



Kant and the problem of the external world

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Abstract

This paper examines Kant's doctrine of Transcendental Idealism in relation to the Problem of the External World, approaching it from the perspective of the Philosophy of Perception. The research proposes that there are convincing arguments for evaluating the Kantian doctrine under these criteria and suggests that, in doing so, it follows that Transcendental Idealism cannot be classified as an idealist stance that denies the existence of extramental objects or properties. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the scope and implications of Kant's Transcendental Idealism in the context of the philosophy of perception, thus contributing to the scholarly debate on the nature of knowledge and reality.

Keywords: *Kant, external words, transcendental idealism.*

1. Introduction to the Problem of the External World

The Predicament of the External World represents one of the most pivotal subjects of scholarly examination and intellectual contention within the annals of philosophical discourse¹, stemming from the inquiry into whether we can indeed attain secure, justified, and dependable *knowledge* concerning the existence and

¹ Heidegger, for instance, deemed it a genuine "philosophical scandal" (to paraphrase Kant) that throughout the annals of intellectual history, there persists an incessant pursuit to unearth a definitive argument capable of resolving this quandary (Hamlyn, 1988).

nature of an objective reality that lies beyond the boundaries of our perceptions and subjective experiences². The underlying disquietude encapsulated by this conundrum emerges from the apprehension that our perceptions might prove deceptive or untrustworthy, thereby potentially culminating in the formulation of erroneous beliefs concerning the veracity of reality.

There is no clarity about what was the primary formulation of what is now recognized as "the problem of the external world." Some authors affirm that its historical roots trace back to ancient Greece. It is said, for example, that it would be part of the renowned "Allegory of the Cave" from Book VII of Plato's Republic, where the division between an apparent reality (of the senses) and an authentic reality (of ideas) is proposed. However, beyond its origin, the concrete fact is that, in different epochs, we can identify philosophical arguments that attempt to demonstrate that our perceptual beliefs would not be solidly justified, just as we tend to believe from a naive perspective.

In this regard, alongside The Republic, notable instances of these arguments are present in works such as Pyrrhonian Outlines (3rd century) by Sextus Empiricus, Against the Academicians (386) by Saint Augustine, Essays (1580) by Michel de Montaigne, and notably in Meditations on First Philosophy (1641) by René Descartes; the latter being arguably the most influential in modernity. Nevertheless, the common denominator resides in the fact that these arguments introduce skeptical scenarios in which things appear perceptually akin—or even identical—to regular perception situations, yet the beliefs that would arise from these skeptical scenarios turn out to be radically false.

In contemporary times, the predicament of the external world is predominantly addressed within the domain of Philosophy of Perception, a discipline that amalgamates fundamental facets of both metaphysics and epistemology. Within this theoretical framework, it is feasible to discern two primary challenges: on one hand,

² It is noteworthy, from the italicized concepts highlighted above, that articulated in this manner, the predicament encompasses an epistemological facet as well as a metaphysical one; the former concerning our apprehension of the external world, and the latter pertaining to its ontological status.

the thought experiment of the brain in a vat (Greco, 2007; Goldberg, 2016), and on the other hand, cases of perceptual error such as illusions and hallucinations (Pereira, 2019; Lyons, 2023). These challenges pose foundational inquiries regarding the nature of our perceptions and the reliability of our senses in accessing the extramental reality.

The thought experiment of the brain in a vat stands as a contemporary reexamination of the Cartesian evil genius hypothesis—asserting its profound influence in this context—and introduces the possibility that a human brain is sustained within a receptacle, animated by a scientist, in such a manner that the brain undergoes perceptual experiences akin, or even identical, to those it would encounter if it were housed within a human body within the actual world. This scenario casts uncertainty upon the reliability of our perceptions and the existence of an external world independent of our experiences, to the extent that the brain lacks the means to discern artificially generated perceptions from those grounded in the actual world.

