

# Kantian Appearances as Qua Objects

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The ‘Kantian fallacy’:

**P** We only know things if they affect us.

**C** We only know things as they affect us.

Strawson (1966: 250) calls the following “a fundamental and unargued complex premise of the *Critique*”:

“Knowledge through perception of things existing independently of perception, as they are in themselves, is impossible. For the only perceptions which could yield us any knowledge at all of such things must be the outcome of our being affected by those things; and for this reason such knowledge can be knowledge only of those things as they appear – of the appearances of those things – and not of those things as they really are or are in themselves.”

The restriction of our knowledge expressed in **C**, Kant says time and again, is to things-as-they-affect-us, to appearances. Is this an illicit reification? Prichard (1909: 73–74) thinks so:

“In stating the fact of perception [Kant] substitutes for the assertion that things appear so and so to us the assertion that things produce appearances in us. In this way, instead of an assertion which relates to the thing and states what it is not but only appears, he obtains an assertion which introduces a second reality distinct from the thing, viz. an appearance or phenomenon, and thereby he gains something other than the thing to which space can be attached as a real predicate.”<sup>1</sup>

Nick Stang says that all interpretations of transcendental idealism must take it to licence the inference from (i) to (ii):

- (i) it is really possible to think a given object under the categories;
- (ii) it is really possible that the object falls under these categories.

He claims:

“The reason this entailment holds is that the objects of experience are appearances not things in themselves”.  
(Stang 2016: 268)

Similarly, Allais (2015: 299) says:

“Idealism enables him [Kant] to make this further move [to establish not only the conditional claim that synthetic a priori principles are true of the objects we can cognize, but that they are true of spatio-temporal objects] because it enables us to convert conditional claims about what we need for cognition into claims about spatio-temporal objects. ”

Two parts of one core thesis:

**appearances** can be known

**things in themselves** cannot be cognised (nor, a fortiori, known), but only be thought

Three main families of theories can thus be distinguished in terms of which contrast they draw the distinction:

**methodological** considering things insofar as they are subject to conditions of human sensibility vs. considering things insofar as they are independent of these conditions;

**phenomenalist** mental vs. non-mental; only mental things can be known;

1. Cf. also: “The former [position] allows that reality is presented to us in perception, but insists that its nature becomes distorted in the process. The latter denies that reality is presented to us at all and substitutes for it another object, viz. ‘appearances’. Further these positions are not always distinguished. Kant, for instance, states his view sometimes in the form ‘we only know things as they appear to us’, sometimes in the form ‘we only know phenomena’, and he fails to notice that the two statements are different.” (Prichard 1906: 223)

**property-dualist** ‘phenomenal’ properties vs. ‘noumenal’ properties; only phenomenal properties can be known.

Aspectival realism: appearances are aspects of things in themselves. An appearance, *a*, is a thing in itself, *b*, insofar as it appears:  $a = b$  qua appearing. I use “qua” as a technical expression to describe the inner structure of aspects and call appearances “appearance-aspects”, and “bases” what they are aspects of: *a* is the appearance-aspect of *b* and *b* is its base. The two theses above will then amount to the claim that we can know only appearance-aspects and that we can only think, not cognise, their bases:

**aspectival** ‘appearance’ aspects vs. their bases; only appearance aspects can be known.

	distinction	core thesis	link
methodological	ways of considering	only knowledge-under-a-description	Gestalt switch
phenomenalist	mental vs. non-mental things	only self-knowledge	representing
property-dualist	types of properties	knowledge only of how we are affected	co-exemplification
aspectival	aspect and base	knowledge only of aspects	aspect-of

A straightforward way of putting qua-objects to use for Kantians is to say that Sam, the cup cannot be known, but only Sam-as-it-appears. Tom, an aspect of Sam, has the property of appearing essentially, while Sam does not. Such a theory has recently been sketched by Colin ? , who models the contrast as one between things-qua-appearing-some-way and things-qua-having-only-properties-other-than-appearance-properties (? : 530):

Since a thing-qua-appearance necessarily has the property of appearing, and one (de re) necessary mind-dependent property makes a thing mind-dependent, it follows that things-qua-appearance (and so, for Kant, objects of experience) are mind-dependent. (? : 535)

Marshall thinks that cannot be bases (what he calls the “original objects”) because these *have* the spatio-temporal properties. But this presupposes that aspects cannot have novel properties. If we take noumena to be bases, not themselves aspects, we make sense of our longing to know the things in themselves and explains why he speaks of our way of thinking about (or, perhaps rather: of) things in themselves in abstractionist terms. It may also help with another, otherwise quite puzzling, feature of Kant’s theory: the recurrent talk of (some type of) necessity ascribed to appearances, but denied of things-in-themselves. Judgments about appearances are said to have some kind of ‘inner’ necessity, while things-in-themselves exhibit some kind of absolute contingency.

