

#### **Prompt 4: Transcendental Idealism**

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents his theory of transcendental idealism, taking pains to distinguish his form of idealism from those postulated by Berkeley and Descartes. According to Kant, transcendental idealism refers to the doctrine that all appearances are mere representations and *not* things in themselves. Appearances are mind-dependent in the sense that their formal features are constituted by the universal structures of the human mind; however, at the same time, appearances are also *empirically real*. Things in themselves, which remains unknown to us, grounds both these outer appearances and inner intuitions. One can interpret such a distinction in two main ways: firstly, a largely phenomenalist “two-world” reading, which proposes that appearances and things in themselves are ontologically distinct realms of being; secondly, a mainly epistemological, “one-world” reading of the distinction as two ways of considering one and the same object. Using the “one-world” reading, which stays more faithful to Kant’s intent, I conclude that transcendental idealism is a viable position.

Let us first understand transcendental idealism by what Kant distinguishes it from. In the resolution to the Antinomies, Kant provides a straightforward definition of transcendental idealism (as well as what he has accomplished in the Transcendental Aesthetic): that all objects of possible experience are “nothing but appearances, i.e., mere representations” (as he reiterates in the *Prolegomena*), which have outside our thoughts “no existence grounded in itself” (B519). In the *Prolegomena*, Kant makes clear what this idealism is concerned with. He writes: “For what I called idealism did not concern the existence of things..., for it never came into my mind to doubt that, but only the sensory representation of things.” (4:293) This is pivotal, as it directly refutes charges of a subjective idealism or phenomenalism that appearances as “mere representations” seem to suggest. In fact, Kant characterizes his idealism as “formal,” in order to

distinguish it from the “material” idealism of Berkeley and Descartes (B274). By formal, Kant means that it is the form of the objects depends on the mind, but not the existence of things. Unlike Berkeley’s dogmatic idealism, which denies the existence of external space, and Descartes’s problematic idealism, which cannot know that objects exist outside us in space, Kant’s formal idealism coexists with his *empirical realism*. Kant’s philosophical position is extremely nuanced. Bearing in mind that the existence of things is mind-independent and the sensory representation of things is mind-dependent *in some sense* (as opposed to transcendental realism, which regards outer experience as things in themselves), Kant further argues that we can possess immediate (non-inferential, as opposed to Descartes’ stance) and certain knowledge of the sensory representation of things. Immediately after his Refutation of Idealism in the B edition, Kant asserts “the existence of objects in space outside me” by self-consciousness (B275). Thus, according to Kant, we can be certain of an empirical reality because inner experience (claimed to be indubitable by idealists) is only possible under the presupposition of outer appearance. Appearances are representations, but nevertheless they exist outside of us. As such, Kant demonstrates the compatibility of transcendental idealism and empirical realism.

At this juncture, it is also helpful to note the distinction Kant draws in the A edition between the transcendental and empirical definitions of “outside me”: a thing in itself “exists distinct from us” while an empirically external object “belongs to outer appearance” and will thereby be called, for the sake of distinction, “things that are to be encountered in space” (A373). Following Kant, objects in space or outer objects in this paper will refer to empirical objects at the level of appearances.

We now zoom into Kant’s account of appearances. In the *Prolegomena*, he concludes that appearances “are not things (but mere ways of representing), nor are they determinations of

things in themselves" (4:293). In line with his overall stance of transcendental idealism in tandem with empirical realism, Kant sees appearances as both mind-dependent and empirically real. From Kant's view, although the formal features of appearances (space and time) are dependent on human minds *in general*, appearances are also empirically real, existing as extended bodies in places with causal relations. Appearances, as external objects independent of *particular* acts of *particular* minds, are that which in universal experience and all different positions relative to the senses is always determined thus in intuition. An example would be: everyone in one room would perceive the same piece of chalk through the universal forms of *a priori* intuition (space and time) and concepts of understanding (the categories). We can encapsulate Kant's argument on appearances in the Transcendental Aesthetic as such: objects in space — like the aforementioned chalk — are "nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility" (A30/B45) because even the subjective conditions of our empirical experience (space, time, and the categories) "cannot exist in themselves, but only in us" (A42/B59). Here, Kant puts forth an important premise that not only objects of experience in space and time, but also space and time themselves, are appearances.

In the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant also uses space and time to delineate our cognitive relationship to appearances. If we remove our own subject or the "subjective constitution of the senses in general," Kant argues then that all constitution — including space and time themselves — and all relations of objects in space and time would disappear (B59). However, having established that, Kant distinguishes between what is "valid for every human sense in general" and that which "pertains to [objects] only contingently" for a particular situation or organization (A45/B62). At the level of appearances, this distinction seems to be one that is between the properties of an object represented in virtue of the *a priori* forms of experience, which are

intersubjectively valid for all minds, and the sensory properties an object presents to differently situated humans, which is dependent on the particular constitution of our sense organs. I would like to use Kant's example of a rainbow in a sun-shower. While the rainbow, the rain, their round form, and even the space through which they fall are all appearances — “mere modifications or foundations of our sensible intuition” (B63) — there is an empirical distinction between the rainbow in itself (a collection of raindrops and spatial relations) and the rainbow appearance (the colorful band perceived). That Kant makes this distinction strengthens his position of empirical realism. Appearances can be unobservable by our sense perception, or can have properties different from what they seem to have in sense perception.