On the other hand, cases of perceptual error, such as illusions and hallucinations, also cast profound doubts upon the reliability of our perceptions and the existence of an external world autonomous from our experiences. Amidst instances of illusion, our perceptions are deceptive, as we misconstrue real external stimuli. Conversely, during hallucinations, we undergo perceptions devoid of any counterpart in the actual world. Both forms of perceptual fallacy compel us to scrutinize the extent to which our perceptions can be deemed trustworthy, and whether we can genuinely apprehend and access the external world through our sensory experiences. These prospects of error appear, at first glance, to challenge our conventional conception of perceptual experience. Principal theories of experience grapple with this challenge (Crane, 2021).

It is worth noting that the classification of theories of experience in response to the posed challenges may vary according to different interpretations. Nevertheless, certain theories recur in the discourse and play a pivotal role. Among them, firstly, is Skepticism, a stance asserting that we cannot possess secure knowledge or

justification to believe in the existence of an external world (Williams, 2017). Advocates of this theory contend that our experiences and perceptions are inherently susceptible to error, and we cannot dismiss the possibility of being deceived by an "Evil Genius" (as Descartes suggested), dreaming, or immersed in a simulation (as implied by the brain in a vat scenario), for instance.

Secondly, Idealism emerges, a position asserting that all knowledge of reality is grounded in perceptual phenomena or sensory experiences, which precludes affirming the existence of an external world independent of our perceptions and experiences (Foster, 2021). Thus, from this standpoint, the argument contends that the sole entities in existence are our experiences and perceptions, with the objects and events we perceive being mental constructs.

Thirdly, we encounter Direct or Naive Realism. Proponents of this position assert that our perceptions and experiences directly furnish us with reliable knowledge of an external world separate from our minds (Gerone, 2016). According to this perspective, our perceptions—at least in ordinary cases—allow us to access reality as it is, with minimal mediation or substantial construction of the experience by our minds.

Finally, within this non-exhaustive overview of theories, we encounter Critical Realism or Representationalism. Advocates of this position posit that our perceptions and experiences offer us indirect knowledge of the external world (Macpherson, 2015). According to this standpoint, our perceptions constitute mental representations of reality, and while our minds may mediate and construct our experiences, these representations can still furnish us with reliable knowledge of an independent external world.

In turn, notable historical philosophers are associated with each position in the debate over the external world: Skepticism finds influence in the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776); Idealism is embodied by the Irish thinker George Berkeley (1685-1753), renowned for his principle of "to be is to be perceived"; Direct Realism is championed by the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1676–1762), founder of the

Scottish School of Common Sense, and, more contemporarily, by the British philosopher G. E. Moore (1874-1958), who advocated for a realist stance in his works on perception; Critical Realism or Representationalism is espoused by the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), an empiricism pioneer, and more recently, by the distinguished British philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), who advocated for a representationalist approach in his theories of perception and mind³.

At this juncture, the query arises: to which category shall we associate Immanuel Kant? As we shall see in the subsequent discussion, there exist two major interpretive factions: one group situating him within the realm of Phenomenalist theories, on one hand, and another group considering that no theory truly captures his essence, given that Kant's thinking must be evaluated within the bounds of a theory of knowledge, in contrast to an evaluation hinged on establishing an ontological status of the external world, on the other. Nevertheless, both groups seem to concur that the assessment must be undertaken considering the doctrine of "transcendental idealism," henceforth prompting us to proceed with its exposition.

2. Presentation of Transcendental Idealism and Interpretive Frameworks

In the "Fourth Paralogism," Kant defines his doctrine, termed "transcendental idealism," in the following manner:

I understand by transcendental idealism of all appearances [*Erscheinungen*] the doctrine that all of them in their entirety must be regarded as mere representations and not as things in themselves [*nicht als Dinge an sich selbst ansehen*], and consequently that space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given by themselves or conditions of objects as things in themselves [*als Dinge an sich selbst*] (A369).

³ It is crucial to highlight that, in each instance, alternative interpretations exist which might situate the aforementioned proponents within theories different from those they have conventionally been affiliated with.

And later, he reiterates:

We have sufficiently demonstrated in the Transcendental Aesthetic that everything intuited in space or in time, thus all objects of a possible experience for us, are nothing but appearances, that is, mere representations which, as they are represented, as extensive beings or series of alterations, have no existence founded in themselves outside our thoughts. I term this doctrine transcendental idealism. (A491/B519).

