empirical object) is a “mind-external object” just because it appears to us as a rose, which allegedly shows that Kant is not a phenomenalist (Rosefeldt 2007: 195, see also 195-8). But this strikes me as false: if being a rose means to have the properties that essentially (or typically) belong to a rose (having spatiotemporal extension, being a plant, etc.), then the things that appear to us as a rose – which do not have any of these properties – are not roses; and the word ‘rose’ cannot be meaningfully applied to them.

use. Consider first, as an example for traditional secondary qualities, the sentence “This rose is red”. Since the rose is not red itself, but only the cause of red appearances (at least if we do not use the term “red” for the properties that are responsible for the red appearances), traditional philosophers reformulate the sentence as “The rose appears red”. But on Kant’s account, since there are no sensible properties in appearance that resemble the object (the thing in itself), all we know about the appearing thing is that it is a thing in itself that affects us in a certain way. We are also unable to identify the particular things in themselves that appear to us⁸⁵, and do not even know how many things in themselves appear to us⁸⁶. As a result, we have to say “At least one thing in itself (of which we have no further knowledge) appears as *a*” – e.g., as a heavy stone. The judgment is then about things in themselves, though not about what they are in themselves, but how they appear.⁸⁷

This puts us in a position to see how this account solves the problem of the transcendental object. First, we should note again that, despite the disappearance of the term “transcendental object”, the conception of it remains. Consider this passage:

Understanding is, generally speaking, the faculty of *cognitions*. These consist in the determinate relation of given representations to an object. An *object*, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is *united*. Now, however, all unification of representations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and consequently is that which makes them into cognitions and on which even the possibility of the understanding rests. (B137)

Kant still thinks that cognition is the relation of a representation to an object and that the unity of consciousness is sufficient to constitute cognition. And he still thinks that appearances are representations of things in themselves, so he still thinks that the object to which we relate the cognition is an unknowable thing in itself:

However, appearances are only representations of things that exist without cognition of what they might be in themselves. (B164)

⁸⁵ This results from the fact that we are not directly acquainted with things in themselves, which are only given to us through intuitions.

⁸⁶ According to Kant, intuitions could be the composite effect of a coalition of things in themselves that affect us. See OD 8:209n, also A353.

⁸⁷ It goes without saying that having empirical representations is not sufficient for the existence of things that appear to us – when we dream or hallucinate, there is nothing that appears.

So the characteristics of the transcendental object are still met: the object is a) the intentional correlate of empirical cognition (presumably also the object given in intuition), b) a thing in itself, c) unknowable as it is in itself. If we just read the B Deduction, it even is still the case that Kant does not offer a solution to the paradox of the transcendental object, which consists in the tension that a) has to b) and c). But in the Aesthetics, he has outlined a way out of the apparent dilemma: Empirical cognition is related to things in themselves, but we do not attribute sensible predicates to them. Rather, we cognize things in themselves by attributing to them the way they appear to us. The things are unknowable in crucial ways – we do not know them as they are in themselves – but we know them as they appear, and this is sufficient to make them the intentional correlate of empirical cognition.

At this point, readers may object that, even if my proposed interpretation is in a position to solve the paradox about the transcendental object, it is based on the unacceptable assumption that we can have knowledge of things in themselves. Does Kant not say time and again that this is impossible? How could it then be legitimate to make judgments about how things in themselves appear? After all, I have listed the unknowability of the transcendental object as it is in itself as one of its characteristics!

However, it would be a misunderstanding of Kant that we can know absolutely nothing about things in themselves. Just consider his claim that we can know that things in themselves are neither spatial nor temporal – whatever his rationale, this is some piece of knowledge that we have of them.⁸⁸ We also know that things in themselves exist – Kant not only says, as we have seen, that appearances without things in themselves that appear would be absurd; he outright states that the understanding “admits the existence of things in themselves” (Prol 4:315) and that “appearances always presuppose a thing in itself and are thus indicative of them [*darauf Anzeige tun*]” (Prol 4:355).⁸⁹ To be sure, Kant does say at times that we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves.⁹⁰ But if we took this to mean that we can have no knowledge of them at all, this would be inconsistent with his claims mentioned above. However, Kant also says that we cannot know things as they are in themselves.⁹¹ This is compatible with knowledge of things in themselves as they appear and other knowledge of them; so the contradiction does not arise. When Kant therefore seems to say that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves whatsoever,

⁸⁸ See A26/B42, A32f./B49, B149.

⁸⁹ Also see Kant’s response to Eberhard, where he says that “the objects as things in themselves give the stuff for empirical intuitions” (OD 8:215).

⁹⁰ See e.g. Bxx, A30/B45, A190/B235.

⁹¹ See e.g. A38/B55, A43/B60, B164, A277/B333, Prol 4:289.

we should take this to mean that we cannot know them as they are in themselves. This is a very substantial amount of ignorance; there is no need to worry that knowledge of things in themselves as they appear makes them too 'knowable'.⁹²

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the dispute on whether the transcendental object is the thing in itself has its roots in the absence of an adequate account in the A edition of the problem how things in themselves could be the object of empirical cognition. Only Kant's later conception of formal idealism and the analogy with secondary qualities puts him in a position to adequately respond to this issue. For, on his mature view, he holds that we cognize things in themselves empirically, but only as they appear and not as they are in themselves.

While I have sidelined the broader implications for the dispute over Kant's transcendental idealism, one possible consequence is that he must be read as a phenomenalist about appearances who thinks that spatiotemporal objects do not exist outside our mind, but also insists that things in themselves exist as mind-independent objects to which we refer our cognition. Phenomenalism would also be a plausible motivation for the identification of the transcendental object with the thing in itself – if appearances are just mental content, it is awkward to consider them the ordinary intentional correlate of empirical cognition. However, it would be a lot to ask to give a succinct defense of a phenomenalist reading in this paper. For this reason, phenomenism is neither a premise nor the conclusion of my argumentation here. And it may be viable to find a non-phenomenalist two-aspect reading that is generally consistent with my account in this paper. But this would have to be investigated in future work.⁹³

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⁹² For a similar argument, see Allais 2015: 33-6, 65-70, also Rosefeldt 2013, forthcoming.

⁹³ [acknowledgments]

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