

# Kant and the Reach of Reason

Studies in Kant's Theory of  
Rational Systematization

NICHOLAS RESCHER

*University of Pittsburgh*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

published by the press syndicate of the university of cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

cambridge university press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>

10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Nicholas Rescher 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Palatino 10.5/13 pt. System QuarkXPress 4.04 [AG]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Rescher, Nicholas.

Kant and the reach of reason : studies in Kant's theory of  
rational systematization / Nicholas Rescher.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-66100-5. ISBN 0-521-66791-7 (pbk.)

1. Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804. I. Title.

b2798.r426 1999

193 dc21

99-25919

CIP

ISBN 0 521 66100 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 66791 7 paperback

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page vii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 On the Status of Things-in-Themselves in Kant's Critical Philosophy	5
2 Kant on Noumenal Causality	21
3 Kant's Cognitive Anthropocentrism	36
4 Kant on Cognitive Systematization	64
5 Kant's Teleological Theology	99
6 Kant on the Limits and Prospects of Philosophy	130
7 On the Reach of Pure Reason in Kant's Practical Philosophy	188
8 On the Rationale of Kant's Categorical Imperative	200
9 On the Unity of Kant's Categorical Imperative	230
<i>Notes</i>	249
<i>Name Index</i>	257

# Introduction

An oft-repeated truism has it that every important thinker of the past needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the changed intellectual circumstances of a later present. But there is not only a diachronic variation of circumstances; there is also a perspectival variation of philosophical outlooks in the present. Sooner or later, a student who becomes closely engaged with the work of one of the great thinkers of the past tends to develop a characteristic vision of its impact and bearing. And so it is in this case. For the Kant depicted here is a protopragmatist who differs in significant respects from the Kant envisioned by various other contemporary interpreters.

First and foremost, these essays see Kant as a problem solver whose favored instrument of work is the distinction. Whenever we look to Kant we find him preoccupied with what he sees as essential distinctions: analytic synthetic, a priori a posteriori, formal material, efficient final, knowledge belief, theoretical practical, means ends, moral prudential, categorical factual the list goes on and on. And all of these distinctions afford tools for addressing philosophical problems that must as Kant sees it be resolved through the development of suitable conceptual and doctrinal instrumentalities. The Kant I envision is one who is pervasively concerned with solving philosophical problems by undoing knots of thought by means of distinctions.

A second key point is that the Kant envisioned here is a dedicated systematizer. A follower of Leibniz and Wolff, he not merely seeks answers to questions and solutions to problems, but answers and solutions that fit into a coherent and systematic whole. And this systematic approach indicates that the proper way to

## *Introduction*

illuminate a Kantian position is not just from the local context of its treatment in a particular Kantian work, but by adducing cognate discussions in Kantian texts in areas that may seem remote from the particular discussion at hand.

Though produced on various occasions over many years, the essays collected together here exhibit a thematic and interpretative unity. While most of them are topically focused on specific issues (on things-in-themselves, moral causality, the Categorical Imperative), all of these essays are somehow concerned and most of them centrally concerned with the overall nature of Kant's system, his deepest philosophical intentions and most basic commitments. More than most past and recent commentators have done, these essays stress the specifically practical aspect of Kant's idealism, interpreting this as an explicative idealism that brings his thought into touch with the sort of pragmatism espoused by Peirce.

The book falls into three parts. Chapters 1–3 deal with Kant's approach to things-in-themselves and the realm of noumenal causality. Chapters 4–6 consider his approach to the methodology of rational inquiry and, in particular, his view of the methods of cognitive systematization, with special attention to his position regarding the limits and prospects of philosophizing itself. Finally, the third division, Chapters 7–9, deals with the role played by the Categorical Imperative alike in Kant's theoretical as in his practical philosophy. The aim, throughout, is to show that in an important sense Kant is prepared to assert the primacy of practical over theoretical philosophy.

