**Kant’s supposed realism about things-in-themselves**

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**Introduction: Metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism**

After more than two hundred years of discussion and interpretation, Kant’s distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself is still attractive for a considerable number of scholars. Many feel attracted by the metaphysical options this distinction seems to offer, while others are fundamentally dissatisfied with Kant because of the metaphysical implications his idealism allegedly has. In current scholarship metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism are predominant, though. The history of metaphysical readings of Kant’s distinction between appearance and thing in itself is long and diverse. To date it has seen four major waves: The *first* wave emerged early after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* during the 1780ies and can be associated with, among many others, Kant critics like Johann Georg Heinrich Feder and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Feder in his *Ueber Raum und Caussalitaet. Zur Pruefung der Kantischen Philosophie* (1787) as well as Jacobi in his famous *David Hume über den Glauben* (1787) claimed that Kant’s things-in-themselves are spatial objects that although they underlie or cause appearances cannot be cognized. On their reading things-in-themselves form the metaphysical backyard of appearances and as cognition-transcendent objects reveal transcendental idealism ultimately as a sophisticated version of skepticism. It is because of its inherent metaphysics and subsequent skepticism that transcendental idealism must be dismissed, they argue.

The *second* wave of metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism can be traced back to the German idealists (and Schopenhauer), in particular to Hegel’s ontological interpretation(s) of the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself. Although Hegel sides Kant’s critique of *metaphysica specialis and generalis*, he portrays, especially in the doctrine of essence of the *Science of Logic*, the distinction between appearance and thing-in-themselves as a metaphysical grounding relation between an appearing world and a world in itself. Hegel discards this kind of dualism as a natural consequence of Kant’s misguided epistemic subjectivism.

The *third* wave of metaphysical interpretations emerged already by the end of the 19th century but came to full force only in the 1920ies. After the so-called ‘decline’ of German Idealism the vast majority of philosophers in the second half of the 19th century has been opposed to metaphysics for almost ideological reasons. This is particularly true of Neo-Kantianism. As a reaction to the dominating anti-metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism in Neo-Kantianism, Heimsoeth and Wundt, in 1924, forcefully reintroduced the metaphysical view. Heimsoeth’s *Persönlichkeitsbewusstsein und Ding an sich in der Kantischen Philosophie*[[1]](#footnote-1)and Wundt’s *Kant als Metaphysiker[[2]](#footnote-2)* turned the tables and contributed significantly to the end of Neo-Kantianism. Their plea for a metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism results from a preceding general debate over Kant’s relation to metaphysics. Shortly before the turn of the century, Friedrich Paulsen for instance writes: “Was [Kant] aufbauen will, ist zweierlei: 1) eine positive Erkenntnistheorie, nämlich eine rationalistische Theorie der Wissenschaften; 2) eine positive Metaphysik, nämlich eine idealistische Weltanschauung.“[[3]](#footnote-3) Paulsen’s metaphysical reappraisal of transcendental idealism is directed against Erdmann’s epistemological reading in his influential *Kant’s Kritizismus* who denies any such ambitions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Obviously, the debate over metaphysical readings didn’t come to an end after Heimsoeth’s and Wundt’s publications of 1924. Of course, after World War II until about the 1980ies metaphysical readings of transcendental of transcendental idealism haven’t been absent in Kant scholarship. They have, however, not initiated a broad discussion specifically about the metaphysical implications of the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself like in our days.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The *fourth* wave of metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism can be witnessed in contemporary Kant scholarship. Over the last two decades or so, maybe beginning with Rae Langton’s *Kantian Humility* (1998), there is rising interest in strategies to reinterpret transcendental idealism in ways that on the one hand allow for metaphysical grounding of appearances while on the other solving a number of well-known problems inherent in older metaphysical readings of Kant mentioned above. The aim of this paper is to show that, although one might find them promising, contemporary metaphysical readings of Kant do not a better job than their historical predecessors. In what follows, I take the classical controversy between the proponents of the so-called ‘one world’- and ‘two worlds’-interpretations as a starting-point, and then turn to a particular version of contemporary metaphysical readings of the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself in more detail. My claim is that metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism are indefensible because they are unable to solve the problem of cognition transcendence and non-spatiality of things-in-themselves.