The interpretation of these passages, along with numerous others concerning appearances, phenomena, things in themselves, and noumena, has been subject to discourse since the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason in 1781 (Stang, 2022). The disagreement is so substantial that consensus is not even reached regarding the framework from which these interpretations should be approached. Now, within this specific debate, two distinct main lines of interpretation can clearly be distinguished.

In the first interpretive strand, we encounter those who assert that transcendental idealism must be read as a strictly epistemological doctrine. As Kant appears to imply on multiple occasions, the central point of the work and transcendental idealism is to identify the conditions that make human knowledge possible and its limits⁴. According to this interpretation, transcendental idealism does not aim to establish metaphysical determinations but rather draws attention to the idea that conditions of knowledge exist and emphasizes the possibility of abstractly contemplating such conditions.

An exemplary case within this interpretive strand is that of Henry Allison (1983, 2004), who contends that transcendental idealism is a kind of "metaphilosophical therapy rather than a first-order metaphysical doctrine" (Allison, 2004, p. 398), and it corresponds to a "theory about the nature and scope of the conditions under which objects can be experienced or known by the human mind" (Allison, 1983, p. 25). In this sense, Allison underscores that Kant's most significant contribution lies in his

⁴ This position is chiefly associated with Allison (1983; 2004) and Prauss (1971; 1974). However, Dryer (1966), Walker (1978), and Nagel (1983) also align with it.

understanding that human knowledge is subject to a priori epistemic conditions, such as the principle of causality and the necessity of representing an objective world in spatial terms.

According to Allison, Kant's proposal regarding these a priori conditions introduce a new dimension into epistemology by revealing that our understanding of reality is not solely based on empirical experience but also on cognitive structures that guide and constrain our perception. These structures, including fundamental principles like causality and spatiality, shape the way we interpret and comprehend the world around us, thus establishing the boundaries of our knowledge and the possibilities of epistemic access to reality.

In this context, the distinction between appearances (*Erscheinungen*) and things in themselves (*Dinge an sich*) would be a methodological distinction. Transcendental idealism, in this sense, would be a procedural "standpoint" that specifically pertains to ways of considering objects, and not to "modes of being" (Allais, 2015, p. 77). Specifically, it would entail considering objects in terms of various epistemic conditions, on one hand, and apart from such conditions, on the other. En este contexto, la distinción entre apariencias (*Erscheinungen*) y las cosas en sí (*Dinge an sich*) sería una distinción metodológica. En este sentido, el idealismo trascendental sería un "punto de vista" procedimental que refiere específicamente a las formas de considerar objetos, y no a las "formas de ser" (Allais, 2015, p. 77). Específicamente, implicaría considerar objetos en términos de diversas condiciones epistémicas, por una parte, y aparte de tales condiciones, por otra.

Contrary to the previously mentioned interpretive stance, we encounter those who contend that transcendental idealism must be construed as a doctrine with a pronounced metaphysical component⁵. According to this perspective, Kant seems to imply on various occasions that a central consequence of his work, and transcendental

⁵ This position is primarily associated with P. F. Strawson (1966), but also with Turbayne (1955), Bennett (1966: 23, 126), Wilkerson (1976: 180-4), Guyer (1987), and Van Cleve (1999).

idealism, is the ascription of a novel ontological status to the empirical objects of our experience.

In line with this exegetical standpoint, transcendental idealism establishes clear metaphysical determinations, accentuating that the spatiotemporal objects of experience—objects that we naively presume as independent from our experience—are indeed nothing more than appearances and, therefore, mental representations. In other words, one of the implications of transcendental idealism, as perceived through this approach, would be that the nature of spatiotemporal objects is, in a relevant sense, mental.

A notable exponent of this interpretive line is P. F. Strawson (1966), who contends that transcendental idealism is best understood as a metaphysical thesis concerning the nature and objects of experience. According to Strawson, Kant's Transcendental Idealism asserts that our experience of objects is always structured by our cognitive faculties, such as space, time, and the categories of understanding. These faculties impose a necessary structure upon the objects of our experience, causing them to appear "as they appear" to us.