Desiderata:

**knowledge transmitting** To know the appearance is to know, in a certain sense, that which appears.

**cognitively encapsulating** Information about the appearance is not information about the thing in itself.

Claims:

**Aspectival knowledge** Knowing that *a* is *F* is to know, of *a*, that it has an appearance-aspect that is *F*, i.e. it is to know that *a* appears-to-be-*F*.

**Knowledge of aspects** Knowing that *a* is *F* is to know, of the appearance-aspect of *a*, that it is *F*, i.e. it is to know that *a*-as-it-appears is *F*.

The project of the Copernican turn thus has two parts: an analytical investigation of the nature of the knowledge we have, characterising it as of appearances that are governed and constituted by synthetic truths a priori, and a dialectical investigation into the domain of the unknowable. The Analytic will aim at a transcendental deduction (proof of applicability) of the concepts essentially employed in such synthetic a priori knowledge of aspects, i.e. demonstrate the applicability of such pure concepts to objects of experience from necessary conditions under which alone such objects may appear to us, i.e. be represented by the senses (in the Aesthetic) and by the understanding (in the Analytic of concepts). The first result is that the concepts TIME, SPACE and the categories (such as SUBSTANCE, NECESSITY, CAUSALITY etc.) may be legitimately used in knowledge claims – if such claims are taken to concern things as they appear. The second result of the deduction is that *only* when considering things in this way, our knowledge claims are warranted – because their objects’ appearing (being appearances) is not only just a necessary condition for them, but their ground.

The aim of the Dialectic is to give an indirect argument for such self-restraint of reason, considering – by way of an “experiment of reason” –,

...dass dieselben Gegenstände einerseits als Gegenstände der Sinne und des Verstandes für die Erfahrung, andererseits aber doch als Gegenstände, die man bloss denkt, allenfalls für die isolierte und über Erfahrungsgrenze hinausstrebende Vernunft, mithin von zwei verschiedenen Seiten betrachtet werden können ... (Bxviii/Bxix, fn.)<sup>2</sup>

2. “...so that the same objects can be considered from two different sides, on the one side as objects of the senses and the understanding for experience, and on the other side as objects that are merely thought at most for isolated reason striving beyond the bounds of experience.” (Kant 1998: 11)

The result of this experiment is that (i) our a priori knowledge only concerns appearances as objects of possible experiences, but is compatible with the “Sache an sich selbst” being “wirklich, aber für uns unerkant” (Bxx), and (ii), that the concept of the ‘unconditioned’ (das Unbedingte) is consistent only if found “nicht an Dingen, so fern wir sie kennen (sie uns gegeben werden), wohl aber an ihnen, so fern wir sie nicht kennen, als Sachen an sich selbst” (Bxx).<sup>3</sup> In both the analytical and the dialectical part, we are thus asked to distinguish two aspects of the putative objects of our knowledge claims (the not further specified use of “Ding” and “Gegenstand”, prior to the introduction of the ‘in itself’/‘as it appears’ distinction): as objects of possible experience and as objects of mere thought.

To say that we know *a* as it appears does not only mean that *a* appears; it also is speaking of *a* in a certain way. In the B Preface, Kant uses “als Erscheinung” and “als Ding an sich selbst” to mark how he takes “das Objekt in zweierlei Bedeutung” (Bxxvii).<sup>4</sup> This does not just mean that he speaks of things in two different ways. As the continuation immediately makes clear, he means to make the stronger claim that it is to commit the fallacy of equivocation to infer a conclusion about *a* as thing in itself from premises only about *a* as appearance – “ways of representation” (Vorstellungsarten) he characterises as “intellectual” and “sensual” respectively (Bxxviii). Speaking of things in the way Kant recommends is thus not just optional, but indispensable if we want to make room for true claims of synthetic a priori knowledge. In this belief, to be substantiated by the Analytic, lies his commitment to **Knowledge of aspects**.