Before I start, one brief remark on the meaning of ‘metaphysical reading’. The technical term ‘ontological’ or ‘metaphysical reading’ has been introduced by Gottfried Martin in the late 1950ies and again by Gerhard Funke in the 1970ies.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whereas for both of them this term has a very broad meaning and applies to a wide range of metaphysical topics in Kant such as *soul*, *world*, *God* and *ontology* in general, I use ‘metaphysical reading’ as an umbrella term for those kinds of readings that make existential claims with respect to things-in-themselves, or to put it differently, I term a reading of transcendental idealism ‘metaphysical’ if it implies realism about things-in-themselves.

**1. The issue with metaphysical readings**

To start with, the controversy over metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism can be structured along the lines of the classical ‘one world’- and ‘two worlds’-reading. On the ‘two worlds’ interpretation’ of transcendental idealism, thing-in-themselves are indispensable because they somehow ground, cause or bring about appearances. The ‘two-worlder’ conceives of appearance and thing-in-itself as numerically distinct objects that occupy two different worlds, usually conceived as the sensible and the intelligible world. Many find this view rather hard to accept since it makes unprovable metaphysical claims about causally affecting *noumena* in the intellig1ible world that somehow *effect* appearances in the sensible world. In particular, it merely speculates about what the causal transfer between the two worlds might look like. Kant himself is very clear about the metaphysical ‘two worlds’-reading: “The division of objects into *phaenomena* and *noumena*, and of the world into a world of sense and a world of understanding, can […] not be permitted at all” (KrV, A 255/B 311).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Given the difficulties of causally effective things-in-themselves, the ‘one world’-interpretation seems to be more convincing. On the ‘one world’-reading the terms ‘appearance’ and ‘thing-in-itself’ refer to the same object such that the metaphysical speculation about a second world is dispensable. The ‘one world’-interpretation must, however, offer a plausible account of how to conceive of the *same* (empirical) object as appearance and thing-in-self all at once. Like the ‘two worlds’-interpretation the ‘one word’-interpretation takes many forms. Since the 1970ies the most debated one is the ‘two aspects’-view. It comes in two main versions, the *epistemic* (*methodological*)and the *ontological* (*metaphysical*) one. The epistemic ‘two aspects’-view considers the same empirical object as appearance *and* as thing-in-itself. Considering an object as thing-in-itself means to consider it independently of the transcendental conditions of cognition but to not make existence claims about unknowable things-in-themselves, i.e., it does not violate cognitive restriction. Proponents of the epistemic ‘two aspects’-view are empirical realists, i.e., realists about spatio-temporal objects, i.e., appearances.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Proponents of the ontological or metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view dismiss both, the ‘two worlds-’ and the epistemic ‘two aspects’-interpretation. On their reading, objects have knowable *phenomenal* aspects and unknowable *noumenal* or in-itself-aspects. *Phenomenal* aspects make an object an appearance, *noumenal* aspects make the same object a thing-in-itself. Since appearances exist, and since they can only exist if they are grounded through things-in-themselves, things-in-themselves must exist, too. The problem here, too, is that because of cognitive restriction, we cannot know anything about things-in-themselves and can therefore only presume that they exist. The advocate of the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view, however, defends both, realism with respect to appearances *and* things-in-themselves.

**2. Realism about things-in-themselves**

On the face of it, Kant seems to leave three principal options with respect to existence of appearances and things-in-themselves: either appearances or things-in-themselves exits, or both exist.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| *existence* | appearance | thing-in-itself |
| (i) empirical realism  | *yes* | *no* |
| (ii) transcendental realism | *no* | *yes* |
| (iii)empirical realism *and* transcendental realism | *yes* | *yes* |

According to empirical realism (i), appearances exist but things-in themselves do not exist, they are rather objects of thought (*noumena*). In transcendental realism (ii) things-in-themselves exist and appearances are nothing over and above mental representations of things-in-themselves.[[9]](#footnote-9) The third option (iii) is special in that it holds empirical realism with respect to appearances *and* transcendental realism with respect to things-in-themselves. It is this option that the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view argues for. Lucy Allais defends it in her *Manifest Reality* (2015) in order to solve some of the prevailing problems often associated with metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism. On her reading, transcendental idealists make “substantial metaphysical commitments: to the mind-dependence of things as they appear to us, and to the existence of an aspect of reality that grounds the appearances of things, and which we cannot cognize.”[[10]](#footnote-10) What is *manifest* is the appearance-aspect, and what is non-*manifest* is the in-itself-aspect of the same object in the same one world. Allais claims that unlike the ‘two-worlders’ she is not simply presupposing the existence of the thing-in-itself. She agrees that we cannot have cognitive access to things-in-themselves. However, they must exist because “it is a conceptual truth that where there is something that appears in a certain way to us there is something that has a way it is in itself”.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Allais, moving from the aspect or “way” a thing appears to the aspect or “way it is in itself”, does not mean to presuppose a second reality or object. The “appearance”-“way” and the “in itself”-“way” are rather about the same reality or object. For this reason, Allais believes to do justice to Kant’s supposedly existential claim about things-in-themselves while not violating cognitive restriction such that Kant would count as a realist about appearances *and* things-in-themselves. The question then is whether he is at the same time an empirical realist *and* a transcendental realist, and whether empirical and transcendental realism can coexist in the same theory.