However, this does not imply that objects in themselves, as they exist independently of our experience, possess the same structure. In other words, Strawson's interpretation underscores the distinction between how objects appear to us and how they exist in themselves⁶, thus it is strongly associated with the "two worlds" interpretation⁷.

In this context, the distinction between appearances (*Erscheinungen*) and things in themselves (*Dinge an sich*) undeniably assumes a metaphysical character. The reason for this is that it centers upon scrutinizing the ontological status of certain entities based on the connection they establish with our perceptual and cognitive

⁶ And in direct relation to the problem of the external world, Strawson argues that the physical world "only seems to exist, [that] in reality it is nothing apart from our perceptions" (Strawson 1966, p. 238). See also p. 240 and 242-6.

⁷ Although the term may be somewhat unfortunate, considering that the concept of "world" has a very specific definition in Kantian theory (Stang, 2022).

faculties. This, in turn, implies a profound contemplation of the nature and properties of these elements in relation to our understanding of reality.

Now then, numerous uncertainties and queries have arisen over time due to this debate between different interpretive lines. Nevertheless, I believe it is feasible to identify three fundamental and salient issues within the framework of this discourse, which could facilitate a better comprehension of the involved perspectives:

1. What is the relationship between appearances and mental representations?
2. What can we comprehend about the nature of things in themselves in Kant's philosophy?
3. What is the nature of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves according to Kant, and how can this distinction be categorized?

In the subsequent discourse, I shall present an intermediary position amidst the two interpretive strands concerning the Problem of the External World within the context of the Philosophy of Perception. From this standpoint, it would be feasible to address each of the questions that the debate has yielded.

3. Transcendental Idealism in the Philosophy of Perception

As I understand the passages cited at the beginning of the preceding section, transcendental idealism is a doctrine—or a set of doctrines—that arises from the relation of three premises from which various conclusions can be derived depending on the emphasis given to each premise and the definition of the concepts involved. In summary, the three premises proceed as follows:

1. A distinction must be made between things dependent on our perceptual experience (*Erscheinungen*) and things independent of our perceptual experience (*Dinge an sich*).

2. Within the set of things dependent on our perceptual experience (*Erscheinungen*), there are the spatiotemporal objects that we know.
3. Within the set of things independent of our perceptual experience (*Dinge an sich*), we cannot know anything.

It is evident that I have condensed Transcendental Idealism based on three premises linked to our perceptual experience. Although this might seem somewhat ad hoc, given its relationship with the Problem of the External World previously discussed, I maintain that there are solid and convincing grounds for proceeding in this manner, especially if we consider some passages from the Critique of Pure Reason in which Kant is clearly contrasting his theory with others. A promising quote for these purposes is as follows:

To this [transcendental] idealism is opposed transcendental realism, which regards space and time as something given in themselves (independent of our sensibility). Transcendental realism represents, therefore, external appearances (if their reality is admitted) as things in themselves [*Dinge an sich selbst*], which would exist independently of us and of our sensibility and, consequently, would also be outside us according to the pure concepts of the understanding. (A369)

Kant refers to Transcendental Realism as a "common prejudice" (A740/B768) and characterizes it as a "widespread but mistaken assumption" (A536/B564)⁸ that appearances have an existence independent of our experience. Now, if we recall that in the earlier section we characterized Direct or Naive Realism as the position that our perceptions and experiences provide us with direct and reliable knowledge of an external world independent of our minds, and that according to this perspective, our perceptions—at least in ordinary cases—allow us to access reality as it is, without our minds mediating or constructing the experience significantly, then the connection with Kant's characterization of Transcendental Realism becomes quite apparent.

⁸ See also (A491/B519).

