

KANT'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE UNKNOWABILITY OF THE EXISTENCE OF THINGS IN THEMSELVES

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Proponents of ontological interpretations of Kant's distinction between appearances (phenomena) and things in themselves (noumena) are attracted to the view that we can know (wissen) things in themselves exist even if they are non-cognizable (nicht-erkennbar). I argue that elements of Kant's theory of knowledge (Wissen) – namely, his theory of the epistemic justification of assertoric judgments – together with his theory of human cognition (Erkenntnis), entail the existence of things in themselves are unknowable (unwissbar) (i.e. the unknowable existence thesis). First, I demonstrate that four theoretical arguments for the existence of things in themselves fail. Second, I provide two philosophical arguments for the unknowable existence thesis. The first extrapolates from the failures of the four theoretical arguments discussed above. The second argues from Kant's theory of the justification of assertoric judgments, in conjunction with his theory of human cognition. Third, I provide a textual argument for the unknowable existence thesis, namely from Kant's assertion that the concept of a noumenon is problematic. I end the paper by defending the unknowable existence thesis from two objections: (1) Kant offers theoretical arguments for the existence of things in themselves, and (2) Kant often talks as if things in themselves exist.

Keywords: Kant; Things in Themselves; Noumena; Appearances; Phenomena;

0. Introduction

Proponents of ontological interpretations of Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves (hereafter distinction_{AT}), in which things in themselves are interpreted either as unconditioned entities or as intrinsic properties of empirical objects, are attracted to the view that things in themselves are knowable (wissbar) on Kant's theory of knowledge (Wissen), even though they are non-cognizable (nicht-

erkennbar) on his theory of (human) cognition (Erkenntnis).¹ For if Kant's theory of knowledge allows for things in themselves to be knowable, and if Kant has, or can be presented with, arguments that establish the existence of things in themselves on theoretical grounds, then an ontological distinction_{AT} is operative in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter *Critique*).² I am sympathetic to the view that an ontological distinction_{AT} is operative in the *Critique*. Nevertheless, I argue here that, given elements of Kant's theory of knowledge – namely, his theory of the epistemic justification of assertoric judgments – and given his theory of cognition, the existence of things in themselves is unknowable; there can be no theoretical grounds proving the

¹ E.g. see James Van Cleve (1999, 135-7) and Lucy Allais (2015, 65-70). Ontological interpretations are divided between two-world views and one-world views. Two-world views interpret appearances and things in themselves as different kinds of entities, in which the latter is supposed to ground the existence of the former. For commentators who interpret Kant's distinction_{AT} along a two-world view, see PF Strawson (1966, 236-9), Paul Guyer (1987, 334-5), and Van Cleve (1999, 150). For commentators who interpret Kant's distinction_{AT} along a one-world metaphysical interpretation, see Rae Langton (1998, 22), Allais (2004, 677), and Colin Marshall (2013, 531-2 and 536). Kieran Setiya (2004, 85-7) provides a one-world metaphysical interpretation that does not commit Kant to the existence of things in themselves. Note, I use 'knowledge' and its cognates according to Eric Watkins and Marcus Willascheck's (2017, 87) description of Kant's use of 'Wissen': 'a mode of assent... that is... closely related to the traditional tripartite definition of knowledge as justified true belief...' I also use 'cognition' and its cognates according to Watkins and Willascheck's (2017, 86) description of Kant's narrow use of 'Erkenntnis': 'a conscious representation of a given object and of (at least some of) its general features.'

² All quotes from the *Critique* are taken from Kemp Smith's translation (Kant 2007). I cite it using the standard A/B pagination.

existence of things in themselves given the Kantian system. Call this ‘the unknowable existence thesis’.³

The unknowable existence thesis is complicated by several factors: (1) Kant, in the *Critique*, actually provides theoretical arguments for the existence of things in themselves, (2) Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi argues that human cognition, on Kant’s theory of human cognition, requires the existence of things in themselves (see §1.3), (3) Lucy Allais offers an additional theoretical argument for the existence of things in themselves on Kant’s behalf (see §1.4), and (4) Kant often talks about things in themselves as though they do exist. In the first section of this paper, I argue that, given the Kantian system, the theoretical arguments corresponding to points (1), (2), and (3) fail to secure the existence of things in themselves. In the second section, I provide two positive philosophical arguments for the unknowable existence thesis. The first argument extrapolates from the failures of the theoretical arguments corresponding to points (1), (2), and (3). The second argument draws upon elements of Kant’s theory of knowledge – namely, upon his distinction of synthetic and analytic assertoric judgments – together with his theory of human cognition (see A6-10/B10-4). The third section is devoted to textual support. There, I begin with another argument for the unknowable existence thesis, one that draws off of Kant’s assertion that <noumenon> is a problematic concept. Then, I address points (1) and (4), since, at face value, they are grounds for objecting the unknowable existence thesis. First, I address point (1) by showing that the purpose Kant has in offering theoretical arguments (for the existence of things in themselves) is not actually to prove the existence of things in themselves. Finally,

³ McWerther (2012, 54-9) also argues that the existence of things in themselves is unknowable.

This paper provides a more exhaustive examination of the theoretical reasons for this thesis.

drawing from Mark Pickering's recent work, I show that the unknowable existence thesis is consistent with Kant's talk of things in themselves as though they do exist.

Before turning to the first section, note I use 'phenomenon' and 'appearance' (and their cognates) interchangeably; likewise with 'noumenon' and 'thing in itself' (and their cognates).⁴ *Mutatis mutandis* for their corresponding concepts.⁵ Doing so is contentious.⁶ However, my positive arguments for the unknowable existence thesis do not turn on their respective purported significant differences. What is important for my arguments is things in themselves and noumena both lie beyond sensibility.

1. Four Theoretical Arguments

I am aware of four theoretical arguments that can be plausibly thought to prove the existence of things of themselves, despite the severe restrictions Kant's theory of human cognition imposes on our cognition of them. In this section, I examine each, in turn, showing they are inadequate for proving the existence of things in themselves.

1.1 The Causal Appearing Argument

Kant sometimes offers a kind of argument that claims, because we cognize appearances, things in themselves exist (e.g. see Bxxvi-xxvii, A249, A251-2, and B306). Call this

⁴ Most Kant scholars regard the distinction between phenomena and noumena to be ontological, but this is not obviously so; see Guyer (1987, 15).

