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Kant's Causal Appearing Argument

1 Introduction

Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves (call this the 'distinction_{AT}') has generated an endless flow of exegetical and philosophical controversies. Infamously, Kant asserts that things in themselves (for humans) are non-cognizable – that is, they can be cognized neither through sensibility nor through the understanding – yet he seems to make several claims about them. One is that we can legitimately infer their existence from the fact that we cognize appearances – call this 'the appearing argument' (see A249; A251-2; Bxxvi-Bxxvii; and B306).¹ Given the general non-cognizability of things in themselves, the appearing argument stands the best chance of epistemically entitling us to the claim that things in themselves exist.² There are two versions: the causal appearing argument and the conceptual appearing argument. My general project is to argue that both appearing arguments are logically unconvincing. This paper, however, limits its focus on the causal appearing argument, which is undergirded by the claim that our cognitions of appearances are caused by things in themselves. Note that, if both appearing arguments are logically unconvincing, then Kant would have no theoretical grounds (i.e. epistemic justification) for postulating things in themselves, for he could neither cognize them directly nor indirectly through inference. As a result, Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter *Critique*), would have to be interpreted as being uncommitted to the existence of things in themselves.

¹ All quotes from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are taken from Norman Kemp Smith's translation (Kant 2007). I cite Kemp Smith's translation using the standard A/B pagination.

² For commenters who appeal to variants of the appearing argument, see (Schaumann 2000, 157), (Born 2000, 186), (Paton 1997, 445), (Dryer, 1966, 512-4, footnotes 1 & 1'), (Strawson 1968, 238 & 255), (Langton 1998, 41), (Collins 1999, 27), (Van Cleve 1999, 11, 135, & 136-7), and (Allais 2004, 661). W.H. Walsh also regards the appearing arguments as logically unconvincing (Walsh 1975, 162-3).

Contemporary dominant two-world and metaphysical one-world interpretations of the distinction_{AT} (as it figures in the *Critique*) do commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves.³ Contemporary two-world interpretations maintain that appearances and things in themselves are ontologically distinct such that the former are representations caused by the latter and the latter are the real entities of the world. Metaphysical one-world views construe the distinction_{AT} as between different kinds of properties: appearances are the object's extrinsic properties; things in themselves are its intrinsic properties.⁴ Accordingly, if the appearing argument is logically unconvincing, then these ontological interpretations are non-viable. In contrast, epistemic one-world interpretations construe the distinction_{AT} as between two ways of considering one set of objects, as they appear or as they are in themselves.⁵ The dominant epistemic interpretations maintain that the set of objects in question is composed of empirical objects.⁶ There being only one set of objects, these interpretations must deny that things in themselves exist as entities or properties that are ontologically distinct from appearances. In this regard, my argument removes one obstacle facing these epistemic one-world interpretations.

Before turning to my argument, note that I use 'phenomenon' and 'appearance' (and their cognates) interchangeably; likewise with 'noumenon' and 'things in themselves' (and their cognates).

³ For commenters who interpret Kant's distinction_{AT} along a two-world view (hereafter two-worlders) and commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves, see (Schaumann 2000, 156), (Born 2000, 186), (Strawson 1966, 236-9), (Guyer 1987, 334-5), and (Van Cleve 1999, 150). For two-worlders who do not commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves see (Garve 2000, 53 & 60; Feder's heavily edited version and the original respectively), (Jacobi 2000, 171), and (Pistorius 2000, 179). For commenters who interpret Kant's distinction_{AT} along a one-world metaphysical interpretation (hereafter metaphysical one-worlders) and commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves, see (Langton 1998, 37), (Allais 2004, 677), and (Marshall 2013, 531-2, 536). For a metaphysical one-worlder who does not commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves, see (Setiya 2004, 85-7). For a commentator who is ambivalent between the two ontological interpretations, see (Adams 1997, 821-5).

⁴ For metaphysical one-world interpretations, see (Langton 1998, 37), (Allais 2004, 674 & 677), (Setiya 2004: 85-7), and (Marshall 2013, 531-2 & 536). Kieran Setiya's interpretation does not commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves.

⁵ For epistemic one-worlders, see (Paton 1997, 422), (Beck 1960, 21-2), (Bird 1962, 28-9), (Dryer 1966, 513-4), (Matthews 1969, 208), (Robinson 1994, 428-32), (Collins 1999, 15 & 28), and (Allison 2004, 16). For an overview of the major problems facing epistemic one-world interpretations, see (Marshall 2013, 523-5).

⁶ See (Bird 1962, 28-9) and (Allison 2004, 62).

