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THE DUPLICITY OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT

by Frank Brierley

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant attempts to solve the ‘problem of reality’ by showing how things empirical can be objects for us and, in anticipation of his *Critiques of Practical Reason* and *of Judgment*, how there is space in (transcendent) reality for the unknowable metaphysical entities of God and the soul. I shall try to show that, while Kant’s concept of the transcendental object is pivotal to these endeavours, the dual roles that he allocates to the transcendental object contribute to a number of bifurcations of interpretation by commentators concerning the status of things in themselves (positive and two negative versions) and the relation between things in themselves and appearances.

I believe with Karl Ameriks [Ref. a] that Kant’s starting point in the *Critique* is with common experience, and not only because the first sentence at A1/B1 of the *Critique* is, ‘There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience.’ [Ref. b] It is here that he pitches camp in that first section of the *Critique*, the Transcendental Aesthetic, which is devoted to proving that knowledge, our knowledge of empirical reality, necessarily contains in its very constitution, as well as sensible intuitions, the *a priori* (mental, self-given) elements of time, space and formal conceptualisation.

In the next section, the Analytic, Kant explains the ‘mechanical’ details of the transcendental combining (*coniunctio*) of the outer and inner ingredients of cognition to make objects possible for us, i.e. to give us knowledge of empirical reality. This is Ameriks’ second step. First we had Kant’s proofs in the Aesthetic that the ‘pure forms of intuition’, space and time, are supplied *a priori* by the subject to organise the inchoate, raw sensations (the ‘given’ sensible intuitions) by the synthesis of the manifold of pure intuition and so advance them to the status of ‘appearances’, the second cognitive stage en route to full cognition, knowledge of objects – see A78-9/B104. In the Analytic Kant elucidates his transcendental psychology. This is the process, the operation of understanding, whereby the manifold of spatially and temporally conditioned appearances, in a spontaneous thought act, are brought under conceptual categories in the ‘synthetic unity of apperception’. The mental apparatus and energy for this *objectification* of appearances contain nothing from experience. It is totally formal, *a priori* in two of Kant’s senses of that expression, being both independent of experience and (logically) necessary. Kant describes it thus at B296/A237:

‘The principles of pure understanding, whether constitutive *a priori*, like the mathematical principles, or merely regulative, like the dynamical, contain nothing but what may be called the pure schema of *possible* [my italics] experience.’

The components or ‘apparatus’ of this translation of raw experience into knowledge may metaphorically be likened to a variety of channels, filters, moulds or templates for sorting and organising partially processed input (temporally and spatially ordered sensible intuitions), plus energy (imagination). The principal players are:

- judgement, the faculty of subsuming under rules according to the logical relationships between concepts. In his Table of Judgements, Kant enumerates twelve ‘functions of thought’ under four heads, quantity, quality, relation and modality.
- the corresponding twelve categories, abstract concepts under which all objective knowledge may be subsumed, or we might say labelled or identified, in order to give it meaning, but not without ...
- the schemata, which operate as supreme mediators between the sensible and the cognisable within time, the inner pure intuition that, having a foot in both camps, as it were, enables the schemata to present empirical representations as possible operands of *a priori*

categorisation ‘by an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover’. (A141/B180-1) Schematism is, moreover, a constraining activity instigated by the imagination to ‘image’ and universalise objects as members of their kind – e.g. to identify a dog as having doghood. Kant saw imagination as providing a sort of intelligent energy to drive the act of apperception via the schemata’s mediation between the empirical and the *a priori*.

- the object in general. At B128 Kant says the categories ‘are concepts of an object in general, by means of which the intuition of an object is regarded as determined in respect of one of the logical functions of judgement’. (See also A93/B125-6) As such, the object in general is a template or cipher representing – in fact, being – the abstract relationship of any and all objects to its/their constituent ‘matter’, a purely abstract and totally general form, almost a Platonic idea of any-object, itself ‘empty’ of experience but critical, as the endower of ‘objecthood’ and unity, in the determination of objects. Thus Kant asks at A104, ‘What ... is to be understood when we speak of an object corresponding to, and consequently also distinct from, our knowledge?’, and answers, ‘... this object must be thought only as something in general = x’.

He goes on to explain that this object (in general) is ‘that which prevents our modes of knowledge from being haphazard or arbitrary, and which determines them *a priori* in some definite fashion’; and in A105, ‘... it is clear that, since we only have to deal with the manifold of our representations, and since that x (the object) which corresponds to them is nothing to us – being, as it is, something that has to be distinct from all our representations – the unity which makes the object necessary can be nothing else than the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations. It is only when we have thus produced synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition that we are in a position to say that we know the object.’ Thus the object in general plays a central role in the objectification of our sensory input, in the securing of our knowledge of empirical reality.