Taken together, these studies accordingly unfold a continuous story line with a characteristic overall plot of its own, which runs roughly as follows: the conception of things-in-themselves or noumena, is not a doorway through which we can project our knowledge from the phenomenal realm into the problematic sphere of mind-independent reality (Chapter 1). Kant's use of causal expressions in relation to noumena represents a use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason grounded in the cognitive approaches of reason itself, rather than rooted dogmatically in an ontologically independent reality that reason endeavors to know (Chapter 2). The ideas projected by pure reason do not represent

## *Introduction*

objects proper (real things in space time) but serve merely to furnish reason with thought instrumentalities. For objectification one must look not to pure reason as such, but to the contingently given resources of the human intellect (Chapter 3). Pure reason's concern is not with the obtaining of knowledge, but with its systematization (Chapter 4). And it is a peculiar feature of the human mind that it requires that such systematization proceed in the purposive terms of a design that provides for a causality of purpose behind the causality of nature (Chapter 5). Since philosophizing itself is an exercise in pure reason that prescind from theoretical reason's focus on issues of real-world applicability, it follows that the proper work of philosophy lies on the side of practical reason (Chapter 6). And it is thus crucial for Kant that the reach of pure reason is greater in practical than in strictly theoretical/cognitive matters, so that the range of warranted acceptability (of what we can and must think to be so) is greater than that of actual knowledge (Chapter 7). This is vividly illustrated in the way in which the necessity and universality of moral principles is rooted in the Categorical Imperative fundamental to Kantian morality (Chapter 8). For the universality of the Categorical Imperative is absolute; what is fundamentally at issue here is a principle of reason that holds not just for moral/practical matters, but across the whole board of reason's concerns; theoretical as well as practical (Chapter 9).

The general theme of the approach to Kant taken in these pages is that of demystification. Kant's project, as portrayed here, is not one projecting a realm of mysterious items detached from the reality of this world: things-in-themselves, noumenal causes or transcendent purposes, or unrealizable duties. He is not the projector of a theoretical zoo populated by strange philosophical entities that are not of this world. His procedure is the effective opposite of this: to project on the screen of mind certain ideas that are serviceable in clarifying what the things of this world are through a contrast with what they are not. His use of idealizations is always negative: to provide an explanatory contrast with the actualities of the realm of our knowledge and existence. His idealities accordingly have a status that is not ontological, but functional and, if you will, pragmatic to provide thought tools that

## *Introduction*

are serviceable in clarifying the world's realities. Thus, for, example, even his highly idealized ethics is portrayed here as part of the stage setting of a wider moral theory, which, as such, contrasts with an applicative casuistry indispensable to rational decision about the acceptability of actions amidst the difficult circumstances of an uncooperative world.

In this way, the essays gathered here provide for a unified account that views the ideal of comprehensive systematization which Kant deems a characteristic of reason in general as also providing the key to the articulation of his own philosophy. Systematization is pivotal both *in* Kant's thought about the nature of knowledge and also *for* Kant's philosophy itself, whose central formative concept mechanism it provides.

The book is the product of the labors of a working philosopher who has for many years found the periodic preoccupation with Kantian texts to be a source of stimulus and inspiration. Its main concern is not with current controversies in Kant interpretation and the critique of rival Kant exegetes. Rather it endeavors to set out a systemically cohesive line of Kant interpretation as suggested by the author's own efforts to get clear on the issues. To a large extent the book keeps its distance from current scholarly debates and controversies and concentrates on setting out its own characteristic effort at a comprehensive reading of Kant.

# Chapter 1

## On the Status of Things-in-Themselves in Kant's Critical Philosophy

### 1. are things-in-themselves merely vestigial dogmatism?

Kant's distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is construed by various commentators along the lines of the traditional philosophical contrast between appearance and reality. There are, on the one hand, the phenomena of the realm of appearance (whose status is mind correlative and whose being lies in their being present to a mind) and, on the other hand, the realm of extramental reality, the domain of what really exists as it really exists, wholly and entirely apart from the sphere of human thought and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Now if this be so, then the conception of things-in-themselves encounters grave difficulties because of the obvious problem of getting there from here, where here represents the fundamental commitment of Kant's critical philosophy. Thus A. C. Ewing flatly asserts: Kant gives no grounds for believing in things-in-themselves, but merely asserts their existence dogmatically.<sup>2</sup> And if things-in-themselves indeed constitute a domain of altogether mind-external reality, it is hard to see how the matter could be otherwise on Kantian principles. Accordingly, it is often held that Kant's thing-in-itself is the (highly questionable) concession to a dogmatically rooted extra-mental reality of a philosophy whose Copernican Revolution everywhere else rejects metaphysical dogmatism and puts the creative activity of the human mind at center stage.

