

Henry Allison, in *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, does an excellent job of laying out the history of misinterpretation of Kant's position, as well as an admirable defense of Kant's true position. According to the standard picture, Kant's transcendental idealism is "a metaphysical theory that affirms the unknowability of the 'real' (things in themselves) and relegates knowledge to the purely subjective realm of representations (appearances)" [pp. 3-4]. Accordingly, this view presents Kant as holding both a phenomenalist account (the subjective experience of sensations that constitute objects) of what is presented to the mind, and hence knowable, along with the postulation of an additional set of entities which are, in the very terms of the theory, unknowable. The basic assumption behind this standard view is that the mind can only acquire the materials for its representations as a result of being "affected" by things in themselves; thus, we must assume things in themselves to exist, even though the theory explicitly denies that we have any right to say anything about them (even the claim that they exist, one would presume).

Many commentators who accepted this received view of Kant's transcendental idealism thus felt compelled to disentangle Kant's mistaken idealistic premises from the genuinely defensible parts of Kant's argument. Thereby, they hoped to preserve the "scientifically minded philosopher's" distinction between a realm of physical objects composed of primary qualities (extension, shape, position) and a mental realm consisting in sensible, secondary qualities (colors, smells, tastes, sounds) of these objects. According to this standard view then, Kant holds that the whole spatiotemporal framework of physical objects is assigned to the subjective constitution of the human mind (ideas and sensations are the 'affections' produced by the 'real' physical objects). Another way of stating this is to claim that Kant is merely an inconsistent Berkeley. This criticism of Kant as incoherent Berkeleian sees Kant as being a subjectivist, whereby he limits knowledge to appearances, and then equates 'appearance' with 'mere representation'. Thus on this reading, when Kant, like Berkeley, claims that we know only appearances, this means that we know only the contents of our minds, i.e. our ideas and sensations. This subjectivist orientation then, it is alleged, forces him to choose between two equally unappealing alternatives: either a) he must hold that things only seem to us to be spatial (or, temporal), which doctrine then entails that our consciousness of the world of spatial objects is somehow illusory; or b) he must claim that appearances, i.e. representations, really are spatial, a doctrine that is absurd because it requires one to regard ideas as extended and spatially located.

The most powerful objection stemming from this standard view of Kant is by limiting knowledge to appearances (subjective realm of representations), Kant undermines his own claims about having genuine knowledge, **scientia**. And this runs contrary to Kant's own intention, famously stated in the *Prolegomena*, as well as the *Critique* (especially the 2nd edition) that he had found a way to provide an antidote to Hume's skepticism. Even more problematic, on this reading, Kant is seen as a Cartesian skeptic – we can know things only as they 'are for us' or 'seem to us', not as they 'really are'. Of course, what this really means is that for Kant we cannot know anything at all. And surely this is a mistaken reading of Kant. So let's get clear on what Kant means.

'Ideality', in Kant's most general sense, means mind-dependence, or being in the mind [**in uns**, in Kant's German]; while 'reality' [**Realität**], in the sense of being opposed to 'ideality', signifies mind-independence, or being external to the mind [**ausser**

uns is Kant's typical expression]. In both the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant distinguishes carefully between an empirical and a transcendental sense of 'ideality'. Taken in its empirical sense, 'ideality' refers to the private data of an individual mind (thoughts, pains, sensations, feelings), which includes "ideas" in Descartes and Locke's sense of the word. 'Reality', in the empirical sense, refers to the "intersubjectively accessible, spatiotemporally ordered realm of objects of human experience" (Allison, p. 7). Thus at the empirical level, the ideality-reality distinction is basically that between the subjective-objective aspects of human experience. So when Kant claims that he is an empirical realist and denies being an empirical idealist, he really is affirming that human experience is not limited to the private domain of our own representations (which Descartes, Locke and other moderns do claim), but includes an encounter with "empirically real" spatiotemporal objects.