⁵ Arthur Collins (1999, 28-9) rightly notes that <noumenon> and <thing in itself> are not the same concepts. That is because their intensions differ. Thus, in principle, their extensions may differ; see Van Cleve (1999, 134). However, I do not, in this paper, take up the task of explaining the difference between these concepts.

⁶ For a critique of identifying the two distinctions, see Collins (1999, 28-9), Allison (2004, 57-9), and Allais (2004, 658-9). Cf. (A254-6/B310-2 and A259/B314).

kind of argument, an ‘appearing argument’.⁷ The causal appearing argument operates by appealing to a putative real relation (e.g. causal relation) that purportedly obtains between our cognition of phenomena and noumena. Its clearest example occurs in Kant’s *Inaugural Dissertation* (hereafter *Dissertation*), in which Kant presents the argument as an argument against empirical idealism:

[S]o far as [phenomena] are sensual concepts or apprehensions, they bear witness, as being caused, to the presence of an object – which is opposed to idealism.⁸ (Kant 1929, 51; Diss. 2, 397).

Consider a formal presentation:

- (P1) All phenomena are caused by some noumena
- (P2) Some phenomena exist
- (C) Some noumena exist

The argument is deductively valid. (P2) is true given Kant’s theory of cognition.

However, Kant’s cognitive theory renders (P1) epistemically unjustifiable.

In the *Dissertation*, Kant assumes a real use of the understanding, meaning we can cognize noumena, or things as they are, through the *a priori* concepts of the understanding, or intelligence (hereafter categories) (Kant 1929, 45-9; Diss. 2, 393-5).

<Causality> numbers among the categories (Kant 1929, 48-9; Diss. 2, 395; and

A80/B106). Thus, with a real use of the understanding, noumena can be subsumed

⁷ For commentators who appeal to variants of the appearing argument, see HJ Paton (1997, 445), DP Dryer (1966, 512-14: footnotes 1 and 1’), Strawson (1966, 238 and 255), Langton (1998, 22 and 41), Collins (1999, 27), Van Cleve (1999, 11, 135: and 136-7), and Allais (2004, 559 and 661).

⁸ All quotes from Kant’s *Dissertation, De Mundi Sensibilis atque Intelligibilis Forma et Principiis* – abbreviated Diss. – come from John Handyside’s translation (Kant 1929).

under <causality>, thereby justifying (P1). However, after writing the *Dissertation*, Kant questions whether he has grounds for assuming a real use of the understanding, because he did not establish the objective validity of the categories in the *Dissertation*.

In my dissertation... 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. (Kant as translated in [Watkins 2009, 313])

Kant sometimes glosses over the distinction between the objective validity of a concept and establishing the objective validity of a concept, but the former is a metaphysical question (*quid facti*) while the latter one is an epistemic means, as opposed to practical means, for justifying the use of a concept in synthetic judgments (*quid juris*) (See A84/B116-7). Thus, a concept is objectively valid just in case something belongs, belonged, or will belong to its extension. Accordingly, establishing that a concept is objectively valid justifies its use, since, then, we know that the object does, in fact, fall under it (i.e. belong to its extension). But, without establishing that a concept is objectively valid, there are no epistemic grounds justifying its use in a synthetic judgment. Barring practical considerations, it follows that we are unlicensed in employing such a concept in synthetic judgments. Kant, wanting to (epistemically) license the employment of the categories in synthetic judgements, seeks to establish their objective validity. However, establishing the objective validity of *a priori* representations is especially difficult:

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... (Kant as translated in [Watkins 2009, 312-13]).

This passage asserts that a representation's objective validity can be established through a real relation (e.g. causal) that obtains between the representation and its object. For instance, if a representation is caused by an object, then, through that causal relationship, the representation takes the object into its extension. Likewise, if the representation causes the object (i.e. creates the object), then, again, through that causal relationship, the representation takes the object into its extension. The problem for establishing the objective validity of the categories (i.e. the objective validity problem), then, is that, in the former case, the representation must be empirical, not *a priori*. And the latter case requires us to be gods, not the limited beings we are.⁹ In the *Critique*, Kant offers another means for establishing a representation'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)

This illustrates the strategy Kant takes in solving the objective validity problem. Namely, he argues that the categories are a necessary condition for experiencing (i.e. empirically cognizing) the objects we experience. Thus, for any object we can experience, it must fall under the categories, or we *would not* experience them since we *could not* experience them.

⁹ See Guyer (1987, 11-24) for an extensive discussion of the objective validity problem.

This strategy, however, entails that the understanding does not have a real use. Uncontroversially, Kant's cognitive theory maintains (1) that things in themselves are never sensibly intuited and (2) sensible intuition is required for experiencing an object (see A30/B45 and A50/B74). Accordingly, we never experience things in themselves.¹⁰ Thus, the above strategy cannot establish that things in themselves fall under the categories. Therefore, since Kant offers no further strategies, the subsumption of noumena under <causality> in (P1) is unjustified and (C) cannot be known on its basis.¹¹

1.2 The Conceptual Appearing Argument

Instead of relying on a real relation, the conceptual appearing argument relies on a putative conceptual relation between <appearance> and <thing in itself>, such that, because of the intension of <appearance>, if something falls under the former, then something must fall under the latter. Thus, if we know that something is an appearance, then we can know that things in themselves exist. Consider a formal presentation:

- (P1') If some appearances exist, then some things in themselves exist (by the intension of <appearance>)
- (P2') Some appearances exist

¹⁰ See also (Guyer 1987, 23)

¹¹ Graham Bird (1962, 18-35), Allison (2004, 53-4), and McWerther (2012, 53-4) also note that applying <causality> to things in themselves (or noumena) runs afoul of Kant's cognitive theory. But showing that it violates Kant's solution to the objective validity problem demonstrates the severity of the problem of interpreting Kant as endorsing the causal appearing argument. Namely, doing so is, in effect, to interpret Kant as failing to solve the objective validity problem – a major impetus Kant had for writing the *Critique*. McWerther (2012, 53) further notes that 'things in themselves exist' runs afoul of Kant's cognitive theory, since <existence> is a category.