Allais’ book is very instructive and conscientious. There is, however, a number of difficulties that make the metaphysical “two aspects-interpretation” vulnerable[[12]](#footnote-12): The *first* difficulty is that if things-in-themselves are the grounds of appearances then, since they are cognition-transcendent, we cannot know anything about their *grounding*. In particular, we cannot be sure whether the appearance-aspect really is what the in-itself-aspect grounds. For even if cognition-transcendent things-in-themselves exist, it does not follow from their alleged existence as a conceptual truth about them that they ground appearances in any specific way. Therefore, Allais must leave it open why a thing appears in this rather than in another way, or whether the in-itself-aspect is not deceiving us by grounding ‘false’ appearances. For instance, how can I be sure that a *red*-appearance of an object is in fact caused by a *red-in-itself*-aspect attributed to a cognition-transcendent object? The metaphysical ‘two aspects’-interpretation has rather skeptical consequences that are similar to those that Kant finds in transcendental realism. For if things-in-themselves have causal effects on our cognitive capacities and if we cannot know things-in-themselves, then we cannot rule out the skeptical possibility of being fundamentally deceived in our cognitive claims. And this is exactly what the skeptical hypothesis wants us to believe.

The *second* difficulty is that the proponent of the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-interpretation must know more about things-in-themselves than she pretends to. She not only knows that things-in-themselves exist but she must also have objective cognition about their causal grounding and by implication she must also know that in-itself-aspects are properties that have powers to do something, e.g., connecting up with other properties and so on and so forth. This clearly is in conflict with the ignorance claim about in-itself-aspects.

The *third* difficulty concerns the question of what the appearance- and in-itself-aspects are aspects of. Allais distinguishes “the way things appear in perceptual experience and the way they are apart from this”, i.e., in themselves.[[13]](#footnote-13) By implication, the “things” the appearance- and in-itself-aspects belong to, are different from the aspects themselves. What are those “things” if only their manifest aspects can be known and if they are also different from the in-itself-aspects? If, as Allais suggests, the in-itself-aspects ground the manifest aspects, it is not the “things” that *do* the grounding. Are “things” then to be conceived as underlying substances? If so, are they unspecified material entities? How does the dualist picture of manifest qualities and in-itself-aspects fit together with the third dimension of, as Allais says, “things, understood neutrally”[[14]](#footnote-14)?

The *fourth* difficulty is that if the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view would be true then things-in-themselves would need to be in space. For if they were not, we could neither attribute to them existence nor *grounding* since, according to this view, there is only one world and if things-in-themselves exist they must be somewhere, i.e., in space. But according to Kant, things-in-themselves are not spatial: “space comprehends all things that may appear to us externally, but not all things in themselves”. (KrV, A 27/B 43)[[15]](#footnote-15) That things-in-themselves are not in space is key for showing why Kant is not a realist about things-in-themselves, nor about appearances *and* things-in-themselves at the same time, but that he exclusively advocates realism about appearances, i.e., empirical realism. True existential judgments about external objects imply, for Kant, that these objects exist in space. Everything that exists in space is cognizable, that is we must, in principle, be able to identify the properties actually or potentially pertaining to these objects. This is evidently in conflict with Allais’ view that things-in-themselves are spatial but not cognizable.