This chapter is a slightly revised version of an essay published under the same title in Gerhard Funke (ed.), *Akten des 5. Internationalen Kant Kongresses: Mainz 1981* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1981), pp. 437–47. Reprinted by permission of Bouvier Verlag.

This discussion will endeavor to show that the preceding perspective is very much mistaken. It will argue that it is quite incorrect to think of Kant's conception of a thing-in-itself as an inappropriate concession to a metaphysical stance that is totally at odds with the fundamental thrust of Kant's philosophy.

## 2. noumenal reality as an instrumentality of thought

For Kant, human thought proceeds at three (closely interrelated and interconnected) levels, corresponding to the three major faculties of the human mind:

1. *Sensibility*, which conforms our sense perception of objects to the (characteristically human) forms of sensibility, namely space and time.
2. *Understanding (Verstand)*, which conforms our various individual judgments regarding objects to the (characteristically human) categories of thought.
3. *Reason (Vernunft)*, which conforms the collective totality of our judgments regarding objects to certain structural requirements of systemic unity.

Their interrelation is crucial in Kant's theory of the thing-in-itself.

As Kant sees it, the conception of a thing-in-itself arises through abstraction, through removing in thought and by hypothesis certain conditions which are there in fact – namely, the particular limiting conditions of operation of our human sensibility (*CPuR*, B307). Specifically, what we can think away are, in the first instance, our particular forms of sensibility (sight, touch, and the rest) and then, by extension, any and all forms of sensibility. We thus arrive at the hypothesis of a being (God?) who does not perceive objects sensuously at all, but intuits them directly, in a sensuously unmediated act of the mind (*CPuR*, B310). Now, when the conditions of sensibility are thus thought away, what remains is the conception of an object that is accessible to a mind that can apprehend things nonsensuously, and this in turn engenders the conception of objects that are purely intelligible or noumenal in nature:

## *Things-in-Themselves*

[I]f we entitle certain objects, as appearances, sensible entities [*Sinneswesen*: phenomena], then since we thereby 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 . . . , 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 [*Verstandeswesen*: noumena]. (*CPuR*, B306)

We might (mistakenly) reify such items into genuine yet unexperientable things—things as a pure, sensuously unmediated, wholly intuitive understanding perceives them:

If by *noumenon* we mean a thing so far it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it, this is a noumenon in the negative sense of the term. But if we understand by it an *object of a non-sensible intuition*, we thereby presuppose a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which is not that which we possess, and of which we cannot comprehend even the possibility. This would be a *noumenon* in the *positive* sense of the term. (*CPuR*, B307)

This positive approach is wholly improper, since we cannot even begin to conceive of such an intuition. A negative variant, however, is quite legitimate:

The concept of a *noumenon* is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment. At the same time it is no arbitrary invention; it is bound up with the limitation of sensibility, though it cannot affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility. (*CPuR*, A255 = B310–11)

When we think away the particular conditions of our own sensibility, this still leaves us with something (*CPuR*, B312 = A254). And what we arrive at is the conception of a thing-in-itself, a noumenon in its negative guise:

[A]pppearance 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 . . . which . . .

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, but signifies only the thought of something in general, in which I abstract from everything that belongs to the form of sensible intuition. (CPuR, A251–52)

And again:

[W]e must bear in mind that the concept of appearances, as limited by the Transcendental Aesthetic, already of itself establishes the objective reality of *noumena* and justifies the division of objects into *phaenomena* and *noumena*, and so of the world into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding [*mundus sensibilis et intelligibilis*], . . . 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 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*. (CPuR, A249–50)

The thing-in-itself is accordingly a creature of understanding (*Verstandeswesen: ens rationis*) a product of abstraction arrived at by prescinding from the conditions of sensibility.

