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The Inexplicable Neutral Entity: A Critique of Metaphysical Two Aspects Interpretations

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Abstract

The goal of this essay is to outline several objections to what are commonly called metaphysical two-aspect interpretations of Immanuel Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism. This essay will be divided into two sections. §1 will argue that any notion we might have of the 'thing-in-itself' is completely vacuous. §2 will outline three objections to metaphysical two-aspect interpretations. *The interpretive objection* is that there is little textual basis for the neutral entity presupposed by metaphysical two-aspect interpretations. *The exclusionary properties objection* argues that metaphysical two-aspect interpretations presuppose that the same thing has exclusionary properties. *The identity objection* argues that Kant does not allow for a sense of identity outside of appearances and thus one cannot identify appearances with things-in-themselves.

Introduction

In the introduction to a recent translation of the Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Paul Guyer and Allen Wood state that "to tell the whole story of the book's influence would be to write the history of philosophy since Kant" (1998, 1). While this statement is undoubtedly true when applied to the *Critique* as a whole, it fails to reflect the controversy surrounding the central position of the *Critique*; Kant's doctrine of transcendental idealism (TI). Even "after more than 200 years of Kant scholarship," commentators haven't reached a consensus as to how to interpret this doctrine, "let alone weigh its philosophical merits" (Schulting, Verburgt 2011, v). In fact, there isn't "even a tendency to convergence" amongst these interpretations, and because of this "recent publications continue to represent an astonishingly wide spectrum of views" (Allais 2011, 91).¹

In spite this divergence, most interpretations are seen as falling into one of two categories: 'two-world' views and 'two-aspect' views. As Henry Allison recently put it, "the debate regarding the interpretation of Kant's idealism is usually seen as turning on the best way to understand his transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves: that it marks either a contrast between two types of thing (the 'two-object' or 'two-world' view) or one between two sides or aspects of ordinary empirical objects (the 'two-aspect' view)" (2006, 1). The two-world view is generally understood to be an ontological position,² whereas the two aspect view is understood to be methodological. However, Allison states that this "is not the most helpful way to frame the issue" (2006, 1). The problem with this binary distinction, according to Allison, "lies in an ambiguity inherent in the two-aspect view" which can itself "be understood either metaphysically, as a thesis about the kinds of properties attributable to empirical objects," or, as under Allison's interpretation, "methodologically, as a contrast between two ways in which such objects can be considered in a philosophical reflection on the conditions of their cognition"

(2006, 1). The essential difference between the two-aspect and two-world interpretations is that two-world views take the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves to concern two distinct sets of objects, whereas two-aspect views take this distinction to concern two aspects of numerically identical objects. Two-aspect views are metaphysical when they take the transcendental distinction to concern two sets of properties of the same objects. In what follows I shall demonstrate the problems with metaphysical two-aspect interpretations.

1. The Thing-In-Itself

Henry Allison, following Gerold Prauss, points out two different locutions of the term ‘thing-in-itself:’ ‘*Ding an sich*’ and ‘*Ding an sich selbst*’ (2004, 52). Allison explains that these correspond to two senses in which one may consider something as in-itself: ontological and epistemological, which correspond respectively to the positive and negative senses of ‘noumenon’ (ibid). Kant states that the noumenon in the negative sense is merely a “boundary concept” and cannot be used “to posit anything positive outside the domain [of sensibility]” (A255/B311).³ Thus the noumenon in the negative sense is not even considered to be a theoretical (‘problematic’ in Kant’s terminology) entity. The closest Kant comes to treating ‘things-in-themselves’ as actual entities within a metaphysical system (and not just ideas) is when he talks about positive noumena, which as Allison notes, are “by definition non-sensible” and “therefore also obviously non-spatial” (1976, 318). The problem with the positive noumena is that they are entities within a metaphysical system *that is itself theoretical*, which is why the noumenon must be understood “only in the negative sense” (B309).

While Kant allows us to think about things-in-themselves (Bxxvi), this does not mean that he considers such objects to be possible.⁴ This becomes clear when we consider Kant’s distinction between ‘logical possibility’ (which concerns whether something can be thought without contradiction) and ‘real possibility’ (which concerns whether the thing can actually exist in a metaphysical sense).⁵ If one wishes to interpret TI as a metaphysical position that asserts even the possibility of noumena, one must establish that Kant allows for the *real* possibility of noumena. Because “the use of the categories can by no means reach beyond the boundaries of the objects of experience” (B308), noumena can only be conceptualized through ‘pure’ or non-schematic concepts.⁶ These pure concepts abstract from our sensible conditions and are derived from general logic, which abstracts “from all content of cognition, i.e. from any relation of it to the object, and considers only the logical form in the relation of cognitions to one another, i.e., the form of thinking in general” (A55/B79). However, this only establishes that notion of a noumenon is *logically* possible.