But maybe things-in-themselves are special in that they exist, although, not as empirical things in space. Kant is in fact considering this possibility which he attributes to Leibniz who conceives of things-in-themselves as merely intelligible things (*intelligibilia*). Kant accepts Leibniz’ position “that relational concepts absolutely presuppose given things and are not possible without these.” (KrV, A 284/B 340) For Leibniz there are then inner determinations that *ground* outer (spatial) relations of things. But this is only (conceptually) true of *intelligible* things or relations because as human cognizers we obviously cannot conceive of relations without there being something that is related (e.g. Leibnizian monads). This relation: *the inner grounding the outer*, i.e., non-spatial things-in-themselves (*noumena*) grounding spatial relations, however, does not hold true with respect to the space we know, i.e., space as form of sensible intuition. For we represent space as an intuitional system of relations. As a represented given relational *whole*, i.e., intuiton, space precedes the spatial things and is therefore “a necessary condition of all the relations within which objects can be intuited as outside us” (KrV, A 27/B 43). The relations among spatial objects we can possibly cognize are therefore fundamentally different from the relations that obtain among things-in-themselves or *noumena*. Consequently, unlike Allais claims, if there are things-in-themselves they cannot be in space but must be outside space.[[16]](#footnote-16)

As it looks, the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view cannot be upheld for things-in-themselves are not in space. Allais, however, seems to offer a way out here in order to save her interpretation. She claims that the notions “things-in-themselves” and “*noumena*” do not have the same referent and that Kant dismisses what she calls “noumenalism”, the idea that things-in-themselves are non-spatio-temporal, non-sensible objects, i.e., intelligible things.[[17]](#footnote-17) This claim is hard to defend, though, since Kantian things-in-themselves are *noumena*. Kant unmistakably says that the “world of sense” does not contain “things-in-themselves” (KrV, A 563/B 591). Thus, things-in-themselves are non-sensible objects, i.e., *noumena* or pure objects of thought. Kant states at numerous places that “our understanding” calls “things in themselves (not considered as appearances) *noumena*” (KrV, A 256/B 312): “The concept of a *noumenon*, i.e., of a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as a thing in itself (solely through a pure understanding)” (KrV, A 254/B 310, cf. A 258f/B 314f, B 307). As a consequence, things-in-themselves are *noumena* and if they exist, they would not be spatial because they are pure objects of thought, that is: *noumena*. For those reasons, the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view cannot be defended as a reading of Kant’s transcendental idealism.

**Conclusion**

As I have tried to show in particular with respect to the metaphysical ‘two aspects’-view, metaphysical readings of transcendental idealism fail because they are unable to conclusively demonstrate that and how knowledge about cognition transcendent objects, i.e., things-in-themselves, is possible and that things-in-themselves are spatial objects. It can, of course, not be doubted that that the textual evidence for Kant’s distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is uncontroversial since there are places in the critical oeuvre where Kant seems to even motivate metaphysical readings of his theory. But it is beyond doubt that Kant advocates empirical realism and dismisses transcendental realism, i.e., the view that things-in-themselves are cognition transcendent objects that exist in space outside us. That Kant, as the metaphysical ‘two aspect’-view insinuates, endorses the view that appearances exits and that things-in-themselves, too, exist, is incompatible with transcendental idealism and as such unintelligible. For if appearances and things-in-themselves are distinct, as Kant claims, and if only appearances exist and can be cognized, it is not possible to argue that things-in-themselves exist, may they be cognizable or not. This is why Kant holds realism about appearances and dismisses realism about things-in-themselves.

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1. H. Heimsoeth 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Wundt 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F. Paulsen 1899, 120. Cf. C. Baertschi 2004, 8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. C. Baertschi 2004, 23-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this context, Prauss’ and Allision’s (see below) accounts of transcendental idealism and the subsequent discussion of their publication are significant contributions but did not prompt metaphysical readings. This also applies to Putnam’s Kantian appreciation of internal realism during the 1980ies. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. C. Baertschi 2004, 11-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are from Kant 1998.  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. G. Prauss 1974, and H.E. Allison 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kant portrays the transcendental realist as empirical idealist who does not deny mental representations but cannot prove the existence of their external causes, i.e., things-in-themselves. Cf. KrV, A 369-372. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 7. Allais beliefs that Kant is committed “to the existence of an aspect of reality that we cannot know” (Allais 2015, 11, 15, 221, see 59-76). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the following cf. in more detail D. Heidemann 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also KrV, A 563/B 591: “The world of sense contains nothing but appearances, […] and […] here we never have to do with things in themselves as our objects”, and KrV,A 490/B 518: “everything intuited in space or in time, hence all objects of an experience possible for us, are nothing but appearances”. Cf. KrV, A 26/B 42, A 276f/B 332f. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 231-258. For a helpful reconstruction of Kant’s argument see J. Buroker 1981, chap. 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. L. Allais 2015, 11, 15, 59-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)