To be sure, such creatures of the understanding do not carry us beyond the domain of phenomena and their grounding:

The understanding . . . does indeed think for itself an object in itself but only as transcendental object, which is the ground of appearance . . . The critique of the pure understanding accordingly does not permit us to create a new field of objects beyond those which may be presented to it as appearances, and so to stray into intelligible worlds: of these it does not even allow us to entertain a concept. (CPuR, A288–89 = B344–45)

The only objects with which we can even deal are therefore those connected however tenuously to the domain of appearances.

Of course, we could not possibly *know* about noumenal objects.

## *Things-in-Themselves*

For, as Kant sees it, knowledge, strictly speaking, is confined to the objects of (sensory) experience. And given that they are, *ex hypothesi*, sense inaccessible, noumena lie beyond the reach of that sensibility through which alone objects can be given to us. But we can certainly *think* them – that is, we can meaningfully assume or suppose (and indeed posit or postulate) such things. We thus have a cognitive (or, at any rate, intellectual) route to things-in-themselves independent of outright knowledge of them, and fortunately so, since knowledge of them is altogether unrealizable.<sup>3</sup> This think versus know distinction is thus crucial. Were Kant to hold that we can know things in themselves, or even that we can know something of them (e.g., that they exist), then this would contradict his characteristic critical doctrine that any and all positive knowledge of objectively real things must, for us, be mediated by the sensibility.

However, this denial of positive knowledge of noumena does not produce a complete vacuum of information. There is (as Kant's own practice makes clear) a good deal that can be said about them, seeing that we have no alternative but to suppose that there indeed are noumena (that appearances are appearances of something) and that they are somehow grounded in a nonphenomenal reality. To be sure, this does not go very far. And the rest of what we have is negative and generic – that noumena are not spatio-temporal, subject to the categories, etc. Moreover, note that all this is not a matter of things in themselves as individual things, but is always something generic, something pertaining to the concept of noumena as such. At the level of particularity (of concrete objectivity) we can know nothing of noumena, for such knowledge would have to be synthetic, and this sort of knowledge simply cannot be obtained in regard to noumena.

The information we have regarding noumena is always packaged in analytic, objectively vacuous, negative stipulations to the effect that nothing of such and such a sort (phenomenal, spatio-temporal, subjectively conditioned, etc.) could validly be counted by us as a noumenon. The idea of a noumenal reality is thus something of which we can make no positive applications of any sort. Nevertheless it is a highly useful device:

## *Kant and the Reach of Reason*

What our understanding acquires through this concept of a noumenon, is a negative extension; that is to say, understanding is not limited by sensibility; on the contrary, it itself limits sensibility in calling things in themselves (things not regarded as appearances) *noumena*. But it at the same time sets limits to itself, recognizing that it cannot know them through any of the categories, and that it must therefore think them only under the title of an unknown something. (CPuR, A256 = B312)

The thing-in-itself, as such, is literally vacuous, since that X (the [mind-external] object) which corresponds to them [viz. to our representation] is nothing to us, being, as it is, something that has to be distinct from all our [sense-based] representation (CPuR, A105). Things-in-themselves are, accordingly, literally nothing for us in their status of identifiable things. But the conception of things in themselves (at the generic level) is quite another matter – something we can certainly get a grip on. It is a contrivance of the mind, a creature of our understanding to which we stand fully and irrevocably committed:

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. And . . . the understanding . . . also supposes that the object in itself must at least be *thought* . . . and so is misled into treating the entirely *indeterminate* concept of an intelligible entity, namely, of a something in general outside our sensibility, as being a *determinate* concept of an entity that allows of being known in a certain [purely intelligible] manner by means of the understanding. (CPuR, B306–7)

And again:

We cannot call the noumenon such an *object*; signifying as it does, the problematic concept of an object for a quite different intuition [namely, *nonsensuous* intuition] and a quite different understanding from ours, it is itself a problem. (CPuR, B334 = A287)

To assume a change with regard to our forms of sensibility means that the understanding too will not be unaffected, because our

forms of judgment (categories) can no longer be supposed to apply (nor, for that matter, our principles for the systemic unity of reason). But of course to abrogate our particular categories of understanding is not necessarily to abrogate all categories of understanding. So when contemplating a change with respect to the operation of sensibility, we must contemplate a change with respect to the operation of the understanding as well: the prospect of different categories must now also be brought into (hypothetical) play. However, alteration is not total abrogation. Something yet remains.