Characterising what makes an inquiry transcendental, the B edition replaces “Begriffe[...] a priori von Gegenständen überhaupt” (A12-13) with “Erkenntnisart von Gegenständen, so fern diese [Erkenntnisart] a priori möglich sein soll” (B25).<sup>5</sup> The transcendental perspective is characterised as distinguishing things according to the ways in which they can be known and it is from this characterisation that the restriction of the application pure concepts of the understanding to appearances is said to “flow” (“davon herrührend”, Bxxviii). Kant thus distinguishes two ways of cognising objects, one sensual, the other intellectual, such that the first entails the second (Bxxvi), but not vice versa: to speak of things as they appear is to qualify the claim made about them, and to speak of things in themselves is to drop this qualification. The charge of equivocation against inferring the unqualified claim from a qualified one is the fallacy known to the medievals as “secundum quid ad simpliciter” (cf. *De Soph.*, 167a7–9). It is this charge he brings forward against noo-logists who speak of things in themselves as if they were appearances and drop the restriction to appearance properties that characterises **Aspectival knowledge**.

Something that appears, on anyone’s view, is an appearance; appearances, in my view, are also things in so far as they appear, and all things in so far as they appear are appearances. This may strike some as too realist an interpretation of “appearance”, identifying, as it does, appearances with the objects of knowledge, albeit under a qualification. How is this supposed to be compatible with what Kant says about their being representations, even ‘nothing but’ representations, in our sensibility, merely subjective and existing only relative to us? “Vorstellung” (representation) is Kant’s most general term for whatever it is in virtue of which we reach out to the world. In the very first paragraph of the Aesthetic, he very tightly links it to “Erscheinung”:

Die Wirkung eines Gegenstandes auf die Vorstellungsfähigkeit, sofern wir von demselben affiziert werden, ist Empfindung. Diejenige Anschauung, welche sich auf den Gegenstand durch Empfindung bezieht, heißt empirisch. Der unbestimmte Gegenstand einer empirischen Anschauung heißt Erscheinung. (A19-20/B33)<sup>6</sup>

In the ‘Stufenleiter’ passage, he characterises “Vorstellung” as the genus of the mental and “Empfindung” as a modification of the subject:

Eine Perzeption, die sich lediglich auf das Subjekt, als die Modifikation seines Zustandes bezieht, ist Empfindung (sensatio). (KrV, A320/B376)<sup>7</sup>

Rather than feeling a tension between the two roles played by sensation, to be that by which intuition relates to its object and at the same time a mode of the subject, Kant seems to believe that the subjectivity of sensation, i.e. it’s second role, *explains* how it is suited to play the first – or at least he says so in the 1772 letter to Hertz:

...aus welchem Grunde beruhet die Beziehung desienigen, was man in uns Vorstellung nennt, auf den Gegenstand? Enthält die Vorstellung nur die Art, wie das subject von dem Gegenstande afficirt wird, so ists leicht

3. “leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but uncognized by us [...] that the unconditioned must not be present in *things* insofar as we are acquainted with them (insofar as they are given to us), but rather in *things* insofar as we are not acquainted with them, as things in themselves” (Kant 1998: 112, my emphasis) The translation omits the anaphoric link between “Dingen” and “ihnen”, which makes it clear, as the translation does not, that the two italicised occurrences of “things” have numerically the same referents.

4. “...if the critique has not erred in teaching that the object should be taken in a twofold meaning, namely as appearance or as thing in itself...” (Kant 1998: 116)

5. “I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible a priori.” (Kant 1998: 149)

6. “The effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it, is sensation. That intuition which is related to the object through sensation is called empirical. The undetermined object of an empirical intuition is called appearance.” (Kant 1998: 155)

7. “A perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state is a sensation (sensatio).” (Kant 1998: 398)

einzusehen, wie er diesem als eine Wirkung seiner Ursache gemäß sey und wie diese Bestimmung unsres Gemüths etwas vorstellen d.i. einen Gegenstand haben könne. (AA X 130)<sup>8</sup>

I think that a plausible interpretation of these passages is the following: within the domain of the knowable, and whenever there is sensation, representing and appearing are converse relations: to say that  $x$  represents  $y$  is to say that  $y$  appears to  $x$ . Moreover, they are also correlative: what  $x$  represents  $y$  to be is what  $y$  appears to be to  $x$ . This does not mean that representation, being a different relation, ‘inherits’ its content from appearance (this would be incompatible with their being converses) – it rather means that one and the same aspect is both an aspect of the representation and an aspect of the appearance: the representing and the appearing thing share the aspect by which they are given to us. It is in this sense, I propose, that appearances *are* representations.