The problem is that Kant explicitly denies the real possibility of noumena. As Kant puts it “if by merely intelligible objects we understand those things that are thought through pure categories, without any schema of sensibility, then things of this sort are impossible” because “the condition of the objective use of all our concepts of understanding is merely the manner of our sensible intuition, through which objects are given to us, and, if we abstract from the latter, then the former have no relation at all to any sort of object” (A286/B342). The reason why noumena are impossible in the real sense is that Kant’s notion of real possibility is empirical: something has real possibility if it can be presented to us through intuition. Although we can think of noumena through ‘pure’ concepts, these concepts are merely abstracted forms of spatiotemporal concepts. The only way that we know our concepts to correspond to any real entities is when we apply them to our spatiotemporal intuitions, which requires us to use them

in their spatiotemporal form. Thus when we abstract from this form there is no guarantee that our concepts will correspond to anything.

The reason for this is that the understanding is the faculty responsible for categorizing sense data and providing the *a priori* syntactic framework for abstract reasoning, and is thus only mediately related to objects through sensible intuition: “objects are therefore given to us by means of sensibility, and it alone affords us intuitions [...] *there is no other way in which objects can be given to us*” (A19/B33, [my emphasis]).⁷ As Kant puts it, “we have no insight into the possibility of such *noumena*, and the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us), i.e., we have an understanding that extends farther than sensibility **problematically**,” (i.e. theoretically), “but no intuition, indeed not even the concept of a possible intuition, through which objects outside the field of sensibility could be given” (A255/B310). To even be capable of asserting the possibility of noumena one would have to have a faculty of non-sensible intuition, which “is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand” (B309). Since we do not possess this type of intuition, noumena are not possible objects for us.

Another problem with considering TI to be a substantive metaphysical system containing claims about things-in-themselves is that things-in-themselves cannot be described meaningfully. The reason for this is that without schematic spatiotemporal content the pure categories are vacuous notions. The categories, as Kant puts it, “have significance only in relation to the unity of intuitions in space and time” and “thus in the case of the noumenon” (which can have no such unity because it is non-spatiotemporal), “the entire use, indeed all significance of the categories completely ceases; for then we could not have insight even into the possibility of the things that would correspond to the categories” (B308). Without their spatiotemporal schematic content “*one cannot grasp through an example what sort of thing is really intended by concepts of that sort*” (A241/B300 [my emphasis]).

This is clear when considering the category of causality. As Kant puts it, “from the concept of a cause as a pure category (if I leave out the time in which something follows something else in accordance with a rule), I will not find out anything more than that it is something that allows an inference to the existence of something else; and in that case not only would there be nothing through which cause and effect could be distinguished, but further, since the possibility of drawing this inference also requires conditions about which I would know nothing, the concept would not even have any determination through which to apply to any object” (A243/B301). In other words, the pure category of cause is vacuous to the point that it does not even allow one to differentiate cause and effect.

As Quarfood puts it, “the thing in itself is thus not so much a thing, or a kind of thing, as a term which serves multifarious functions at various places in Kant’s system” (2011, 157). Following the analysis of Gerold Prauss, Allison argues that most of the time Kant uses the form ‘*Ding an sich selbst*’ (roughly ‘thing-considered-in-itself’), which should be understood as a method of consideration rather than as a metaphysical entity (2004, 52). To an extent I agree with Allison in that I too hold that “the concept of the thing in itself is not the concept of another kind of *thing* (a non-spatiotemporal one), but another kind of *concept* of a *thing* (one qua cognized by a ‘pure understanding’)” (Wood, et. al. 2007, 36). The primary use of the term ‘thing-in-itself’ in the *Critique* refers to a method of considering something as abstracted from our sensible conditions.⁸ Thus aside from the positive noumenon, ‘thing-in-itself’ is used in almost an entirely epistemological sense by Kant. While we cannot conceive of any real

metaphysical possibility of things-in-themselves *de re* this does not stop us from considering empirical objects ‘as-they-are-in-themselves.’