(C') Some things in themselves exist

The argument seems valid, but either (P1') is false or the argument is fallacious. First, the argument is concerned with proving the existence of things in themselves in the transcendental sense (<thing in itself_T>). Accordingly, to avoid equivocation, 'thing in itself' in (P1') and (C') must be understood in its transcendental sense. Second, 'appearances' in (P1') and (P2') is either taken in an ordinary sense (<appearance_O>) or in its transcendental sense (<appearance_T>). Assume the ordinary sense. From an ordinary sense of 'appearance' – for example, the look of a table from our particular viewpoint – it follows that a thing in itself exists, but only in the physical sense (<thing in itself_P>), which is nothing different from an empirical object (A45/B63).¹² But the existence of an empirical object does not logically entail the existence of things in themselves in the transcendental sense. For, as Henry Allison (2004, 55) notes, all there could be to an object is a 'multiplicity of perspectives' such 'that there remains nothing left over to be considered "as it is in itself"'. Now assume 'appearances' is taken in its transcendental sense. Then, (P1') is, at a minimum, question-begging. As Dustin McWerther notes,

Kant cannot claim that things in themselves exist on the dual basis of our acquaintance with appearances and an analysis of the meaning of the word 'appearance' without begging the question. For if things in themselves are indeed logically implied by the concept of appearance, then Kant must first explain why 'appearance' is the appropriate term for the sensory representations given in sensibility. To do that, he must already know that these sensory representations are the appearances of things in themselves,

¹² Cf. (McWerther 2012, 56).

but that is precisely what was supposed to be concluded by these means.
(McWerther 2012, 54-5)

But, actually, (P1') is false. Several passages illuminate the intension of
<appearance_T>:

[A]ll sensitive apprehension depends upon the special nature of the subject, in so far as it is capable of being modified in diverse ways by the presence of objects... But, on the other hand, whatever is exempt from this subjective condition regards only the objects. It is clear, therefore, that things sensitively apprehended are representations of things as they appear, while things intellectually known are representations of things as they are.
(Kant 1929, 44-5; Diss. 2, 392-3)

This difference [between sensible and intelligible cognition] is quite evidently transcendental. It does not merely concern their [logical] form, as being either clear or confused. It concerns their origin and content.
(A44/B62)

Even if we could bring our intuition to the highest degree of clearness, we should not thereby come any nearer to the constitution of objects in themselves. We should still know only our mode of intuition... (A43/B60)

We then realise that not only are the drops of rain mere appearances, but that even their round shape, nay even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves, but merely modifications or fundamental forms of our sensible intuition... (A46/B63)

The first passage comes from the *Dissertation* and explains why Kant labels the objects we sensibly cognize 'appearances': our cognitions of sensible objects are fundamentally the result of modifications of our sensibility and, therefore, only reflect properties of our sensibility (i.e. how it modifies), not the properties intrinsic to the putative cause of this

modification.¹³ Hence, the intension of <appearance_T> is <an object that is fundamentally the modifications of sensibility> (or, <a set of properties that are fundamentally the modifications of sensibility>). The remaining passages show this view is retained in the *Critique*. But the existence of things in themselves is not logically entailed by the modification of our sensibility, since it is logically possible for sensibility to modify absent some putative object existing apart from it and supposedly interacting with it. Accordingly, <appearance_T> and <thing in itself_T> do not conceptually relate such that, if something falls under the former, then, because of the former's intension, something must fall under the latter. Therefore, (P1') is false. The only reason the conceptual appearing argument seems valid is because it equivocates between the different senses of 'appearance' (<appearance_O> and <appearance_T>) or 'thing in itself' (<thing in itself_P> and (<thing in itself_T>)).¹⁴

1.3 The Sensibility Argument

The sensibility argument is closely related to the causal appearing argument, but instead of operating on a real relation (e.g. causal relation), it operates on Kant's definition of 'sensibility':

The capacity (receptivity) in so far as the mind is affected by objects, is entitled *sensibility*. (A19/B33)

Kant defines 'sensibility' such that the performance of sensibility's cognitive function requires sensibility to be affected by an object. For the sake of argument, assume the

¹³ Cf. (Guyer 1987, 15) and (McWerther 2012, 50).

¹⁴ For additional criticism of the conceptual appearing argument, see Allison (2004, 54-5).

affecting object is a thing in itself, and call the affection ‘noumenal affection’.¹⁵ Then Kant’s definition of ‘sensibility’ makes way for the following argument:

- (P1'') If sensibility performs its cognitive function, then some things in themselves affected it and, therefore, exist
- (P2'') Sensibility performs its cognitive function
- (C'') Some things in themselves affected sensibility and, therefore, exist

The argument seems sound. (P2'') is true given Kant’s cognitive theory. (P1'') seems to be true by Kant’s stipulated definition of ‘sensibility’. Assume it is. Then, by applying McWerther’s criticism of the conceptual appearing argument, we see the sensibility argument is question-begging. Kant cannot claim that things in themselves exist on the dual basis of our acquaintance with a cognitive power performing its function and an analysis of his stipulated definition of ‘sensibility’. For if things in themselves are indeed logically implied by the definition of ‘sensibility’, then Kant must first explain why ‘sensibility’ is the appropriate term for the cognitive power in question. To do that, he must already know that this cognitive power is affected by things in themselves, but that is precisely what was supposed to be concluded by these means.

The sensibility argument undergirds Jacobi’s (2000, 173) famous criticism: ‘I had to repeatedly start the *Critique of Pure Reason* from the beginning because I continued to be confused by the fact that **without** this presupposition [of the thing in itself], I could not find my way into the system, whereas **with** it I could not stay there.’ If Kant’s definition of ‘sensibility’ and cognitive theory are given, then human

¹⁵ The sensibility argument is intertwined with the problem of affection. Although my analysis of the sensibility argument may bear upon that problem, treating it here falls out of the scope of this paper. For more on the problem of affection see Van Cleve (1999, 162-67) and Allison (2004, 64-73).

cognition requires noumenal affection and, therefore, requires the existence of things in themselves. However, if Kant's definition of 'sensibility' and cognitive theory is given, then, by the same token, it is established that humans possess some *a priori* concepts (e.g. <existence>, <causality>, <affection>, etc.) that are objectively valid of some things in themselves. For, given those assumptions, we know that some things in themselves, in fact, fall under <existence> and <causality> or <affection>. But (1) this contradicts Kant's insistence that we cannot know whether our *a priori* concepts are objectively valid of things in themselves. Thus, Jacobi states, 'To remain in the [Kantian] system with the presupposition [of a thing in itself] is flatly impossible because it presupposes the objective validity of our perception of objects outside of us as things in themselves, and not **merely** as subjective appearances.' I would add to Jacobi's complaint that (2) those assumptions reinstate the objective validity problem – the solution of which is Kant's impetus for writing the *Critique* – since neither things in themselves could have caused our possession of the *a priori* concepts in question, nor could those *a priori* concepts cause the things in themselves to exist (see §1.1), and (3) those assumptions generate a contradiction with Kant's assertion that <noumenon> is a problematic concept (see §3.1).