To speak of “ $x$  as it appears” or “ $x$  as represented” is ambiguous in at least three ways:

- process** the processes of appearing and of representing are different – they differ in their direction, and in what they are grounded in: things appear in virtue of how they are, while subjects represent in virtue of how they are and these grounds are different in the case of the representation of mind-independent matters of fact;
- event** the two processes may still coincide, and thus be the same event: every appearing is then also a being represented, and every representing also a being appeared to: it is in virtue of such coincidence that these events make available the same information, and reveal the same aspect of the world;
- result** the one event that is both adequately described as “ $x$  appears to  $y$  as  $F$ ” and “ $x$  is represented as  $F$  by  $y$ ” may still have two different results, and modify its two relata in two different ways: as a dancing ‘produces’ both a dancer and a dance, an event of representing/appearing produces both an appearance and a representation.

Whereas appearances are things as they appear, some of the things so appearing are things in themselves. Not all appearing things are things in themselves: appearances also appear. So a distinction is needed, marked by Kant by the use of ‘in itself’. A thing in itself is a thing that appears, but does not appear simpliciter, but only ‘through’ an appearance. This may be taken to give rise to a difficulty: by what criterion is Kant to distinguish between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ appearing, the first denied, the latter asserted of things in themselves? I do not think, however, that Kant would regard this question as legitimate: if we characterise appearances as things in so far they satisfy the necessary conditions for us to have knowledge of them (whatever they are), it just *follows* that we cannot know things except as appearances: whenever we know anything of  $a$ , these necessary conditions are satisfied and there is thus an appearance of  $a$ , which is all ‘of  $a$ ’ we may be said to know.

That we cannot know things in themselves on the basis of how they appear to us does not, however, entail that we do not know them at all. We do know about them, as Bxxvi makes clear, how they appear to us. As Prauss (1977: 16) has noted, Kant says in the footnote to B70 that it is the things in themselves that appear to us and that how they appear to us (“die Prädikate der Erscheinungen”) can be attributed to the “Objekte selbst [...] in Verhältnis auf unseren Sinn”.<sup>9</sup> He is thus committed to what I called above “aspectival knowledge”: our knowledge, of things in themselves, is how they appear to us. Such ‘predicates of appearances’ can, however, be attributed to the things in themselves only with this qualification, for the predicate does not mean anything in abstraction from the “subjective condition, under which alone we can have [...] intuition” (A42/B59).<sup>10</sup>

What is required for an argument from (something like) **P** to (something like) **C** to go through? Two requirements stand out: (i) we face the *ontological* task of construing the object of knowledge in **C** in a way compatible with it’s also being the subject matter of **P** (to avoid equivocation); (ii) we also have to deal with the *metaphysical* problem of explaining why the condition in **P** can be dropped on the way to the non-conditional statement **C**. Perhaps this way:

**P’** Of things, we know only how they appear.

**C’** We only know how they appear of things-as-they-appear.

“Appearance” in Kant exhibits is ambiguous in two different ways: process/result and vehicle/content. It may mean (i) the on-going appearing of something (what our knowledge is said to be restricted to in **P**) and (ii) the resulting event; it may mean (iii) that which appears a certain way and (iv) that in virtue of which it appears. Perhaps (ii) and (iii) are identified when Kant says that an “appearance” is a “being of sense” (Sinneswesen).<sup>11</sup> It is not clear to me that interpreting talk of appearances in terms of phenomenal properties captures any of these senses neatly. It does not capture the content sense because the content of a representation is never just a property by itself (or rather, never just a concept standing for a property), but also includes an object (or a concept thereof), and the claim that the object has the property. It does not capture the vehicle sense because phenomenal properties are not that by which things appear to us – not even response-dependent properties. Response-dependent properties such as *being red* or *being funny*, even if grounded in our responses to

8. “What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call “representation” to the object? If a representation comprises only the matter in which the subject is affected by the object, then it is easy to see how it is in conformity with this object, namely, as an effect accords with its cause, and it is easy to see how this modification of our mind can represent something, that is, have an object.” (Kant 1999: 133)

9. “The predicates of appearance can be attributed to the object in itself, in relation to our sense ...” (Kant 1998: 190).