Because we are able to abstract certain qualities away from our conception of a certain object we sometimes take this subjective contingency to be objective. It is a necessary function of our rational capacity to consider objects in abstraction from certain qualities. Indeed, our ability to represent spatiotemporal objects in abstraction from certain qualities is incredibly useful for mathematical and scientific inquiry. It is only when we reify this abstracted notion of a thing that we become confused. This is essentially what Kant accuses Leibniz of doing in his conceptions of monads (A264/B320). Our tendency to reify things-in-themselves is part of the “transcendental dialectic” and is “a **natural** and unavoidable **illusion**” which results when subjective principles are passed off as objective (A298/B354). The true role of the thing-in-itself is to point out the limitations placed upon us by our sensibility. At most, the concept of the thing-in-itself allows us to think about some supersensible ground or substratum out of which spatiotemporal nature emerges, “that exists independently of the particular way we cognize it through discursivity and our particular forms of intuitions” (Quarfood 2011, 157).⁹

2. The Failure of Two-Aspect Interpretations

Metaphysical two-aspect views claim that the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves actually concerns a difference “in the set of properties of one and the same thing” (Schulting 2011a, 11). According to these views Kant admits only one class of objects that has *two sets of properties* (e.g. intrinsic and extrinsic). The claim is that while we know objects empirically through their extrinsic/mind-dependent spatiotemporal properties, we also know *these same objects* to possess intrinsic/mind-independent properties that are (in some sense) non-spatiotemporal. These views claim that while we know objects empirically through their extrinsic spatiotemporal properties, we also know *these same objects* to possess intrinsic properties that are (in some sense) non-spatiotemporal. In what follows I shall present three objections to metaphysical two-aspect views: the interpretive objection, the exclusionary properties objection and the identity objection.

The Interpretive Objection

The first problem that comes to mind when presented with this view is interpretive. It seems to require some third entity, which is itself neither a thing-in-itself, nor an appearance. One cannot hold that things-in-themselves possess two sets of properties, as this would violate Kantian humility. The “thing in itself is not the starting point of Kant’s transcendental analysis,” so we can hardly *start off* by describing TI as a system of things-in-themselves: to do so “would be to reaffirm the very problematic transcendental-realist position that Kant’s subjective turn is supposed to supplant” (Schulting 2011a, 13-14). To say that a thing has intrinsic and extrinsic properties or mind-dependent and mind-independent properties is to make a positive metaphysical assertion about said thing. This would require us to make a positive assertion about things-in-themselves, which would violate Kant’s claim that things in themselves are unknowable. As Hoke Robinson puts it, “if things in themselves are primary, then to say that appearances are spatial and are *of* things in themselves is to say that things in themselves appear spatial, which violates noumenal ignorance” and if “what exists as appearance is *of* what exists as thing in itself, the thing in itself must affect us causally, contrary to the Kantian restriction of causality to appearances” (1994, 422).

It would be even more absurd to regard appearances as the things that have the extrinsic/intrinsic qualities. First of all, it is hard to see how one could ontologically favor appearances given the fact that they are almost by definition ontologically inferior. Furthermore, ontologically favoring appearances in this manner will trivialize TI by reducing it to a mundane account of physicalism. As Schulting puts it, asserting that “there only seem to exist empirical objects, which have both an in-itself nature and an appearance nature,” is that one must deny that there are things in themselves that “*only* have an in-itself nature and *no appearance* nature (e.g., God, and the soul)” (2011a, 11). The problem is that favoring appearances in this manner “disallows even the possibility of God’s existence,” because “no room is left for objects that are effectively numerically *distinct* from appearances, and which have no phenomenal counterpart (or noumenal objects that would affect beings with a different intuitional capacity than ours)” (ibid). Not only does it seem impossible to derive the substantial theological notion of God that Kant requires from the mere fact that spatiotemporal things have intrinsic properties, but construing God as spatiotemporal leads to theological absurdities. As Allison puts it, “far from allowing for the possibility that things in themselves, construed as intelligible entities, might possibly be spatial, Kant viewed it as one of the strengths of this theory of space and time that it repudiated such absurd and theologically dangerous doctrines” (1976, 318). Thus it seems that this view must presuppose some third entity.