After all, to be fully objective and authentic, an appearance must be an appearance *of something*; there must be an underlying something that does the appearing that grounds it in an extraphenomenal order. The phenomena are representations (appearances), and where there is representation, there must be something that is represented (something that appears): When we say that the senses represent objects *as they appear*, and the understanding objects *as they are*, the latter statement is to be taken . . . as meaning that the objects must be represented as [mere] objects of experience, that is, as [mere] appearances (*CPuR*, A258 = B314), or again: [T]hough we cannot *know* these objects [of experience] as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears (*CPuR*, Bxxvi).

But of course noumena are not particular (individuated) things about which we have positive information. We can, and so must, have the concept of a noumenal realm or order, but not a concept of noumenal things. As individuated particulars, noumena are not even possible: For to substitute the logical possibility of the *concept* (namely that the concept does not contradict itself) for the transcendental possibility of *things* (namely that an object corresponds to that concept) can deceive and leave satisfied only the simple-minded (*CPuR*, A244 = B302). We can appropriately entertain and deploy the generic conception of things-in-themselves, but we can never concretely apply it (e.g., to this chair in itself). For Kant this would involve a contradiction in terms. Accordingly, things-in-themselves are not a part of knowable reality (nature):

Since we can apply to it [the noumenon] none of the concepts of understanding, the representation remains for us empty. The thing at issue with the thing-in-itself is a concept without an object, a mere *ens rationis* that is the mere shell of an object without content, without reality, indeed without as such being genuinely possible, although they must not for that reason be declared also to be impossible (*CPuR*, A290 = B347; cf. A291 = B347).

But of course knowledge is not the only cognitive modality at our disposal. For one thing, there is assumption and hypothesis. And, for another, there is positing and postulation. On this basis, the availability of things-in-themselves emerges as a postulate of the human understanding and the conception thereof as its indispensable tool. Kant summarizes the position as follows:

The cause of our not being satisfied with the substrate of sensibility, and of our adding to the phenomena noumena which only the pure understanding can think, is simply as follows. The sensibility . . . is itself limited by the understanding in such a 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 for the concept of an appearance in general; namely that something which is not in itself appearance must correspond to it. (*CPuR*, A251)

Our understanding is committed to the postulate or supposition that things-in-themselves have a place in an experience-external nonsensuous noumenal realm, however little we may know about them (*CPuR*, A253 = B309). Noumena are things the understanding must think (*CPuR*, B307) given the modus operandi of the human mind. Our understanding cannot operate without supposing things-in-themselves, any more than our sensibility can operate outside the space-time framework at the perceptual level. But to postulate something as an instrumentality for use is very different from claiming to know of its actuality.

To be sure, we do not and indeed cannot possibly as a matter of principle *know* anything concretely about an experience-external order of things. But that is neither here nor there. What counts is that the operations of our mind are so structured that we

do and must take our representations as actually representative. We do and must *think* of our experience as the product of a mind-external reality that somehow impinges upon our mind *ab extra*. And it is just this fundamental tendency of the human mind to objectification and externalization that is the sole and sufficient basis of things-in-themselves. Postulation and presupposition can appropriately enter in where knowledge of actual existence leaves off. In sum, the conception of a thing-in-itself is a thought tool: what we have here are validatable thought objects, theoretical entities that we can and must make use of in order to make sense of a knowable reality of which they themselves are emphatically not a determinable part.