An element that I find relevant to emphasize up to this point is that, just as in the context of the Philosophy of Perception in relation to the Problem of the External World, Kant establishes the parameter for evaluating the ontological status of entities in terms of perceptual dependence or independence. In this case, the transcendental realist would commit the error of attributing perceptual independence not only to space and time but also to spatiotemporal appearances. This parameter is one that continues to be used today to assess perceptual theories and is attributed to any doctrine that defends realism:

There are two general aspects of realism, illustrated by a look at realism about the everyday world of macroscopic objects and properties. First, there is a claim about existence. Tables, rocks, the moon (...) all exist (...). The second aspect of realism about everyday macroscopic objects and their properties is their independence. The fact that the moon exists and is spherical is independent of anything anyone says or thinks about the matter. (Miller 2002, p. 1)

Another important element to consider is that, when contrasting his doctrine with a theory that implies ontological consequences about the world independent of our experiences—such as in the case of Transcendental Realism—Kant validates, to a certain extent, a metaphysical common ground for evaluating his own theory. In other words, having the possibility to disengage from a proper metaphysical discussion—as epistemological readings suggest—Kant explicitly places his theory within a metaphysical debate. This is why we have good reasons to argue that Transcendental Idealism must possess, at least partially, a metaphysical foundation⁹.

This seems to indicate that, in the debate between the interpretive strands presented in the previous section, the metaphysical perspective prevails. However, it is important to proceed with caution, as the interpretation

⁹ To engage in debate, a common ground is necessary. In this case, that common ground is a metaphysical one (or one with metaphysical implications). By placing his doctrine within a metaphysical debate, Kant implicitly validates these parameters for assessing his own doctrine.

under the metaphysical line of Transcendental Idealism is often associated with an "idealistic" classification—in the metaphysical sense of the Philosophy of Perception—of the doctrine itself. Numerous confusions and misunderstandings, as we will see below, arise in this regard.

After contrasting his doctrine with Transcendental Realism, Kant proceeds to contrast his doctrine with what he terms as "Empirical Idealism." Let us consider the following paragraph:

An injustice would also have done us if we were attributed the much-maligned empirical idealism, which, although it supposes the reality of space, denies the existence of extended beings in it, or at least finds this existence doubtful, and so, in this respect, admits of no satisfactorily demonstrable distinction between dreaming and truth. As regards the appearances of the internal sense in time, it finds no difficulty in them as real things; it even maintains that this inner experience, and only this, furnishes sufficient proof of the real existence of its object (in itself), together with all this temporal determination. (A491/B519).

Empirical Idealism, according to the description provided by Kant, posits that all that we immediately know (without inference) is the existence of our own minds and our temporally organized mental states, while the existence of objects "external" to us in space can only be inferred. Since the inference from a known effect to an unknown cause is always uncertain, the empirical idealist concludes that we cannot be certain about the existence of objects outside of us in space.

More specifically, Kant distinguishes two variants of idealism: Dogmatic Idealism, which asserts that objects in space do not exist, and Problematic Idealism, which holds that objects in space might exist, but we cannot know if they truly do (see A377). In contrast to these idealisms, Kant maintains that Transcendental Idealism is a form of empirical realism because it implies that we have immediate (non-inferential) and certain knowledge of the existence of objects in space solely through self-awareness (A370–1).

Now, considering that in the earlier part, we characterized Idealism as the position that holds all knowledge of reality is grounded in perceptual phenomena or sensory experiences, thereby precluding the affirmation of an external world independent of our perceptions and experiences, and that from this perspective, it is argued that only our experiences and perceptions exist, and the objects and events we perceive are actually mental constructions, then the connection between what Kant labels as "empirical idealism" and a theory proper to the Philosophy of Perception—the idealist one—becomes evident. However, this is a mistake.

Unlike the opposition between Transcendental Idealism and Transcendental Realism, the parameter for evaluating the ontological status of entities in the opposition between Transcendental Idealism and Empirical Idealism is NOT in terms of perceptual dependence and independence. It is essential and pertinent to note that, for Kant, "objects in space" are NOT equivalent to objects independent of our experience (A373). As explained in the Transcendental Aesthetic, space is a pure form of external sensibility.

Therefore, the debate with Empirical Idealism—both in its dogmatic and problematic variants—always centers on the spatiotemporal objects dependent on our experience. Within this context, Kant maintains that the "objective" reality of these objects would be secured through self-awareness. The argument can be found in the classic passage known as the "Refutation of Idealism" (B274–B279)¹⁰. It is not relevant here to assess the strength of the argument itself. What is relevant, on the contrary, is to consider that this is a debate within the context of things and properties dependent on our experience.