What, then, about things in themselves? According to Kant, we are steeped in “unavoidable ignorance” in relation to things in themselves (Bxxix). The reason for our ignorance is due to the inherent limitations of our sensibility. Abstracted from the receptivity of sensibility, the things in themselves are “entirely beyond our cognitive sphere” (A190/B235) and we can only be acquainted with “our way of perceiving them” (A42/B59). The representation of a body in intuition contains only the appearance of something and the way in which we are affected by it, but nothing at all that could pertain to an object in itself. In the Phenomena-Noumena chapter, Kant presents things in themselves as existing in the noumenal realm: accordingly, “not an object of our sensible intuition” entails that things in themselves are not given to us in space and time while “an object of a non-sensible intuition” entails that we have to assume an intellectual intuition of which we do not possess and cannot understand (B307). In both ways, noumena, as are things in themselves, remain unknown to us.

Our cognitive relationship to things in themselves is also equally elusive. Kant argues in the Aesthetic that even if we bring our intuition to the highest degree of distinctness we would

still never be able to come close to the things in themselves but only the most enlightened version of their appearance. This is because we can only cognize our own way of intuiting, that is through our sensibility, and once that subjective constitution is removed, we can no longer determine the represented object with the properties that sensible intuition attributes to it.

How Kant thinks things in themselves relate to appearances is a tricky matter. He describes the relationship between the two in several manners: things in themselves are “the cause of appearance (thus not itself appearance)” (A288/B344), “an unknown ground of those appearances” (A380), a “non-sensible cause” (A494/B522), and as a source of “[affection]” (A190) for our sensibility. However, different readings of Kant’s transcendental idealism will provide different interpretations of how we conceive how appearances relate to things in themselves. Henry E. Allison’s piece on “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism” aptly summarizes the two main camps of interpretation. The “two-world” interpretation is largely a phenomenalist reading of appearances — capitalizing on Kant’s claim that appearances are mere representations, this view “takes appearances and things in themselves to constitute two ontologically distinct realms of being” (Allison 112). The alternative “one-world” interpretation sees the distinction between appearances and things in themselves as one which pertains to “two ways of considering things”: as objects appear to us spatiotemporally and as they may be in themselves independent of our intuition (Allison 112).

One crucial place to look in the first *Critique* for Kant’s intent is in the resolution to the Antinomies. Because of “sensibility as a receptivity,” Kant suggests that we can call things in themselves the “merely intelligible cause of appearances” (B522). Since sensibility as something that is receptive requires a transcendental object to activate, this provides another reason for the existence of things in themselves. It might appear that Kant wants to advance a causal

relationship between things in themselves and appearances, which would fall under the “two-world” reading. However, if Kant were to talk about things in themselves as ontologically distinct beings whose affection causes a representation, then that would entail the application of the categories to things in themselves. Kant thereby would have to give up the difference between appearances and things in themselves. It also cannot be appearances which our sensibility is affected by because appearances exist in virtue of the very experiences they are supposed to be causing. Kant himself saw a problem with allowing the principle of causality to be valid of all things in general, raising the self-contradiction that would occur to the human soul: “I would not be able to say of one and the same thing, e.g., the human soul, that its will is free and yet that it is simultaneously subject to natural necessity.” (Bxxvii) As such, the “two-world” interpretation rings hollow.

Having set aside the “two-world” interpretation, a dissection of the epistemological reading of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves under the “one-world” interpretation would reveal that it is more faithful to Kant’s overall, programmatic intent in the first *Critique*. In the preface to the B edition, Kant advocates for a one-world, two-aspect view, 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” but cannot be cognized (Bxvii). This “twofold standpoint” means that things in themselves are simply objects considered independently of our distinctively spatiotemporal form of intuition, and are thus objects of a discursive cognition in general (Bxix). Kant’s position of empirical realism also lends credence to an epistemological reading. His sharp distinction between empirical and transcendental reality enables Kant to preserve the empirical reality of time – it only lacks reality when it comes to things in themselves. By considering time as an

“epistemic rather than an ontological condition,” transcendental idealism ensures the “objective reality” of time with respect to appearances while also leaving conceptual space for a radically distinct atemporal perspective — the second perspective (Allison 121). Consequently, only transcendental idealism allows for the possibility of affirming both the essential temporality of our experience and the conceivability of the unconditioned. While this may seem like a deflationary view which limits our sphere of knowledge to the sphere of appearances, it fits Kant’s ultimate agenda: our subjective need to seek the unconditioned is at the heart of Kant’s transcendental illusion; it is only with the transcendental idealism that such an illusion can be resolved.

In conclusion, Kant’s transcendental idealism is viable because it stands under an epistemological reading of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, which is to rule out any standpoint-independent perspective on our empirical reality and to prove that we have no access to the noumenal realm (or to God, Soul, and the World-Whole). Having established that things in themselves however do exist (to be thought but not cognized by our sensibility), such is Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy: that the objects of empirical reality must conform to our cognition instead of the reverse. That, Kant accomplishes with success.

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### Works Cited

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