### 3. the functional role of the conception of things-in-themselves

As Kant saw it, the central and crucial task of the mind's realistic commitment to things-in-themselves is to keep phenomena in their place as phenomena, to enforce a recognition that appearances are just that — appearances — by providing for the contrast between the appearance as such and a something that appears, thus blocking the way to an idealism (in its phenomenalist configuration) that rests content with a fabric of appearance. The prime role and function of his recourse to things-in-themselves is thus viewed by Kant in a negative mode, as a means for marking the limits of the human understanding:

[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, in order to show that this knowledge cannot extend its domain over everything which the understanding thinks . . . The concept of a noumenon is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment. At the same time there is no arbitrary invention; it is bound up with the limitation of sensibility though it cannot affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility. (*CPuR*, A255 = B310)

Noumena serve to curb the pretensions of sensibility. And they do this by providing for two crucial factors: objectivity and externality.

Objectivity is needed to implement the real fictitious distinction. This turns on the coherence and orderliness internal to our experience. As A. C. Ewing puts it, Kant holds that for us the reference to an object . . . must . . . be understood as an expression of the unity of experience.<sup>4</sup> This objectivity is provided by the transcendental object, of which Kant says:

All our representations are . . . referred by the understanding to some object . . . as the object of sensible intuition. But this goes no further than the transcendental object; and by that is meant a something = X, of which we know, and with the present constitution of our understanding we can know nothing whatsoever, but which, as a correlate of the unity of apperception, can serve only for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition. (*CPuR*, A250)

But this objectivity of experiential unity is only half the story.

Externality enters in because objectivity must be supplemented by the mind's insistence that our representations do actually represent that they are somehow grounded in an extraphenomenal reality. (The externality at issue is clearly not a matter of spatiality, but one of grounding.)<sup>5</sup> And this externality has its roots in the fact that the human understanding necessarily and inexorably postulates things-in-themselves (i.e., commits itself in thought to an endorsement of their reality). Exactly this the provision of externality is the reason for being of Kantian things-in-themselves.

Our thought is inherently intensional (to borrow Husserl's term) that is, aimed at matters that are (as we see it) themselves positioned outside the domain of the mental. In unifying the materials of sensibility into actual units or items (not mere phenomenal constellations or ordered collages of sense qualities, but integrated and interrelated wholes), the understanding does something useful. But such a unity, indicated by an integrated sense manifold a transcendental object, as Kant calls it is not enough. What is still lacking is externalizing intentionality, that pointing at some-

thing external through which an appearance (however unified) is referred to something extraphenomenal as being an appearance of *something* (CPuR, A252). It is this second demand that the conception of a thing-in-itself is designed to meet.

The conception of things-in-themselves is a creature of mind a self-imposed demand of the human understanding needed to implement its commitment to the objectivity and externality of those things with which it has to deal on the basis of the deliverances of sensibility and understanding. The task of this postulate is to ensure the fact that we have *experience*, and not merely *imagination* of other things, as Kant puts it at the start of the Refutation of Idealism (CPuR, B275). The fundamental role of the conception of things-in-themselves is thus to preclude ontological idealism, to provide for that essential idea of an independently self-sufficient object through which alone the objects of our thinking become genuine objects, conceived of as being more than mere mental constructions.

We accordingly not only can have credence in things-in-themselves can think them as actual but we must do so. As rational inquirers we cannot but *postulate* their availability though, to be sure, we can never *know* it, for that would be to bring them within the phenomenal orbit. We not only can endorse the conception of things-in-themselves, but we must do so to operate within our conceptual scheme. They represent an ineluctable imperative of our cognitive reason. Our mind being so constituted that it must impute objectivity to the objects of our experience, it cannot but regard them as the cognition-internal representations of cognition-external realities. Our reason is committed to that espousal, that *postulation* of things-in-themselves without which the conception of a thought-external reality could not be implemented. We cannot must not claim knowledge about a manifold of mind-independent reals that exist altogether in themselves. What is at issue here is a matter of a (practically) rational commitment to an indispensable useful conceptual resource.