This point is crucial. Regarding spatiotemporal objects, Kant is clearly an idealist. To reiterate the point, consider the following passage:

¹⁰ In synthesis, the argument posits that consciousness of the temporal relations of my internal states necessitates that these internal states constitute appropriately unified experiences. Consequently, self-awareness requires the existence of spatially external objects in space, beyond myself.

Why do we need a doctrine of the soul based solely on pure rational principles? No doubt mainly to protect our thinking self from the danger of materialism. But this is achieved through the rational concept of our thinking self that we have given. For according to it, there is so little fear that if matter were removed, all thinking and even the existence of thinking beings would be abolished, that on the contrary, it clearly shows that if I remove the thinking subject, all the bodily world would have to disappear as well, since the latter is nothing more than the appearance in sensibility of our subject and a mode of its representations. (A383; cf. A374n, A490-1/B518-9, A520/B492-A521/B493, A494/B522)¹¹

Kant tells us that by removing the subject, the corporeal world is also eliminated. This reasoning bears a striking resemblance to the argument used by Galileo Galilei—more than a century before the Critique of Pure Reason—in relation to qualities that depend on our existence to manifest:

Thus, from the standpoint of the subject in which they seem to reside, [these things] are mere empty names, but they only reside in the sensible body (...) [I]f the animal were removed, then all these qualities are (...) annihilated. (Galileo 2008, p. 185)

The counterfactual reasoning Galileo uses in imagining a world without perceiving subjects and concluding that in such a scenario, secondary qualities¹² would also cease to exist is used to define the status of certain properties that we naively attribute to objects, but which actually belong to our perception of them, such as odor, texture, color, and taste, among others. By extension, we can attribute the same ontological status to spatiotemporal objects in the Critique of Pure Reason.

In this regard, Kant's doctrine differs from Empirical Idealism only insofar as it establishes both the existence and the possibility of knowledge of spatiotemporal objects through the argument presented in the "Refutation of Idealism," not through

¹¹ Italics are mine

¹² In Locke's language.

the notion of dependence. In other words, the dispute between Transcendental Idealism and Empirical Idealism is a dispute confined within idealism, where the relevant aspect is to consider the status of existence and "knowability" of spatiotemporal objects¹³.

The big question is: Does this mean that Kant is an idealist also within the context of the Philosophy of Perception, in relation to the Problem of the External World? And the big answer is No.

The Problem of the External World is one in which the ontological status of entities is evaluated in terms of perceptual dependence and independence. While Kant being an idealist with respect to spatiotemporal objects is confusing, we are now able to understand that this does not imply that he is an idealist with respect to objects independent of our perception, insofar as spatiotemporal objects are not independent of our perception according to the very doctrine of Transcendental Idealism (A375).

But then, what is the status of objects independent of our perception according to Kant's doctrine?

5. Matter in Itself

Many philosophical interpretation problems arise from inadequate choices of names or qualifiers for certain concepts. Regarding the metaphysical idealist readings "à la Berkeley" of his doctrine that emerged with the first edition, in the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant cautioned in a footnote that the term "Transcendental Idealism" might have been unfortunate, and that "Critical Idealism" would have been better (A491/519). I believe the same could be said of the concept of the "thing in itself."

¹³ Where the relevant for Kant is to discard the possibility of thinking in spatiotemporal objects as "mere illusions" (B70-1).

The concept of a "thing" suggests considering a particular "something" that might somehow correspond to the perceived phenomenon. For those committed to a metaphysical interpretation, much of the debate has revolved around determining whether there is a correspondence between two different entities, or whether it involves a correspondence between two aspects of the same entity (Allais, 2015, p. 59)¹⁴.

I find both the interpretation of "two entities" and the interpretation of "two aspects" to be mistaken, arising from a flawed debate. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of a "thing" prompts thoughts of two elements—either two types of objects or two types of aspects. However, in my opinion, Kant's doctrine would have gained much clarity and consistency if instead of discussing the "thing in itself," Kant had spoken of "amorphous matter independent of experience" or, in more subtle terms, "matter in itself."