Mutatis mutandis for their corresponding concepts.⁷ It is controversial whether the distinction between phenomena and noumena and the distinction_{AT} are equivalent. However, my argument turns on the consequences of the *Critique's* cognitive theory, in particular our inability to legitimately apply our concepts to things apart from sensibility. Since things in themselves (on an ontological interpretation) and noumena both lie outside sensibility, we cannot legitimately apply our concepts to either. Therefore, my analysis of the causal appearing argument applies in either case, regardless of whether the two distinctions really are equivalent.

2 The Causal Appearing Argument

Kant, in his *Inaugural Dissertation* (hereafter *Dissertation*), views the causal appearing argument as logically compelling. But Kant later identifies a problem with the *Dissertation's* cognitive theory. In short, the *Dissertation* lacks the theoretical resources for guaranteeing that the *a priori* concepts of the intelligence (or understanding) *actually do apply to* the objects they *purport to apply to* – the objective validity problem (of the *a priori* concepts of the intelligence). Kant attempts to resolve this problem in the *Critique*. In this section, I argue that his solution limits our intelligence in a manner that undercuts the logical force of the causal appearing argument. I begin by examining how the *Dissertation's* cognitive theory licenses the causal appearing argument, thereby isolating the relevant aspects of that theory. Then I consider how the objective validity problem pressures Kant to modify his theory, thereby illuminating the relevant difference between the *Dissertation's* cognitive theory and the *Critique's*. With that difference in hand, I demonstrate the philosophical grounds for why the causal appearing argument must be logically unconvincing. Finally, I support my thesis on textual grounds.

⁷ Arthur Collins rightly notes that <noumenon> and <thing in itself> are not the same concepts (Collins 1999: 28-9). That is because their intensions differ. Thus, their extensions may differ; see (Van Cleve 1999: 134). But, for the reasons given below, this difference can be safely ignored for the purpose of this paper.

2.1 The *Dissertation's* Cognitive Theory and the Causal Appearing Argument

The *Dissertation's* cognitive theory lays the philosophical foundation for the causal appearing argument. Its two most basic elements are sensibility and the intelligence:

SENSIBILITY is the receptivity of the subject through which it is possible that its power of representation should be affected in a certain manner by the presence of some object. INTELLIGENCE (rationality) is the faculty of the subject through which it is able to represent things which cannot by their own characters act upon the senses.⁸ (*Diss.* §3)

Correspondingly, we cognize two kinds of objects: phenomena (i.e. sensibles) and noumena (i.e. intelligibles). Generally speaking, only phenomena can be cognized through sensibility, and noumena can only be cognized by the intelligence (*Diss.* §3). However, there is a limited sense in which noumena can be cognized through sensibility. Note that Kant's definition of 'sensibility' includes a causal element, such that our cognition of phenomena requires our sensibility to be affected by "the presence of some object," namely by some noumenon. This causal element undergirds the *Dissertation's* version of the causal appearing argument:

[S]o far as [phenomena] are sensual concepts or apprehensions, they bear witness, as being caused, to the presence of an object... (*Diss.* §11)

In short, because our cognition of phenomena requires sensibility to be affected, we can legitimately infer the existence of noumena from our cognition of phenomena. Now that I have illustrated *that* Kant, in the *Dissertation*, maintains we can infer the existence of noumena from our cognition of phenomena, I proceed to determine *how* the *Dissertation's* cognitive theory justifies that inference.

The intelligence has two cognitive functions in the *Dissertation*: a logical use and a real use. Through its logical use, we exhibit phenomena through acts of reflection and comparison (*Diss.* §5).

⁸ All quotes from Kant's *Dissertation* come from John Handyside's translation (Kant 1929). I cite the *Dissertation* using in-text citations of the *Dissertation's* numbered sections.

Through its real use, we cognize noumena as they are. Unlike sensibility, the real use of the intelligence does not require a causal element, for its representations are not acquired empirically. Instead, we cognize noumena through concepts that are acquired *a priori*:

[T]he concepts there met with are not to be looked for in the senses, but in the very nature of pure intellect, not as concepts *connate* to it, but as abstracted (by attention to its actions on the occasion of experience) from laws inborn in the mind, and so to this extent as *acquired*. (*Diss.* §8)

Kant lists <causality> as being one of these *a priori* concepts, thereby implying that sensibility cannot license the causal appearing argument without the representational resources of the intelligence.⁹ For illustration, consider a formal representation of the causal appearing argument:

- (P1) Cognitions of phenomena are caused by noumena
- (P2) I cognize phenomena
- (C) Noumena exist

Note that (P1) employs <causality> and references noumena. Thus, without the representational resources of the intelligence, (P1) cannot be accepted. And it further follows that the causal appearing argument is logically compelling only if <causality> can be legitimately applied to noumena. The *Dissertation's* cognitive theory meets this requirement through the real use of the intelligence. I now turn to considering the philosophical pressures that lead Kant to change his cognitive theory and how that change undermines the causal appearing argument's logical force.