To keep a precritical dogmatism in check we must stipulate the unknowability of noumena: to keep feckless idealism in check we must postulate their existence. The conception of things-in-

themselves must be applicable at the generic level (even without our being in a position ever to apply it at the level of particulars). It is a concept we can only employ *sub ratione generalitatis*. There is no particularization no prospect of identification at this level: quite literally we can have no knowledge of any object as a thing in itself (*CPuR*, Bxxvi). And even in the case of our own selves, where we come into closest proximity to noumena, we can secure no knowledge whatever:

[W]e must admit and assume behind the appearances something else which is not appearance, namely things in themselves; we do so although we must admit that we cannot approach them more closely and can never know what they are in themselves, since they can never be known by us except as they affect us. This must furnish a distinction, though a crude one, between a world of sense and a world of understanding. The former, by differences in the sensuous faculties, can be very different among various observers, while the latter, which is its foundation, remains always the same. A man may not presume to know even himself as he really is by knowing himself through inner sensation . . . Thus in respect to mere perception and receptivity to sensations he must count himself as belonging to the world of sense; but in respect to that which may be pure activity in himself (i.e., in respect to that which reaches consciousness directly and not by affecting the senses) he must reckon himself as belonging to the intellectual world. But he has no further knowledge of that world. (*Grundlegung*, p. 451, Akad.)

Kant would have viewed the labors of his successors toward clarifying the thing-in-itself and providing information about its nature as utterly misguided. A thing-in-itself whose nature is brought within the reach of the categories of understanding is ipso facto unable to do the job of endowing the appearances with the intentionality of indicating something that stands altogether outside the phenomenal order, and thus to ensure that appearances are appearances *of* something. A cognitively domesticated thing-in-itself would (*ex hypothesi*) not be able to accomplish the important mission assigned to such things in the Kantian framework namely, that of providing a basis of *mind externality* for the objects at issue in our knowledge.

#### 4. the status of the conception of things-in-themselves

Let us now return to the purported difficulty mooted at the outset the charge that Kant's recourse to things-in-themselves is not only gratuitous and dogmatically undefended, but even involves a certain inconsistency or incongruity with his basic commitments. For, all that he is entitled to on his theory, so the objection goes, is a variety of creatures of the human mind, and yet what he wants and needs to have is an assured extramental reality for certain identifiable individual things that are entirely mind independent in themselves.

It deserves emphatic stress that this line of objection is very much mistaken. Kant is not hankering after what he cannot have. He is content with what he can get. As he sees it, the understanding delivers into our hands (or, rather, our minds) the concept of things-in-themselves as a conceptual resource of its own devising that is the fruit of its insistence on objectivity and externality. But to claim knowledge of their existence is inappropriate: we certainly cannot claim to know that such things exist. For In the *mere concept* of a thing no mark [token, character] of its existence is to be found. For . . . existence . . . has . . . to do only with the question of whether such a thing be so given us that the perception of it can, if need be, precede the concept (*CPuR*, A225 = B272). But while the understanding cannot *know* things in themselves, it indeed must think or, more precisely, *postulate* such things by way of imputation. What we can get from the understanding is the *conception* of things in themselves and the *conception* of them as real (*CPuR*, A249). Still, our commitment to this conception does not involve knowledge: it does not settle or prejudice any ontological issues, since to substitute the logical possibility of the *concept* (namely that the concept does not contradict itself) for the transcendental possibility of *things* (namely that an object corresponds to the concept) can deceive and leave satisfied only the simple-minded (*CPuR*, A244 = B302).

And this brings us to the crux of the matter. The realm of things-in-themselves is not a realm of which we are in a position to say that we *know* it to exist in the demanding Kantian sense of

know – at best it can be said that we do and must *think* it to be there (in Kant's essentially postulational sense of 'think'). With things-in-themselves *as such* we are beyond our depths. The *conception* of a thing in itself, however, is a creature of the understanding to which we stand irrevocably committed in viewing our experience as an experience of *something* that is itself experience external. Things-in-themselves are the creatures of mind, or rather (and perhaps more exactly), the *conception* of things-in-themselves is a mental contrivance to which our reason finds itself unavoidably committed.