But what would this entity be? One possibility is the ‘transcendental object,’ which the cause or ground of appearance in general (See A253, A288-89/B344-45 and A358). However, the transcendental object is “the concept of an object corresponding to and distinct from our cognition” (2004, 61-2). This would imply that appearances and things-in-themselves are both ways of *representing* the transcendental object, rather than sets of properties possessed by it. This would be a methodological two-world view, like Allison’s. In fact, “the transcendental object expresses not a mode of considering the object as it is in-itself, independent of cognition, but only a condition for the cognition of phenomenal objects” and as such it is not an object proper and cannot be said to possess properties in the manner required by the metaphysical two-aspect view (Nitzan 2010, 177). In fact “there simply is nothing more to be said about such an object than that it is a something in general = X,” which would seemingly preclude us from claiming that it has any properties at all, intrinsic or extrinsic.¹⁰

The Exclusionary Properties Objection

Even if we put this textual difficulty aside, the metaphysical two-aspect view still faces several obstacles. One major difficulty with this view is that it seems to attribute contradictory properties to the same thing. While, as Schulting notes, “one could argue that one and the same thing could still have two (seemingly) contradictory aspects *at different times*” or “that it has these aspects *in different respects*,” or that it is “*considered* from various standpoints,” this is not what the metaphysical two aspect view is doing (2011a, 15 [my italics]). It is making the assertion that there is one entity *de re* that has two different types of properties *in a strong metaphysical sense*. To say that the object has these two types of properties in virtue of how one considers it would reduce the metaphysical two-aspect view to a *methodological* two-aspect view akin to that of Henry Allison. This seems to force the two-aspect view to claim that the same thing has exclusionary properties (i.e. is both spatiotemporal and non-spatiotemporal).

One possible way of escaping this objection is to say that intrinsic/transcendental properties are non-spatiotemporal in a non-exclusionary way, and that they are better understood as being a-spatiotemporal than non-spatiotemporal. Schulting is right to point out that “something can’t both be spatial and *not* be

spatial,” but this does not necessarily preclude things from having both spatial and non-spatial properties (2011a, 15). It might be argued it is only *part* of the neutral entity that is in space. However, the problem is that it is unclear how anything could exist as a substantial entity while only having relational, extrinsic or mind dependent properties.¹¹ Because of this it seems that relational/extrinsic/mind-dependent properties always supervene upon or emerge out of non-relational/intrinsic/mind-independent properties. If this is the case, we must ontologically favor the intrinsic/non-relational/mind-independent properties over the properties that emerge from them. Thus it seems that the two-aspect view must claim that these neutral objects *merely appear to be spatial*, while on the deepest level they are not. This, however, is remarkably similar to Leibniz’s account of monads, which Kant vehemently argued against.¹²

The Identity Objection

The most successful objection to metaphysical two-aspect views is that they “appear to *assume* token-identity between phenomena or appearances and things in themselves” as a necessary presupposition rather than a proposition in need of proof (Schulking 2011a, 13). In order to talk about a thing’s intrinsic properties one must first establish the identity of the thing, for without establishing identity there is no ‘thing’ to possess properties, extrinsic or intrinsic. However, as Schulking points out, identity “can’t be determined beforehand, i.e., before an object for judgment has effectively been determined (by virtue of the categories, specifically those of quality)” (2011a, 13). In other words, numerical identity itself can only be established for appearances, and thus we cannot establish the numerical identity of appearances and things-in-themselves without subjecting the latter to the categories and thereby violating Kantian humility.

According to Kant, empirical objects are individuated by their spatiotemporal location.¹³ The problem is that Kant leaves us no alternative way to establish identity. If the objects we perceive were things-in-themselves, our pure understanding could individuate these objects conceptually. However Kant explains that in order to do this one will have adopted a confused transcendently realistic perspective (A263-4/B319-20).¹⁴ Because pure concepts are universal representations that apply to multiple objects it is impossible to individuate objects through these concepts alone. The extended form of a spatial grid allows one to distinguish separate locations that are qualitatively identical. Kant rejects the Leibnizian notion of identity and the associated principle of the identity of indiscernibles because “the phenomenon of incongruent counterparts, for instance a left and a right glove, shows that such a feature of space as its orientation cannot be accounted for on a purely conceptual basis” (Quarfood 2011, 156).¹⁵

Without spatiotemporal form we have no idea how objects could be individuated from one another. Indeed, it is uncertain whether there would actually be individual ‘things’-in-themselves at all. For all we know it could well be the case that multiple spatiotemporal objects could turn out to be a single non-spatiotemporal object and vice-versa. This would undermine the entire point of metaphysical two-aspect views, for the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction would not apply to the properties of individual things. If the claim of such views is simply that reality *in general* has an intrinsic non-spatiotemporal aspect, this is a far more amenable position. However, this is usually not what these views are taken to claim: they are typically taken to claim a token-identity between individual appearances and things-in-themselves (Schulking 2011a, 13).

A possible response to this is that there is some *transcendental* spatiotemporal order that individuates the intrinsic qualities of things in a manner parallel to empirical space-time. However, such an interpretation must prove that Kant can admit this parallel form of transcendental spatiotemporality.