2.2 The Objective Validity Problem, the *Critique's* Cognitive Theory, and the Causal Appearing Argument

After writing the *Dissertation*, Kant identifies an outstanding problem with his cognitive theory, namely his failure to address the objective validity problem. He writes to Marcus Herz:

In my dissertation I was content to explain the nature of intellectual representations in a merely negative way, namely, to state that they were not modifications of the soul brought about by the

⁹ Throughout this paper, I use '<...>' as a device for indicating that I am speaking about a concept. So, for instance, instead of writing 'the concept of a tree', I might write '<tree>'. To my knowledge, R. Lanier Anderson is the first to use this device; see (Anderson 2010, 75-92).

object. However, I silently passed over the further question of how a representation that refers to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible.¹⁰

A representation has objective validity if and only if something belongs (belonged, or will belong) to its extension (i.e. it refers to something), or, logically equivalently, such a thing exists (existed, or will exist). The question of objective validity, as a general problem, results when we have not yet determined whether an object belongs to a representation's extension.¹¹ So, for instance, I know my empirical concept of a tree is objectively valid because I acquired <tree> by experiencing trees. Thus, for many concepts, their objective validity is never in question. But not all concepts are acquired in this manner. For example, I did not acquire <fate> by experiencing an object being fated and, therefore, without appealing to some other grounds, its objective validity and, by extension, its legitimate use remains in question.

Kant offers two formulations of the objective validity problem.¹² The first occurs in a letter to Marcus Herz. The second occurs in the "Transcendental Analytic".

I asked myself this question: What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call "representation" to the object? If a representation comprises only the manner 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... Similarly, if that in us which we call "representation" were active with regard to the object, that is, if the object were itself created by the representation... the conformity of these representations to their object could be understood... However, our understanding, through its representations, is neither the cause of the object... nor is the object that cause of our intellectual representations...¹³

There are only two possible ways in which synthetic representations and their objects can establish connection, obtain necessary relation to one another, and, as it were, meet one another. Either the object alone must make the representation possible, or the representation alone must make the object possible. In the former case, this relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible *a priori*... In the latter case, representation in itself does not

¹⁰ Kant in (Watkins 2009, 313).

¹¹ Following Béatrice Longuenesse, I understand the objective validity problem to apply to both empirical and *a priori* representations; see (Longuenesse 1998, 18). In contrast, Paul Guyer seems to apply 'the objective validity problem' only to the case of our *a priori* concepts; see (Guyer 1987, 11).

¹² See (Guyer 1987, 11-24) for an extensive discussion of the objective validity problem.

¹³ Kant in (Watkins 2009, 312-3).

produce its object in so far as *existence* is concerned [i.e. unlike God's representations]... (A92-3/B125-6)

In both passages, Kant worries how we can know whether a representation can '*represent* something, that is, have an object', or, in other words, how we can determine whether a representation takes an object in its extension. Two cases seem straightforward. First, if an object causes us to produce (or makes possible) a representation, the representation, through that causal (or making-possible) relation, takes the object into its extension. Second, if a representation causes an object to exist, the representation, again through that causal relation, takes the object in its extension. The problem in the case of our *a priori* concepts is they are neither caused by noumena nor do they cause them. If they were caused by noumena, they would be empirical concepts, not *a priori* ones. And if they were the causes of noumena, we would be gods, not the limited beings that we are. Therefore, even if noumena were to belong to the extensions of <causality>, etc., there is no straightforward relation between noumena and our *a priori* concepts that would epistemically justify an application of those concepts to them. Consequently, it is questionable whether the understanding has a real use, for it has a real use (i.e. we cognize objects through the understanding) only if noumena do in fact belong to the extensions of our *a priori* concepts. However, the second formulation offers a third alternative for grounding a concept's objective validity:

None the less the representation is *a priori* determinant of the object, if it be the case that only through the representation is it possible to *know* anything *as an object*... (A92-3/B125-6)

If we were to know our *a priori* concepts make possible our cognition of objects in general, we would know, for any object we cognize, it must belong to the extensions of our *a priori* concepts. For if they did not, we *would not* cognize them since we *could not* cognize them.