Or does it? In A104-5 the phrase ‘object in general’ does not actually appear, though it seems clear to me that reference to an object that ‘must be thought only as something in general = x’ demonstrates that the discussion is about the object in general referred to back in A93 where Kant says, ‘The question now arises whether *a priori* concepts do not also serve as antecedent conditions under which alone anything can be, if not intuited, yet thought as object in general. In that case all empirical knowledge of objects would necessarily conform to such concepts, because only as thus presupposing them is anything possible as *object of experience*.’ Yet Gardner (op. cit. pp. 151-153) tells us that A104-5 is about the ‘transcendental object’, and proceeds also to quote from A109, in which the following fascinating and problematic passage occurs.

‘Now ... we are in a position to determine more adequately our concept of an *object* in general. All representations have, as representations, their object, and can themselves in turn become objects of other representations. Appearances are the sole objects which can be given to us immediately, and that in them which relates immediately to the object is called intuition. But these appearances are not things in themselves; they are only representations, which in turn have their object – an object which cannot itself be intuited by us, and which may, therefore, be named the non-empirical, that is, transcendental object = x.’

Gardner makes no reference to ‘object in general’ and its possible identification here with the transcendental object, nor does he explain the emphasis in this passage on representations/appearances *having their objects*, particularly the curious description of the representations’ object as the non-empirical transcendental object = x. His entire emphasis is on the functions of the transcendental object that coincide with everything we know about the object in general, e.g. ‘Its role is to provide a point to which the elements of the manifold of intuition may be referred, allowing appearances to be determined as thinkable objects of intuition’ (p.152), and ‘The transcendental object cannot fulfill its role as providing a reference point distinct from representations by virtue of its content, because it has none. All it can amount to, then, is a

function of unity: all it can refer to is “that unity which must be met with in any manifold of knowledge which stands in relation to an object.” (A109).’ (p.153)

However, by ignoring Kant’s explicit mention of the object in general in A109, Gardner confirms the usurpation of its function by the transcendental object in general at precisely this point in the *Critique*. But what he fails to draw attention to is a role of the transcendental object, first introduced here, that goes beyond that to which the object in general was quite properly restricted. The transcendental object is described in a way the object in general never was as the object of representations/appearances. On one reading, the transcendental object might therefore be construed as a thing in itself, that ‘non-empirical object which cannot itself be intuited by us’, in which appearances are grounded. We shall come to reasons for (just) rejecting that view, but must first consider the transcendental object in its function as successor to the object in general.

As a 100% *a priori* function, the object in general’s credentials for fulfilling its role in the transcendental synthesis of apperception seemed impeccable, apart perhaps from a query as to how as empirical a notion as objecthood could ever acquire *a priori* status. By contrast, the transcendental object’s description as the object of appearances/representations (*prior* to its role in apperception) arguably taints it with either noumenal or outer associations in such a way as to make it entirely unsuitable for its Copernican role, that of helping to confer objecthood upon the manifold of sensible representations. Nevertheless, we must accept that that is the job Kant allocates it, though we are perhaps entitled to a suspicion about his motivation. Could he be, if only by persuasive or rhetorical association, importing into the analytical frigidity of the transcendental psychology the mystic breath of the transcendent unknown? Anyway, from A109 onwards, the transcendental object in one of its two characters is a near perfect doppelgänger for the object in general.

In its other character it is distinguished from the noumenal thing in itself by Kant at A253, viz: ‘The object to which I relate appearance in general is the transcendental object, that is, the completely indeterminate thought of *something* in general. This cannot be entitled *noumenon*; for I know nothing of what it is in itself, and have no concept of it save as merely the object of a sensible intuition in general, and so as being one and the same for all appearances.’ This seems to abstract from the noumenal role of grounding appearances and enable the transcendental object to become a partial and exclusively functional stand-in for the thing in itself. It cannot constitutionally be a noumenon, for reasons I give below, but is something more general, a mere contentless, formal representative of the noumena’s role as grounds, cause or substrate of/for appearances.

The transcendental object has been likened to the thing in itself possibly on the grounds that the ‘emptiness’ of the one resembles the unknowability of the other (Gardner [Ref. c], p155, says ‘the same in respect of both being completely blank’). However, a logical reason why the transcendental object cannot in fact be a thing in itself is that transcendent reality must, by inference from Kant’s account of objects in the empirical world, contain in prospect all the differences between those objects. The differences between a camel and a horse certainly can’t derive from the ‘pure schema of *possible* experience’: their seeds must be contained within the sensible intuitions of actual experience, i.e. must derive from those non-spatial, non-temporal components of appearances intuited from transcendent reality. Differentiation-in-waiting has to be the key feature we can infer about the otherwise unknowable transcendentally real world which supplies the ‘matter’ that is transcendentally reconstructed into the objects of empirical reality. (We cannot, of course, infer actual differentiation, which is presumably a mode dependent on judgement/conceptualisation.) Kant cannot possibly allow his transcendental object to contain the complexity that must reside in transcendent reality.