However, the sensibility argument – and therefore the three problems above it generates for Kant's cognitive theory – relies on the assumption that no other definition of 'sensibility' is open to Kant's cognitive theory. Thus, Jacobi argues 'the word "sensibility" is already entirely meaningless if we do not understand it to be a distinct real medium between what is real and what is real.' But this is false. A definition of 'sensibility' is meaningful if it differentiates sensibility from our other cognitive powers, say, by drawing on their distinctive features. Sensibility and the understanding are differentiated, respectively, in terms of passivity and spontaneity. The

understanding's subsumption of objects under concepts illustrates its spontaneity. The fact that humans cannot make the objects of their cognition vanish and be replaced by other objects from one moment to the next, as God can, illustrates sensibility's passivity. While noumenal affection is a possible explanation for this passivity, it does not need to be appealed to in differentiating sensibility from the understanding. Accordingly, Kant's cognitive theory allows 'sensibility' to be assigned a meaningful definition that (1) does not imply things in themselves exist and (2) does not generate the above three problems. The fact that Kant opts for the definition he does is explainable by the fact that he believes things in themselves exist even though their existence is unknowable (see §3.3).

1.4 The Relational Argument

Allais (2015, 234-5) has recently presented the relational argument. The idea is that <relational properties> and <intrinsic properties> are conceptually related such that, if an object falls under the former, then it must fall under the latter. Allais understands things in themselves to be the intrinsic properties of empirical objects.¹⁶ Thus, given

¹⁶ Allais's interpretation of Kant's distinction_{AT} is modelled on a non-naïve direct realist view of cognition, one that must be able to account for non-veridical experiences. For example, consider a stick that is partially submerged in water. On such a view, the appearances of being bent is a property that belongs to the stick; hence, Kant's realism. Nevertheless, appearances of the stick only exist when a cognizer is cognizing the stick, or, minimally, could cognize it; thus, Kant's idealism. To make this interpretation consistent with Kant's cognitive theory, however, we must further stipulate that (1) appearances are never veridical of an object's intrinsic properties and (2) properties that are normally considered to belong to objects independently of any cognitive relationship with them are actually appearances (e.g. extension).

her understanding of things in themselves and the above conceptual relation, we have the following argument:

- (P1^{'''}) All appearances of empirical objects are entirely relational properties
- (P2^{'''}) Some appearances of empirical objects exist
- (P3^{'''}) The intension of <relational properties> conceptually implies that things in themselves exist
- (C^{'''}) Some things in themselves exist

The argument is deductively valid. (P1^{'''}) and (P2^{'''}) are both true given Kant's cognitive theory (A277/B333). Allais asserts that Kant accepts (P3^{'''}) without qualification. I argue Kant's acceptance of (P3^{'''}) depends on whether what is falling under <relational properties> is an object of understanding or an appearance. Specifically, I argue that Kant does not accept (P3^{'''}) in the case of appearances falling under <relational properties>.

Allais (2015, 238-41) bases her support in *The Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection* (hereafter *The Amphiboly*), drawing heavily on Kant's discussion of 'the *Inner* and the *Outer*' (A265/B321). Specific support of (P3^{'''}) comes directly from these passages:

According to mere concepts the inner is the substratum of all relational or outer determinations. (A283/B339)

Through mere concepts I cannot, indeed, think what is outer without thinking something that is inner; and this for the sufficient reason that concepts of relation presuppose things which are absolutely [*i.e.* independently] given, and without these are impossible. (A284/B340)

[W]ithout an absolutely inner element, a thing can never be represented by mere concepts. (A284/B340)

Allais (2015, 238) takes these passages to show that Kant ‘thinks something absolutely inner, or something non-relational, is required as a matter of a conceptual truth’. This, however, is a misinterpretation. When Kant is using ‘mere concepts’, he is thinking of objects being represented, or cognized, through a pure understanding – a representation that would be devoid of sensible content. Thus, Kant is say that objects of pure understanding, cognized without sensible content, must have intrinsic properties. Moreover, the claim that <relational properties> conceptually implies things in themselves (i.e. intrinsic properties) is limited to objects of pure understanding. The broader context of The Amphiboly and Kant’s discussion of ‘the *Inner* and the *Outer*’ supports my interpretation.

The general point of The Amphiboly is to demonstrate how transcendental reflection can prevent the invalid inferences we are apt to make from our failure to distinguish cognitions that originate in sensibility from cognitions that originate in the understanding (A260-1/B316-17). The problem occurs because, for certain concepts, *c*, the conceptual implications of *c* that hold of objects cognized merely through *c* do not hold of objects that are cognized through the conjunction of *c* and sensible intuition. For instance, Kant maintains that the identity of indiscernibles holds for objects of pure understanding, but it does not hold for appearances (A263/B319); the real in appearances allows of opposition, but the real in objects of pure understanding does not (A264-5/B320); matter is prior to form for objects of pure understanding, but form (i.e. space and time) is prior to matter for appearances (A267/B323). The same pattern continues in Kant’s discussion of *Inner* and the *Outer*:

In an object of the pure understanding that only is inward which has no relation whatsoever (so far as its existence is concerned) to anything different from itself. It is quite otherwise with a *substantia phaenomenon* in space; its inner determinations are nothing but relations, and it itself is

entirely made up of mere relations... As object of pure understanding, on the other hand, every substance must have inner determinations and powers which pertain to its reality. (A265-6/B321)

Here, Kant asserts the existence of noumenal substances (i.e. objects of pure understanding) is grounded solely on their intrinsic properties, such that their existence does not rely on a relation to something else. Phenomenal substances, in contrast, are composed entirely of relations. In short, Kant is asserting that, while objects of pure understanding must possess intrinsic properties to exist, phenomenal substances exist without possessing intrinsic properties. Kant later draws out the point further:

Because, without an absolutely inner element, a thing can never be represented *by mere concepts*, I may not therefore claim that there is *not* also in the things themselves which are subsumed under these concepts, and *in their intuition*, something external that has no basis in anything wholly inward. (A284/B340)

This is a difficult passage to parse. Its general structure states that the first clause is not adequate justification for claiming the propositional content following the first 'that' of the second clause. The first clause states that objects cognized through mere concepts (i.e. objects of pure understanding) must have intrinsic properties. The propositional content in question states that the objects subsumed under the same concepts by way of sensible intuition (thereby entailing that the concepts are no longer *mere* concepts) cannot have relational properties (i.e. something external) without them being grounded on intrinsic properties. In other words, it asserts that, for objects of sensible intuition, having relational properties requires the existence of intrinsic properties. But, then, taking the passage as a whole, Kant is saying that the conceptual implications that mere concepts have for objects of pure understanding do not entail, for objects of sensible intuition, that possessing relational properties requires the existence of intrinsic

properties. This speaks precisely against Allais' contention that Kant accepts (P3''') without qualification. Specifically, he does not think (P3''') is justified in the case of appearances falling under <relational properties>.