'Ideality' taken in the transcendental sense is quite different. This sort of ideality, gathered from philosophical reflection upon experience, provides us the universal, necessary, hence **a priori** conditions of human knowledge. Kant's doctrine of the transcendental ideality of space and time simply means that these are the subjective conditions of human sensibility (data for thought or experience). So when we speak of appearances in the transcendental sense, we mean spatiotemporal entities or phenomena, i.e. things as viewed under the conditions of human sensibility. Similarly, when we speak of things in themselves transcendently, we are speaking of things as viewed independent of these conditions. Allison provides us with a very clear example from Kant's own later writing that clarifies these distinctions:

Furthermore, it is to be noted that appearance, taken in the transcendental sense, wherein it is said of things that they are appearances [**Erscheinungen**] (phenomena), means something completely different than when I say, this thing appears to me in some manner or other, which should designate appearance in the physical sense, and which can be called semblance [**Apparenz**] and illusion [**Schein**]. For although these objects of the senses are mere appearances, since I can only compare them with other sensible objects ... by the language of experience, they are nevertheless thought as things in themselves. Thus if it is said of such a thing that it has the look [**Anschein**] of an arch, in this context the seeming refers to the subjective aspect of the representation of a thing, which can be a cause for it to be falsely taken in a judgment as objective. And therefore, the proposition that all sensible representations only yield knowledge of appearances is not at all to be equated with the claim that they contain only the illusion [**Schein**] of objects, as the idealist will have it. (*On Progress in Metaphysics*, 1796)

Following Kant's own caution to us, we can see then that those commentators who accuse Kant of being a confused or incoherent skeptic have simply failed to appreciate his distinction between empirical and transcendental versions of the basic distinction between appearance and thing in itself. So, Kant's claim that we should limit our knowledge to appearances in the transcendental (not the empirical) sense is an epistemic claim. That is, human knowledge depends on certain **a priori** conditions that reflect the structure of the human cognitive apparatus. These conditions do not determine

how objects ‘appear’ to us; rather, they express the “universal, necessary conditions under which the human mind is capable of recognizing something as an object at all” [Allison, p. 9].

If Kant is right that his own transcendental idealism provides the correct view of space, time, human cognition, and empirical objects, then, one might ask, what is the mistaken view that he is trying to correct? Kant regards all non-critical philosophies as versions of transcendental realism, the view that external objects exist independent of human sensible intuition. Thus from Kant’s viewpoint, the transcendental realist treats appearances as things in themselves, and accordingly plays the part of an empirical idealist, one who claims that the mind can only have immediate access to its own ideas or representations. So empirical objects only have an ideal existence – one must infer their existence, thus leading to the pseudo-problem (as Kant views it) of the external world, derived from the Cartesian skeptical starting point.

Kant gives us the best statement of his position in the critique of the 4th Paralogism, of the Ideality of Outer Relations [A369].

By *transcendental idealism* of all appearances I mean the doctrinal system whereby we regard them, one and all, as mere presentations and not as things in themselves, and according to which space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given on their own or conditions of objects taken as things in themselves. This idealism is opposed to a *transcendental realism*, which regards both time and space as something given in itself (independently of our sensibility). Hence the transcendental realist conceives outer appearances (if their actuality is granted) as things in themselves that exist independently of us and of our sensibility, and that would therefore be *outside* us even according to pure concepts of understanding. It is, in fact, this transcendental realist who afterwards plays the empirical idealist. Having wrongly presupposed that if objects of the senses are to be external then they must have their existence in themselves, i.e. even apart from the senses, he then finds that from his point of view all our presentations of the senses are insufficient to make the actuality of these objects certain...

The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist and concedes to matter as appearance an actuality that does not need to be inferred but is directly perceived. Transcendental realism, on the other hand, get necessarily into a quandary, and finds itself compelled to make room for empirical idealism. For it regards objects of the outer senses as something distinct from the senses themselves, and thus regards mere appearances as independent [**selbständig**] beings that are outside us. And thus, indeed, no matter how conscious we are of our presentation of these things, it is on this view still far from certain that if the presentation exists then the object corresponding to it also exists. In our system, on the other hand, these external things – viz., matter – are in all their shapes and changes nothing but mere appearances, i.e., presentations in us, of whose actuality we become conscious directly. (Kant, *Critique*, Werner Pluhar trans., A 371-2)