When I refer to "matter in itself," let me make it clear that I'm not referring to any specific object or thing; rather, I mean the material from which phenomena are formulated in experience. Kant indicates that his idealism is solely formal: the form of objects is due to our minds, not their material (Ak. 11, p.395)¹⁵. Although the distinction between form and matter in Kant's philosophy is complex, his idea seems to be that the material of experience—the sensory content organized perceptually and conceptually by space, time, and categories—does not belong to mental entities; rather, it exists beyond experience.

This "matter in itself"—misleadingly termed the "thing in itself"—would function as a "non-sensible cause" of representations. It will be argued that Kant explicitly denies such a notion; particularly, in the following passage: "[T]he non-sensible cause of these representations is entirely unknown to us, and therefore we

¹⁴ Allis adds a third possibility, corresponding to the epistemological interpretation: "A third possibility is that which is yield by those who negate that Kant has a compromise with things in themselves because those negate transcendental idealism as a metaphysical posture. Those consider that the notion of things in themselves is simply a way of thinking about spatiotemporal things of our knowledge" (Allais, 2015, p 59).

¹⁵ My italics. Also, Kant refers about his stands as "formal" idealism in the Prolegomena (Ak 4, p. 337)

cannot intuit it as an object, since such an object would not be represented in space or time (mere conditions of our sensible representation) without which no intuition can be thought" (A494).

However, an important clarification is needed here. While it's true that both our knowledge and the applicability of the category "cause" are limited to representational entities dependent on experience—as Kant asserts on numerous occasions—this doesn't prevent us from coherently considering that things in themselves could be subject to categories. Kant never logically denied the possibility of attributing categorical determinations to things in themselves. In fact, his theory of freedom requires ascribing causal capacities to rational agents as things in themselves. As Desmond Hogan contends (I quote at length):

In a summary, Kant writes: "Here, in a few words, is the key: freedom signifies the relationship of an action as appearance, on the one hand, with the causes in appearance, and on the other hand, with an intelligible power of the same [subjects], through which they themselves are the cause of appearances, and with respect to [whose intelligible power] empirical conditions are not determinative" (R 5640; A 544/B 572, A 553/B 581). Although the noumenal solution to the antinomy of freedom-determinism doesn't require a one-to-one relationship between empirical objects and underlying things in themselves (Ak. 8:209-10), it does presuppose that agents existing on the empirical level are distinct on the noumenal level. It is noteworthy that Kant's proposition repeatedly refers to a causal dependence of phenomena on noumena, and the causality in question in these passages is explicitly non-empirical (Hogan 2009, p. 523).

While we cannot "know" the unknown cause of our spatiotemporal representations, it is coherent to postulate some intelligible power that serves as "matter in itself" or "amorphous matter" that affects us. Regarding this affectation, Kant maintains, for instance, that "whatever things in themselves may be (apart from the representations through which they affect us) is something completely beyond

our sphere of knowledge" (A190/B235)¹⁶. Much attention has been given to the cognitive restriction in this passage, but less to the concept of "affectation" at play, which clearly distinguishes itself from spatiotemporal "sensible affectation."

In the sense I intend to convey with "matter in itself," we can find quite suggestive references. For example, in one of Kant's letters (responding to Eberhard), he writes: "[the Critique] postulates this foundation of the material of sensory representations not once more in things, as objects of the senses, but in something supersensible, which underlies these latter, and about which we cannot have cognition" (Ak. 8, p. 205).

Furthermore, in contrast to those who attribute a metaphysical Idealism to him, Kant asserts: "I speak of ideality with respect to the form of representation, whereas they interpret it as ideality with respect to the matter, that is, ideality of the object and its existence" (Discovery, Ak. 11, p. 395).

Hence, Kant can affirm that only the form of experience depends on the mind, not its matter; the matter of experience depends on an external source to the mind, the matter. This strategy can be better understood as a reasoning by the best explanation: since we do not generate "the matter" from which we perceive the world, a supersensible foundation is inferred.

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¹⁶ Italics made by myself.

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