2. Two Positive Philosophical Arguments

Here, I provide two independent philosophical arguments for the unknowable existence thesis. The first extrapolates from the results of the above subsections. The second considers the judgement 'things in themselves exist' in light of some of the elements of Kant's theory of knowledge. I offer these in turn.

2.1 The Argument from Extrapolation

Since no thing in itself is sensibly intuited, their existence must be inferred either from our cognition of appearances ((P2), (P2'), (P2''), and (P2''')) or from our knowledge of our cognitive faculties. First, consider our cognition of appearances. An inference of things in themselves from appearances either relies on a real relation (e.g. causal) or a conceptual relation. §1.1 shows that no causal relation can ground such an inference. For no proposition that subsumes things in themselves under <causality> is justifiable given Kant's solution to the objective validity problem. Kant's solution to the objective validity problem entails this for no other reason than that <causality> is an *a priori* concept. But, then, no proposition subsuming things in themselves under an *a priori* concept is justifiable. Moreover, since no thing in itself is sensibly intuitable, no proposition subsuming things in themselves under an empirical concept is justifiable. But any appeal to a real relation in inferring things in themselves from appearances will require the subsumption of a thing in itself under the corresponding concept of that real relation – a concept that is either *a priori* or empirical. Therefore, no real relation justifies such an inference. §1.2 shows that the intension of <appearance_T> does not

entail things in themselves exist simply by something falling under <appearance_T>. And §1.4 shows that, on Kant's cognitive theory, appearances falling under <relational properties> do not entail that things in themselves exist. More generally, §1.2 illustrates that reliance on a conceptual relation for such an inference will always be question-begging, for independent grounds will always be required for proving that the concept applies. Now consider our knowledge of our cognitive faculties. As §1.3 illustrates with 'sensibility', the words referring to our cognitive faculties can be assigned definitions that do not imply the existence of things in themselves. §1.3 also illustrates that any definition of a word used in the investigation of our cognitive faculties that implies the existence of things in themselves will be question-begging, for independent grounds will always be required for proving that the cognitive power in question satisfies the word's definition. Without appeal to a real relation, conceptual relation, or non-question-begging stipulated definition, there are no means for validly inferring the existence of things in themselves. The unknowable existence thesis follows.

2.2 The Argument from Kant's Theory of Knowledge

'Things in themselves exist' (or 'intrinsic properties of an empirical object exist') is an assertoric synthetic *a priori* judgement. There are only five general means for (epistemically) justifying assertoric judgements on Kant's theory of knowledge. Analytic judgements are justifiable through conceptual analysis. But 'things in themselves exist' is synthetic, not analytic. Synthetic assertoric judgements are justifiable *a posteriori*, but 'things in themselves exist' must be justified *a priori*. There are, then, only three general means by which synthetic assertoric judgements can be justified *a priori*. First, they are justifiable if the *a priori* concept being employed is a necessary condition for experiencing objects in general (A92-3/B125-6). In which case, synthetic *a priori* judgements employing that *a priori* concept can be justified, but only

if the objects subsumed under it can be experienced. However, on Kant's cognitive theory, no thing in itself is experienced. Second, some are justifiable through our investigation of our cognitive faculties (e.g. 'space and time are the forms of sensibility') (See A10-6/B24-30). However, the knowledge that is, thereby, directly acquired concerns our cognitive faculties, which are not things in themselves. Lastly, they are justifiable indirectly through logical entailment, for any synthetic judgement logically entailed by a set of justified judgements (of whatever sort) will also be justified.

Some synthetic *a priori* judgements about things in themselves must be justifiable by logical entailment, since Kant argues that things in themselves are non-cognizable, things in themselves are non-spatiotemporal, etc. However, as I understand it, Kant views these claims to be logically entailed from synthetic *a priori* knowledge that is grounded by his investigation into our cognitive faculties (e.g. 'space and time are the forms of sensibility'), together with analytic truths about things in themselves. But knowledge acquired this way will not entail the existence of things in themselves. For illustration, consider the synthetic judgement 'no bachelors are homeowners'. If I were to discover that only married people are homeowners, that, together with the analytic truth that no bachelors are married, logically entails that no bachelors are homeowners. But it does not entail that bachelors exist. First, 'only married people are homeowners' does not ground the existence claim, since everyone could be married. Second, assertoric analytic judgements (e.g. 'all bachelors are unmarried') do not ground the existence claim, since the source of their justification resides in the subject concept (e.g. <bachelor>) containing the predicate concept (e.g. <unmarried>), not on intuiting an object falling under both the subject and predicate concepts simultaneously. Thus, assertoric analytic judgements are true regardless of whether an object actually

falls under both its subject and predicate concepts. It may be objected that, since Kant purports to adhere to Aristotelian logic, the universal propositions in question must imply the existence of their objects.¹⁷ But, if Kant adheres completely to Aristotelian logic, then, on Kant's theory of knowledge, propositions such as 'all bodies are extended' are not knowable *a priori*. For justification of these propositions would require more than conceptual analysis, namely justification that would demonstrate the existence of their subject matter (e.g. the existence of bodies). Since such propositions are knowable *a priori* on Kant's theory of knowledge, Kant cannot adhere completely to Aristotelian logic. Thus, since the objection fails, if I discover synthetic facts about my cognitive faculties *a priori* that, together with analytic truths of things in themselves, logically entail synthetic *a priori* knowledge of things in themselves, the existence of things in themselves is not thereby entailed. Therefore, in order for 'things in themselves exist' to be justified by logical entailment, the set of justified judgements from which it is entailed must include a synthetic judgement that is about things in themselves whose justification, itself, is not grounded on a set of justified judgements consisting merely of synthetic judgements about non-things-in-themselves and analytic truths of things in themselves. Now, let us examine whether such a synthetic judgement is possible on Kant's theory of knowledge and theory of cognition.