10. Very similarly, he says in the Amphiboly that space and time are “sinnliche Anschauungen, in denen wir alle Gegenstände lediglich als Erscheinungen bestimmen”.

11. Cf.: “if we call certain objects, as appearances, beings of sense (phenomena), because we distinguish the way we intuit them from their constitution in itself, then it already follows from our concept that to these we oppose ... noumena” (B306).

them and defined in terms of them, may appear in quite different ways, or they may even not appear at all (for instance, by being masked, finkish or fragile in the way dispositions are). Thirdly, it does not capture the sense of “appearance” in which it stands for the way objects are given (whatever precise sense can be given to this latter phrase). While it is analytic for Kant that things are given as appearances, it is neither analytic nor true that they are given as having only phenomenal properties.

What properties they may be said to have a priori is established by some transcendental deduction. Kant’s transcendental deduction of the concepts *SPACE* and *TIME* is laconically brief:

...da nur vermittelt solcher reiner Formen der Sinnlichkeit uns ein Gegenstand erscheinen, d.i. ein Objekt der empirischen Anschauung sein kann, so sind Raum und Zeit reine Anschauungen, welche die Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der Gegenstände als Erscheinungen a priori enthalten, und die Synthesis in denselben hat objektive Gültigkeit. (A89, B121-122)<sup>12</sup>

The problem is that we need an interpretation of “die Möglichkeitsbedingung von  $x$  enthalten” substantial enough to imply “auf  $x$  zutreffen”. The quoted argument proceeds as follows:

- (a) all our possible representations of objects represent them as being in time
- (b) time is a form of pure intuition / only in time can things appear to us
- (c) *TIME* applies to all things that we can represent

But the step from (b) to (c) is not automatic: that things necessarily appear to us temporally does not imply that they are temporal unless, of course, it is presupposed that they appear to us the way they are. If we think of (a) as guaranteeing the truth of this extra premiss, we commit the Kantian fallacy. The crucial step is from (1) to (2):

- 1. to cognize something as an object (etwas als einen Gegenstand erkennen) is (to cognize it) through the representation (Vorstellung)  $x$
- 2.  $x$  is a priori determining (a priori bestimmend) *in Ansehung* of the object

According to Kant, the inference is valid and is also sound for  $x = \{ \text{SPACE, TIME, categories} \}$ . The aesthetics establishes (1) for  $x = \{ \text{SPACE, TIME} \}$  with respect to the cognition which is *Anschauung*. The deduction to (2) is then as follows:

Mit dieser formalen Bedingung der Sinnlichkeit [dass wir Anschauung davon haben können] stimmen also alle Erscheinungen notwendig überein, weil sie durch dieselbe erscheinen, d.i. empirisch angeschauet und gegeben werden können. (A93 / B125)<sup>13</sup>

Again, we cannot infer that a necessary condition of our cognition of some object is a condition of that object unless the object is itself some  $x$ -qua-cognised. The property-dualism interpretations does not provide warrant for this inference: even if their spatial and temporal properties are extrinsic, relational, dispositional, response-dependent or in other ways ‘secondary’, it does not follow from that fact that we have to attribute them to the objects of cognition that these objects in fact have them. Neither does it make sense of the fact that the necessity by which spatiotemporal properties attach to phenomena is not just conditional, but absolute. Guyer puts the point against Allison as follows:

...it is not Kant’s view that what we know merely the conditional necessity that if we are to perceive things external to ourselves they must be spatial. Rather, it is Kant’s view that what we perceive is *necessarily spatial* in an absolute sense, and that the existence of this absolute necessity can be explained only by the supposition that we actually *impose* spatial form on objects. (1987: 361)

Qua objects are tailor-made to make room for this absolute necessity, as they make sense of remarks as the following:

“...if we find cause to deem a judgment necessarily, universally valid [...], we must then also deem it objective, i.e., as expressing not merely a relation of a perception to a subject, but a property of an object ... (Prol., §18: 298)

12. “For since an object can appear to us only by means of such pure forms of sensibility, i.e., be an objecta of empirical intuition, space and time are thus pure intuitions that contain a priori the conditions of the possibility of objects as appearances, and the synthesis in them has objective validity.” (Kant 1998: 222)

13. “All appearances therefore necessarily agree with this formal condition of sensibility [that under which alone objects can be intuited], because only through it can they appear, i.e., be empirically intuited and given.” (Kant 1998: 224)

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