In the *Critique*, Kant seeks to ground the objective validity of our *a priori* concepts in this third way. Assuming he is successful, the upshot is that we are epistemically justified in applying our *a priori* concepts to any cognizable object. However, this justification is secured at a cost. The *Critique's* cognitive

theory is, in part, a modification of the *Dissertation's*. As such, it retains the *Dissertation's* position that the only objects we sensibly intuit are phenomena. Because we do not sensibly intuit noumena, and because no causal relation obtains between our *a priori* concepts and noumena, we can only cognize phenomena. Accordingly, the third option only assures our *a priori* concepts are objectively valid for phenomena and, therefore, we are only justified in applying those concepts to phenomena.¹⁴ Since, in principle, we can never be justified in applying our *a priori* concepts to noumena, Kant secures the objective validity of our *a priori* concepts at the cost of a real use of the understanding. In other words, the *Critique's* cognitive theory limits the understanding – including its *a priori* concepts – to a logical use (i.e. only to the exposition of appearances).

This limitation renders the causal appearing argument logically impotent. Recall its formal presentation:

- (P1) Cognitions of phenomena are caused by noumena
- (P2) I cognize phenomena
- (C) Noumena exist

In 2.1, I argued the legitimate application of <causality> to noumena is a necessary condition for the causal appearing argument to be logically compelling. Without that legitimate application, there would be no epistemic grounds on which we could accept (P1). Since the *Critique's* cognitive theory limits the understanding to a logical use, <causality> cannot be legitimately applied to noumena and we, therefore, cannot accept (P1).¹⁵ Thus, by the lights of the *Critique's* cognitive theory, the causal appearing argument cannot be logically compelling.¹⁶

¹⁴ See also (Guyer 1987, 23).

¹⁵ For more arguments for why (P1) cannot be accepted by Kant, see (Bird 1962, 18-35).

¹⁶ For additional criticism of the causal appearing argument, see (Allison 2004, 50-4).

2.3 Kant's Denial of the Logical Force of the Causal Appearing Argument

In "The Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena" (hereafter "Phenomena and Noumena"), Kant seemingly endorses the causal appearing argument. However, careful consideration of the text shows Kant doing the opposite. Consider the apparent endorsement:

Now we must bear in mind that the concept of appearances, as limited by the Transcendental Aesthetic, already itself establishes the objective validity of *noumena* and justifies the division of objects into *phaenomena* and *noumena*... **For if the senses represent to us something merely as it appears, this something must also in itself be a thing, and an object of a non-sensible intuition, that is, of the understanding. In other words, a [kind of] knowledge must be possible in which there is no sensibility, and which alone has reality that is absolutely objective. Through it objects will be represented as they are, whereas in the empirical employment of our understanding things will be known only as they appear.** (A248-50; my emphasis in bold)

Here, Kant draws on the philosophical developments of the "Transcendental Aesthetic" putatively for the purpose of justifying the objective validity of <noumenon>. In doing so, he appeals to a version of the causal appearing argument: '[f]or if the senses represent to us something merely as it appears, this something must also in itself be a thing, and an object of a non-sensible intuition, that is, of the understanding'. That is, since the "Transcendental Aesthetic" proves sensible objects are phenomena, there must exist noumena causing our cognition of them. And since we know noumena exist, we know <noumenon> is objectively valid. However, the purpose of the above passage becomes apparent only after reading its immediately following passage:

If this [justification of the objective validity of <noumenon>] be so, it would seem to follow that we cannot assert, what we have hitherto maintained, that the pure modes of knowledge yielded by our understanding are never anything more than principles of the exposition of appearance... (A250)

To maintain that "the pure modes of knowledge yielded by our understanding are never anything more than principles of the exposition of appearance" is to limit the *a priori* concepts of the understanding to a logical use. But knowing <noumenon> is objectively valid, requires a real use of the understanding.

Kant is not to be construed as having a sudden change of heart. The “Transcendental Analytic” is spent on, among other things, demonstrating that the *a priori* concepts of the understanding are limited to the exposition of appearances. Simply put, Kant expends too much effort in the *Critique* in establishing this limitation in order to drop it in the span of a paragraph. Consequently, the putative justification of the objective validity of <noumenon> is nothing but a foil for demonstrating that we cannot determine its objective validity. These passages, therefore, show Kant’s awareness that the *Critique’s* cognitive theory renders the logical force of the causal appearing argument impotent.

3 Conclusion

I have demonstrated that, given the *Critique’s* cognitive theory, the causal appearing argument is logically unconvincing. Moreover, I have provided textual evidence showing Kant is aware of this fact. If the conceptual appearing argument is also logically unconvincing (as I maintain), then Kant, in the *Critique*, must be interpreted as being uncommitted to the existence of things in themselves. As a result, any interpretation of Kant’s distinction_{AT}, as it occurs in the *Critique*, that commits Kant to their existence is non-viable. So much, then, for the contemporary dominant ontological interpretations of Kant’s distinction_{AT}.

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