Put in a nutshell, the matter stands thus: just as space and time are forms of sensibility (creatures of man's perceptual faculty), and causality, unity, spontaneity, and the rest are forms of man's understanding or faculty of judgment, so also is the very conception of a thing-in-itself a creature of the human mind, a *Verstandeswesen*, an *ens rationis* – a (negative) *noumenon*, in the etymological sense of the term, that is, something created by the understanding in its in-built insistence upon operating with a conceptual scheme of objective, mind-external foci of knowledge.

On Kantian principles, positive noumena are out. There is just no prospect of establishing any cognitive contact with mind-independent *realia* that exist altogether in themselves; and even if there were, we could have nothing to do with them – they would, literally, be nothing to us. Even the mere possibility of noumena in any positive construction of this conception stands outside the realm of what we can get – and of what we need.

But what there is, and for us (given the *modus operandi* of our intellect) must be, is the commitment to a conception of things-in-themselves for use as a limiting concept. For it is of the very nature of human reason to construe the things of experience, the phenomena, as representations – that is, to take them to be correlative with underlying reality, to be not just appearances but appearances *of things* as they are in themselves (an sich selbst genommen). The mind-generated conception of things-in-themselves is the basis on which the human understanding erects that postulate that can alone underwrite the genuine (authentic) externality of things which their merely phenomenal (seeming) externality can suggest but never guarantee, seeing that the stability and permanence

of objective experience demands that the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me is something that can never be obtained from the mere representation of such things (*CPuR*, B275–76).

Accordingly, the thing-in-itself enters into the system of Kant not as a certain type of existing thing, correlative with an ontological category of some sort. Rather it provides an intellectual tool in that the conception reflects the inherent stance of a reason committed to viewing the things of the world (its world) in a certain sort of way – to wit, in terms of their representational aspect as appearances *of* something. The thing-in-itself is the product of our mind's commitment to thinking about the phenomena (the items of our experience) as *mere* phenomena, as appearances which, of course, can only be done on the basis of a commitment to the idea that there is something that appears, seeing that an appearance must, by the very meaning of the term, be an appearance *of* something. It is the conception of things-in-themselves that counts, and that does indeed have an ontological *locus standi* in the operational processes of the human mind. And it is via this conception that we must postulate things in themselves and think of them as beings wholly independent of us.

All that Kant is entitled to on his principles, but also all that he needs for the purposes of his position, is a thought-indispensable conception of things-in-themselves. The Kantian thing-in-itself is to be understood not as part of the furniture of the real world as such, of nature, but rather as an instrumentality of our thought about this real world. And such a thing-in-itself, something introduced in this way to play this sort of role, is the product of an intellectual insistence upon – that is, a postulation of – a certain way of thinking about things, the product of a certain conceptual scheme to which our reason stands committed. Things-in-themselves as such are not natural objects but themselves entities, mere *Verstandeswesen* – putative correlates of certain mechanisms of our understanding. Paradoxical though it may sound, things-in-themselves are – as Kant saw it – not in the final analysis real things at all, but thought things, whose legitimacy lies in their being not fictions, but inherent and inevitable commitments of the human understanding.

To interpret things-in-themselves differently as representing an ontological category of actual things would indeed do violence to Kant's whole outlook. It would in truth lead to something dogmatic and unassimilable to the critical philosophy. But Kant certainly does not commit the mistake that beckons here. His discussion of the thing-in-itself is not a response to the injunction

Tell me about things as they actually are—really and mind independently—quite apart from our conceptual framework and its involvement and presuppositions. From Kant's point of view this injunction is absurd—it formulates an altogether nonsensical demand. His theory is designed not to fulfill but to abolish this sort of question.

## 5. conclusion

For Kant, then, the concept of things-in-themselves or noumena is not a doorway through which we can project our knowledge from the phenomenal realm into the problematic sphere of mind-independent reality. Rather, it is a postulational, mind-imposed contrivance through which alone we are able to operate our conceptual scheme—a scheme in which objectivity and externality play a crucial role. To reemphasize: Kant's things-in-themselves form part not of the furniture of a realm of mind-independent reality, but rather of the machinery of thought. The Kantian thing-in-itself is, in effect, an *ens rationis*, a postulate of reason based on the fact that our human mind does and must think of the things of everyday experience in a certain sort of way.