Let *j* be any such synthetic judgment. First, since *j* is justified and is about things in themselves, we know from the above discussion that the only general means for justifying *j* is through logical entailment. Second, since *j* is synthetic, *j* cannot be logically entailed by a set of justified judgements consisting solely of analytic truths. Thus, at least one of the justified judgements in the set justifying *j* is synthetic. Let *j'* be

¹⁷ This objection was raised by an anonymous reviewer.

any such judgment. For the reasons given above, *j'* cannot be grounded merely on synthetic judgements about non-things-in-themselves in conjunction with analytic truths of things in themselves. Thus, for the first and second reasons just given, the justification of *j'* must also be grounded in another set of justified judgements in which one is a synthetic judgement; and so on *ad infinitum*. But the human mind can only appeal to a finite set of justified judgements. Therefore, *j* is impossible. 'Things in themselves exist' cannot be justified by logical entailment.

Given the above discussion, there are no means, given Kant's theory of knowledge and theory of cognition, for justifying 'things in themselves exist'. Hence, the unknowable existence thesis follows.

3. Textual Support

I begin this section by providing a textual argument for the unknowable existence thesis, specifically one grounded on Kant's assertion that <noumenon> is a problematic concept. Then, I turn to defending the unknowable existence thesis from the fact that Kant explicitly offers versions of the appearing arguments. Namely, I show Kant is actually (1) rejecting the appearing arguments and (2) relying on the conceptual appearing argument to explain how we acquire <noumenon> (or <thing in itself_T>) *a priori*. Nevertheless, Kant sometimes explicitly and implicitly asserts the existence of things in themselves. Thus, lastly, I explain Kant's commitment to things in themselves in the face of his adoption of the unknowable existence thesis.

3.1 The Problematic Concept Argument

In the B-edition of *The Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena* (hereafter *Phenomena and Noumena*), Kant asserts that <noumenon> is a problematic concept (B310). He goes on to assert things in

themselves (if they exist) belong to the extension of <noumenon>, saying

[T]he concept of a noumenon is necessary, to prevent sensible intuition from being extended to things in themselves, and thus to limit the objective validity of sensible knowledge. The remaining things, to which it does not apply, are entitled noumena... (B310)

The ‘remaining things’ to which sensible cognition does not apply include things in themselves, since, according to Kant, no thing in itself is sensibly cognizable.

Therefore, all things in themselves (if they exist) belong to the extension of the problematic concept <noumenon>. But part of Kant’s definition of ‘problematic concept’ is that the concept’s ‘objective reality... cannot any way be known’ (B310). It follows that the objective validity of <noumenon> is unknowable. That is, it is unknowable whether anything belongs to the extension of <noumenon>. But this is logically equivalent to the claim that it is unknowable whether any noumena exist. And since all things in themselves (if they exist) belong to the extension of <noumenon>, it follows that it is unknowable whether any things in themselves exist. Thus, Kant consciously adopts the unknowable existence thesis.

3.2 The Appearing Arguments

In the A-edition of *Phenomena and Noumena*, Kant provides an appearing argument that, at first glance, seems to be aimed at establishing the objective validity of <noumenon>, or, logically equivalently, proving noumena exist:

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)

However, the immediately following passage expounds upon the consequences this appearing argument has for Kant's cognitive theory, if the argument is sound:

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, and that even in their *a priori* application they relate only to the formal possibility of experience. On the contrary, we should have to recognise that in addition to the empirical employment of the categories, which is limited to sensible conditions, there is likewise a pure and yet objectively valid employment. (A250)

That is, if the appearing argument is sound, then the 'important conclusion' that the Transcendental Analytic leads to is false:

[T]he Transcendental Analytic leads to this important conclusion, that the most the understanding can achieve *a priori* is to anticipate the form of a possible experience in general... the understanding can never transcend those limits of sensibility... Its principles are merely rules for the exposition of appearances... (A246-7/B303)

Any interpretation of the *Critique* that has Kant rejecting the important results of the Transcendental Analytic is untenable. Consequently, Kant is not offering the appearing argument so as to endorse it.¹⁸ Rather, he is offering the appearing argument so as to

¹⁸ See Bird (1962, 18-35) for several textual reasons against interpreting Kant as endorsing the causal appearing argument. Perhaps most notably, Kant, in the 'Fourth Paralogism',

reject it. Nevertheless, Kant views the conceptual appearing argument as instrumental in our *a priori* acquisition of <noumenon>. Shortly after rejecting the appearing argument above, Kant offers another one, which I have put in bold:

The cause of our not being satisfied with the substrate of sensibility, and of our therefore adding to the phenomena noumena which only the pure understanding can think, is simply as follows. The sensibility (and its field, that of the appearances) is itself limited by the understanding in such fashion that it does not have to do with things in themselves but only with the mode in which, owing to our subjective constitution, they appear. The Transcendental Aesthetic, in all its teaching, has led to this conclusion; **and the same conclusion also, of course, follows from the concept of an appearance in general; namely, that something which is not in itself appearance must correspond to it. For appearance can be nothing by itself, outside our mode of representation. Unless, therefore, we are to move constantly in a circle, the word appearance must be recognized as already indicating a relation to something, the immediate representation of which is, indeed, sensible, but which, even apart from the constitution of our sensibility (upon which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something in itself, that is, an object independent of sensibility.**

There thus results the concept of a *noumenon*. It is not indeed in any way positive, and is not a determinate knowledge of anything... Consequently, although our thought can abstract from all sensibility, it is still an open question of whether the notion of a noumenon be not a mere form of a concept, and whether, when this separation has been made, any object whatsoever is left. (A251-3; emphasis mine)

regards ‘the conclusion that the existence of outer objects is doubtful from the premiss that such objects are not immediately perceived but are inferred as the cause of given perceptions’, for the reason that we cannot tell whether the cause is external or internal (Bird, 1962, 21; A366-8).

Just before the conceptual appearing argument, Kant informs us what he is aiming to do here. Namely, he wants to explain why we add noumena to phenomena, even though we only experience phenomena. That is, he wants to explain what motivates us to infer the existence of noumena, once we come to understand that all we cognize empirically are phenomena. But, just after the conceptual appearing argument, we discover (1) the reason for adding noumena to phenomena only results in the formation of <noumenon> and (2) the objective validity of <noumenon> is not thereby established, since ‘it is still an open question of whether the notion of a noumenon be not a mere form of a concept, and whether, when this separation has been made, any object whatsoever is left.’¹⁹

Thus, in keeping with Kant’s rejection of the earlier appearing argument, we see that the inference from the existence of phenomena to the existence of noumena is invalid.²⁰

Why, then, are we compelled to add noumena to phenomena nonetheless?