This fits well with Gardner’s interpretation. He points out that identification of the transcendental object with noumenon would lead to the disintegration of Kant’s transcendental idealism (because

it would open the doors to realism and scepticism by making (transcendent) reality knowable). However, we have arrived at the bifurcations of interpretation stimulated by the ambiguity with which Kant imbued the transcendental object.

First we have the question whether the transcendental object itself is noumenal. I have followed Kant's specific denial in A253, despite his specific identification of transcendental object with noumenon/thing in itself elsewhere. It seems to me that each instance of this is explained away by the functional stand-in relationship I proposed above.

Next we have the positive and negative interpretations of things in themselves. The positive view is based on passages where Kant lays definite claim to knowledge of their existence, as in A249: '... the concept of appearances ... already of itself establishes the objective reality of *noumena* ...' The negative view arises from far more cautious passages in which it seems sufficient for Kant's purpose that noumena are possible, and/or their role is a limiting one to demonstrate the limits of empirical knowledge. E.g. A254: 'The remaining things ... are entitled noumena, in order to show that this knowledge cannot extend its domain over everything which the understanding thinks. ... The concept of the noumenon is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of the sensibility.'

This idea has led some commentators to conclude that Kant's transcendental idealism is therefore not dependant upon a noumenal world, which his philosophy merely makes possible since he lacks the wherewithal to prove the presence of the unknowable. This negative view of things in themselves has two versions, the strong one denying the existence of a noumenal world and therefore of the transcendental object with its role of representing things in themselves as the objects of appearances. This version has the disadvantage, in Gardner's words (*op. cit.* p.286) that 'if we now, at the end of the *Analytic*, declare the very notion of reality in itself to be null and void, we undo the contrast on which the Copernican revolution is premised, and the skeptic and rationalist will be quite within their rights to dispute the whole basis on which the *Analytic* has proceeded.' It would also destroy Kant's objective of leaving open the possibility of there being a transcendent reality in which there was room for God, the soul and a satisfactory explanation of free will.

The weak or agnostic version of the negative view of things in themselves leaves open the possibilities Kant wanted to preserve, and also leaves alive, as does the positive view of things in themselves, both the explanatory role of the transcendental object as an unconstituted stand-in for noumena as the grounds of appearances, and also its object-in-general synthesising role in transcendental apperception.

The transcendental object as noumenal proxy is central to yet another disputed interpretation, that concerning the relationship between things in themselves and appearances. Are they two aspects of the same thing, or are they distinct objects? For example, at B345 Kant refers to the 'transcendental object, which is the cause of appearance and therefore not itself appearance.' He could equally well have said 'noumenon'. Without entering deeply into the debate, I would admit to liking Gardner's conclusion to this two-objects v two-conceptions dispute, that 'two-conceptions' fits best Kant's description of the relationship between things in themselves (*qua* grounds of appearances) and appearances, whereas two-objects best describes Kant's depiction of the relation between appearances as psychological entities and noumena/things in themselves.

And it seems to me that this conclusion further endorses the duplicity of the transcendental object as being, in one guise (Mr Jekyll), the 'above-board' object in general, while operating part of the time as an illicit infiltrator from transcendent reality (Mr Hyde) in the possible subversion of Kant's transcendental psychology.

Notes

1. See pp.4-5 of the Ameriks' Introduction to his *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*: 'The first move in unpacking "my simple hypothesis" about Kant's transcendental philosophy involves taking the structural kernel of the system as a whole ... to comprise four basic steps: 1. a starting point in common experience (E); 2. a transcendental derivation (TD) from this of various pure forms, categories, or principles; 3. an ultimate metaphysical account of all this in turn as making sense only on the basis of transcendental idealism (TI); and finally, ...'

2. That is 'appearances_R' in the terminology explained by Sebastian Gardner on p.279 of his *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* [Ref. c] as follows: 'Appearance_O and appearance_R may be understood as referring to the empirical object considered at different stages in Kant's analysis of the process of cognition: appearance_R is the sensible appearing that provides an intuitive datum for cognition, and appearance_O is the object cognised as so appearing; the two being related in that ... it is the fulfilment of certain further conditions ... that converts ('objectifies') appearances_R into appearances_O.'

3. See for example A366: 'What matter may be as a thing in itself (transcendental object) is completely unknown to us, though ... its permanence as appearance can indeed be observed.' Here only the unknowability of matter, quite properly represented by the transcendental object, is at issue, and doesn't require the latter's constitutional identity with the thing in itself.

And at A358: '... the something which underlies the outer appearances and which so affects our sense ... may yet, when viewed as noumenon (or better, as transcendental object), be at the same time the subject of our thoughts.' Only the functional, representative resemblance of underlying outer appearances is relevant to the viewpoint here: complete identity with noumenon is not implied.

References

- a. Ameriks, Karl. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*. Oxford: OUP, 2003
- b. Quotations from Kant's *Critique* are from Norman Kemp Smith's translation in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003
- c. Gardner, Sebastian. *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Routledge, 1999