While it has long been objected that Kant's treatment of space and time leaves neglected alternatives, establishing that Kant's metaphysical system *presupposes one of these alternatives* is far outside the realm of exegetic plausibility. As Lorne Falkenstein puts it, Kant is almost universally understood as claiming that "things in themselves do not have any properties or relations that could be legitimately termed spatiotemporal," which "is not just to say that any spatiotemporal properties or relations that things in themselves might have would be nothing *to us*, but that they would be *nothing*" (2004, 292).

Concluding Remarks

If the arguments I have presented here are successful I will have given three obstacles facing metaphysical two-aspect views. Given a proper understanding of the thing-in-itself it becomes clear that we cannot speak of the thing-in-itself either as a distinct entity or as the intrinsic/mind-independent properties of some neutral object. We cannot treat TI as a metaphysical system composed of entities with empirical and transcendental properties, because we cannot, in principle, have epistemic access to such entities. After all, what is the point of distinguishing appearances from things-in-themselves if we know them to be the same entity?

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¹ For a concise summary of these accounts see Schulting 2011a, 1-25.

² For instance, Lucy Allais states that “the traditional ‘two-world’ camp sees Kant’s appearances and his things as they are in themselves as *different kinds of entities* that are in some kind of (unknown) relation to each other, and is generally committed to understanding appearances in terms of phenomenalism, as mental or virtual entities” (2004, 657).

³ All quotes from the primary text of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited parenthetically in the standard “(A_/B_)” format. All secondary sources are cited parenthetically “(name year, page#).” For full references, see References.

⁴ It may occur to the reader that Kant provides specific, seemingly non-vacuous examples of positive noumena (e.g. God and the soul). However, these should not be taken as entities posited by TI construed as a metaphysical system. These examples are all objects of *practical* reason, whereas TI is the doctrine that results from the critical analysis of *pure* reason. As Kant puts it, “I cannot even **assume God, freedom and immortality** for the sake of the necessary practical use of my reason unless I simultaneously **deprive** speculative reason of its pretension to extravagant insights,” or in other words we must “deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**” (Bxxix-xxx).

⁵ See the follow passages: Bxxvi; A219-226/B266-274; A241-245/B300-302; and B305-6.

⁶ The reason for this is that such noumena are, by definition, non-sensible/non-spatiotemporal and thus our traditional concepts, “as mere forms of thought for our sensible intuition, do not reach these in the least” (B308). Thus they must be conceptualized through non-schematic ‘pure’ concepts, i.e. concepts that have all of their schematic (spatiotemporal) content removed (A138-140/B177-179).

⁷ As one scholar puts it, “pure concepts cannot be representations of *something* since their precise role is to account for the way by which representations relate to things in the first place” (Nitzan 2010, 186).

⁸ For instance in the preface to the second edition Kant states that the *Critique* teaches “that the object should be taken in a **two-fold meaning**, namely as appearance or as thing in itself” (Bxxvii). In this I am largely following Allison’s analysis (2004, 50-57).

⁹ Quarfood cites passages from the *Critique of Judgment*: “the supersensible real ground for nature” (CJ 409) or “substratum” of nature (CJ 410).

¹⁰ On top of all these objections, Allison himself notes that his use of the transcendental object is complicated by the fact that in the second edition of the *Critique* Kant “not only dropped all references to the transcendental object but also introduced the distinction between a positive and a negative sense of the noumenon” (2004, 63).

¹¹ As Schulting puts it, if “the thing that has extrinsic properties, spatial properties say, is the very same (numerically identical) thing that also has intrinsic properties, non-spatial properties say, then it seems that the thing in itself as such is in space, which conflicts with Kant’s official doctrine that things in themselves are not spatiotemporal” (2011a, 15).

¹² He does this in the section on the “amphiboly of the concepts of reflection” (A260-90/B316-46) as well as the second Antimony (A434-43/B462-71).

¹³ Kant states that “in the case of two drops of water one can completely abstract from all **inner** difference (of quality and quantity), and it is enough that they be intuited in different places at the same time in order for them to be held numerically different” (A263/B319 [my emphasis]). Lucy Allais acknowledges this fact when she states that “the *role* of intuition is to present us with particulars, and it does not depend on concepts to play this role” (2009, 384).

¹⁴ Kant argues extensively against Leibniz along these lines in the amphibolies (A260-90/B316-46) and second antimony (A434-43/B462-71).

¹⁵ As Allison puts it, according to Kant, “spatial relations cannot be constructed out of, or reduced to, conceptual or logical relations” (1976, 319).