Kant holds that reason demands completeness and, therefore, demands the unconditioned (Bxx and A307-8/B364). But, as the above passage states, an appearance

¹⁹ Cf. (WH Walsh 1975, 162-3).

²⁰ Cf. (Allais 2015, 63), (Pickering 2016, 598-603), and (McWerther 2012, 55-7). Allais’ interprets the above conceptual appearing argument as entailing the existence of noumena in the negative sense (i.e. non-sensible things). First, as I have argued, Kant rejects the earlier appearing argument (A249). Second, what results from the argument is <noumenon>, whose objective validity is indeterminable, meaning the argument’s inference to the existence of noumena is invalid. Pickering and McWerther agree with me the appearing arguments are bad arguments. However, Pickering interprets Kant as providing a different argument than the conceptual appearing argument – one in which the conclusion is about the existence of <noumenon>, not noumena – because he does not want to attribute a bad argument to Kant. But, Kant says he is explaining why we add the existence of something to phenomena, meaning the argument’s conclusion has to do with the existence of noumena, not the existence of <noumenon>. Thus, Kant is purposely giving a bad argument as an explanation for why we form <noumenon> *a priori*.

is ‘nothing by itself, outside our mode of representation’, meaning, for any appearance, its existence is conditioned. Moreover, the passage says the Transcendental Aesthetic teaches that sensibility never brings us into cognitive contact with things in themselves – the kind of thing whose existence can be unconditioned. Thus, if we limit ourselves to objects of experience in explaining what grounds the existence of an appearance, then we are always left appealing to another appearance, whose existence is likewise conditioned and must be explained by yet another appearance, and so on *ad infinitum*, leaving us ‘to move constantly in a circle’. Reason’s demand can only be satisfied – i.e., this circle can only be escaped – by treating <appearance_T> ‘as already indicating a relation to... something in itself’ (Cf. Bxxxvi-Bxxxvii). This, though, I argued in §1.2 is to be guilty of equivocation. Thus, reason’s demand for the unconditioned *psychologically compels* us to accept the conceptual appearing argument, even though the argument is *logically unconvincing*. This has the trappings of a dialectical illusion, which enables reason to produce *a priori* concepts (i.e. transcendental ideas), but never establishes their objective validity. This is further evidenced by the fact that transcendental ideas are also the product of dialectical illusions (i.e. inferences caused by reason’s demand for completeness) and both <noumenon> and transcendental ideas are labelled ‘problematic concepts’, suggesting <noumenon> (and <thing in itself_T>) is close in kind to an idea of reason (B310 and A339/B397ff.).²¹

²¹ Cf. (Daniel Warren 2001, 52-8). Warren (2001, 55) also maintains that <thing in itself_T> ‘has the content Kant associates with the ideas of reason’. Note there is a disanalogy between the transcendental ideas of reason and <thing in itself_T> in that each transcendental idea corresponds to a kind of syllogism (categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive), but <thing in itself_T> is the result, so I argue, of the conceptual appearing argument. In contrast, Warren (2001, 55) sees <thing in itself_T> resulting from appearances having only comparatively inner properties, meaning that, without absolutely inner properties (i.e.

The B-edition of Phenomena and Noumena corroborates this reading. There, Kant explicitly says that ‘we are here subject to an illusion from which it is difficult to escape’ and ‘we come upon an ambiguity which may occasion serious misapprehension’, such that we are ‘misled into treating the entirely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible entity... as being a *determinate* concept of an entity that allows of being known’ (B305-7). And, as I have argued above, the illusion from which it is difficult to escape is generated by the conceptual appearing argument:

At the same time, if we entitle certain objects, as appearances, sensible entities (phenomena), then since we thus distinguish the mode in which we intuit them from the nature that belongs to them in themselves, it is implied in this distinction that we place the latter, considered in their own nature, although we do not so intuit them, or that we place other possible things, which are not objects of our senses but are thought as objects merely through the understanding, in opposition to the former, and that in so doing we entitle them intelligible entities (noumena). (B306)

Shortly after offering this version of the conceptual appearing argument, Kant discusses the ambiguity that may occasion serious misapprehension:

The understanding, when it entitles an object in a [certain] relation mere phenomenon, at the same time forms, apart from that relation, a representation of an *object in itself*, and so comes to represent itself as also being able to form *concepts* of such objects. (B306-7)

In short, we imagine ourselves as equipped with a real use of the understanding, which is, in effect, a limited sort of intellectual intuition, through which we can cognize an object in itself. That is, we imagine that the conceptual appearing argument equips us

things in themselves), there is no ‘endpoint for an explanatory regress’. In both cases, <thing in itself_T> is the result of reason’s need to avoid an infinite regress.

with the concept of a noumenon in the positive sense (<noumenon+>) – ‘an *object* of a *non-sensible intuition*,’ which is intellectual – and, at the same time, establishes its objective validity (B307). This is what misleads us ‘into treating the entirely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible entity... as being a *determinate* concept of an entity that allows of being known’ (B307). Thus, to clear up the ambiguity and forestall the illusion that we have a real use of the understanding, Kant recasts ‘the entirely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible entity’ that results from the conceptual appearing argument in terms of a noumenon in the negative sense (<noumenon.>) – ‘a thing so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*’ (B307). What is important for my purposes is that, without a real use of the understanding, the objective validity of either <noumenon+> or <noumenon.> is unknowable. For, as Kant goes on to say,

The [real] possibility of a thing can never be proved merely from the fact that its concept is not self-contradictory, but only through its being supported by some corresponding intuition. (B308)

We do not intuit noumena in the positive sense, because we do not possess a real use of the understanding or an intuitive intellect. And, we do not intuit noumena (or noumenal properties) in the negative sense, because we only have a sensible intuition.²² My

²² While Kant introduces <noumenon+> and <noumenon.> to avoid confusing ourselves as having a real understanding, it has continued to invite just that. Since <noumenon.> merely includes <not-sensibly-intuitable>, the knowability of its objective validity does not depend upon whether the objective validity of <intuitive intellect> is knowable, as in the case of <noumenon+>. Thus, it may be thought that, while we cannot know the existence of noumena in the positive sense, we can know the existence of noumena in the negative sense; see, for example, Allais (2015, 60-5). But neither kind of noumenon is intuitable by us, which is required for knowing their real possibility, let alone their actual existence. Thus, interpreting Kant’s cognitive theory as allowing for the knowledge of the

contention that the objective validity of <noumenon-> is unknowable is further evidenced by the fact that Kant clarifies which <noumenon> he has in mind, when labelling <noumenon> ‘a problematic concept’, because, when doing so, he gives the definition of ‘noumenon in the negative sense’: ‘a thing which is not to be thought as object of the senses’ (B310).²³ Again, as argued above (§3.1), the unknowability thesis follows.

Before turning to the next section, notice that <noumenon> cannot be an empirical concept, since no noumenon is experienced. Neither is it a category. Furthermore, the possession of <noumenon> is necessary for Kant’s practical philosophy, since (1) <noumenon> is necessary for forming non-contradictory judgments about noumena and, therefore, for thinking (Denken) noumena and (2) without being able to think (Denken) noumena, it would be impossible for practical (moral) considerations, as opposed to theoretical (epistemic) considerations, to justify judgments about noumena (e.g. ‘the soul is immortal’) (Bxxvii). Thus, the possession of <noumenon> is necessary for making room for *faith* [i.e. *Glaube*]’ (Bxxx). Consequently, since <noumenon> is neither empirical nor a category, the appearing arguments, as invalid arguments that cause us to form <noumenon> *a priori* through dialectical illusions, are instrumental to the success of Kant’s practical project. *Mutatis mutandis* for <thing in itself_T> and things in themselves.

existence of noumena in the negative sense is, in effect, to interpret ourselves as having a real use of the understanding (i.e. an intuitive intellect).

²³ Cf. (Allais 2015, 64). Allais interprets Kant to be describing <noumenon₊> as being a problematic concept, despite quoting his explicit use of the definition of ‘noumenon in the negative sense’ in clarifying the concept in question.

3.3 Kant's Commitment to the Existence of Things in Themselves

I have been arguing for the unknowable existence thesis. In fact, I have argued that Kant consciously adopts the unknowable thesis. Nevertheless, Kant, both in the *Critique* and the *Prolegomena*, makes several assertions that explicitly or implicitly commit him to the existence of things in themselves.²⁴ Consider some examples:

Doubtless, indeed, there are intelligible entities corresponding to the sensible entities... (B308-9)

[T]he something which underlies the outer appearances and which so affects our sense that it obtains the representations of space, matter, shape, etc., may yet, when viewed as noumenon (or better, as transcendental object)... (A358)

[O]ur sensibility is affected in its characteristic way by objects that are in themselves unknown to it and that are wholly distinct from said appearances. (Prol. 4, 318)

This commitment to the existence of things in themselves seems at odds with Kant's adoption of the unknowable existence thesis. How can these be consistent with one another?

Recently, Pickering (2016) has argued that Kant's commitment to the existence of things in themselves is a doctrinal belief. In the third section of The Canon of Pure Reason, Kant says, 'The holding of a thing to be true... has the following three degrees: *opining*, *believing*, and *knowing*' (A822/B850). As Pickering notes,

These species of acceptance are either sufficient or insufficient in a subjective sense and an objective sense. Subjectively sufficient acceptance

²⁴ All quotes from the *Prolegomena* – abbreviated Prol. – are taken from Gary Hatfield's translation (Kant 2004).

has its ground in the particular nature of the subject. Objectively sufficient acceptance is valid of everyone who has reason. Opinion is subjectively insufficient and objectively insufficient. Belief is subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient. Knowledge is both subjectively sufficient and objectively sufficient. (Pickering 2016, 603-4)

Kant goes on to maintain that ‘it is only from a *practical point of view* that the theoretically insufficient holding of a thing to be true can be termed believing’ (A823/B851). Accordingly, Kant seems to be asserting that the only way to accept a judgement (e.g. ‘things in themselves exist’), when theoretical grounds fail to provide objectively sufficient reasons for accepting it, is through practical reasons, such as moral considerations. However, he goes on to carve out exceptions to this, which he terms doctrinal beliefs:

But in many cases, when we are dealing with an object about which nothing can be done by us, and in regard to which our judgement is therefore purely theoretical, we can conceive and picture to ourselves an attitude for which we regard ourselves as having sufficient grounds, while yet there is no existing means of arriving at certainty in the matter. Thus even in purely theoretical judgements there is an *analogon of practical* judgements, to the mental entertaining of which the term ‘*belief*’ is appropriate, and which we may entitle *doctrinal belief*.

Pickering (2016, 610-3) correctly argues that the acceptance of ‘things in themselves exist’ fits Kant’s description of a doctrinal belief. First, corresponding to my arguments for the unknowable existence thesis, any theoretical reasons for accepting ‘things in themselves exist’ are objectively insufficient. Second, as I argue in §3.2, we are led to infer the existence of noumena because of reason’s demand for completeness and the unconditioned. But reason’s demand for completeness and the unconditioned is merely a special feature of our subject and, so, at best, provides a subjectively sufficient reason for accepting ‘things in themselves exist’ (Cf. Pickering 2016, 610-1). Thus, while

there are no theoretical reasons through which we can *know* the existence of things in themselves, there are theoretical reasons for *believing* they exist. Accordingly, Kant's explicit and implicit commitments to the existence of things in themselves are not inconsistent with Kant's adoption of the unknowable existence thesis. At the same time, it explains why Kant opts for a definition of 'sensibility' that includes noumenal affection, when a meaningful alternative definition that does not include noumenal affection is available.

4. Conclusion

I have argued for the unknowable existence thesis on both philosophical and textual grounds. I have even argued that Kant consciously adopts the unknowable existence thesis. Moreover, I defended the unknowable existence thesis from two objections: Kant provides theoretical arguments for the existence of things in themselves, and Kant talks as though things in themselves do exist.

Although this paper removes a major source of support for ontological interpretations of Kant's ontological distinction_{AT}, it has several positive upshots. First, it offers an interpretation that does not reinstate the objective validity problem, the solution of which is Kant's impetus for writing the *Critique*. Second, it offers an interpretation that avoids Jacobi's criticism that Kant's cognitive theory generates a contradiction. And, third, it explains the formation of <noumenon> and <thing in itself_T>, which (1) are neither empirical nor are they categories and (2) is necessary for Kant's practical philosophy, since Kant's practical philosophy requires our ability to think (denken) noumena and things in themselves.

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