chungen der Vernunft selbst verurteilt, ist kein Inhalt, sondern eine reine Energie\textsuperscript{16}, die sich nur verwirklicht, indem sie sich unendlichen Aufgaben gibt…, das heißt unaufhörliche neue Anfänge.

Hören wir zum Schluss eine der Formeln von Patočka wie sein Testament:

„Europa hat zwei Wege zur Befreiung des Planeten gebahnt: den äußeren Weg der Eroberung und universellen Hegemonie, welcher sein Ruin als historische Entität war, und den inneren Weg der Befreiung des Planeten als Befreiung der Welt, als Weltwerdende der Lebenswelt, der Weg, der nun wiederentdeckt und nach den Katastrophen des Außen und den Wirrungen und Fehlleistungen des Inneren bis zu seinem Ende gegangen werden muss“\textsuperscript{17}.

R. Howell

Things in Themselves: An Interim Report

In § I, I note Kant’s view of the objects of knowledge and the problems about things in themselves that that view involves. A philosophically satisfactory, Kantian resolution of these problems should meet three conditions: (i) it must be reasonably faithful to Kant’s views; (ii) it must show that his views are internally consistent (and that his major arguments are valid); (iii) it must not rest on premises that are themselves philosophically implausible. In § II, I discuss some standard interpretations that fail to meet (i) or (ii). In § III, I note an original new interpretation that may well meet (ii) — but that then does not fully meet (i) and that, while not intended to meet (iii), also in fact does not do so. If my discussion is correct, we still lack any fully satisfactory way of escaping the problems about things in themselves.

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I. Background: Objects of Knowledge

According to Kant, objects, having an existence in themselves, appear to us by affecting our minds so as to yield mental states — Kantian intuitions — that represent those objects to us as being individual, particular entities in space and time. Space and time are simply the forms of our outer and inner sense, respectively, and all the objects of our knowledge exist, in the spatiotemporal forms in which we know them, only insofar as they are represented by our intuitions as occurring spatiotemporally. Space, time, and the objects of our knowledge are thus cognition-dependent entities that have no existence in themselves (A26/B42, A32—33/B49, etc.). The result is Kant’s empirical realism and transcendental idealism: space and time really belong to the objects that we know, and those objects (Kantian appearances) are indeed genuinely known by us. But space, time, and those objects are transcendently ideal, for they do not belong to or occur among things existing in themselves\textsuperscript{1}.

Kant argues further that while the categories, the a priori concepts of the understanding, apply to all the objects of our knowledge, the categories do not apply, in any knowledge-yielding way, to objects in themselves\textsuperscript{2}. This conclusion, like the other Kantian points just noted, is supposed to express transcendental, second-order knowledge about the scope and limits of our first-order a priori and empirical knowledge (A11—12/B25, etc.).

These claims lead immediately to problems about things in themselves. Thus (A) all objects that we can know are cognition-dependent, spatiotemporal appearances. We therefore cannot know things as they are in themselves (A30/B45 and elsewhere). Yet the above claims seem to contain knowledge about such things — in-

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\textsuperscript{1} For these familiar points, see, e.g., A35/B51, A38/B55, A27—28/B43—44, A35—36/B52—53, B69, B69—70 footnote, A369, A370—71, A27—28/ B44, A35—36/B52—53, and A42—43/B59—60. “A” and “B” refer, as usual, to the pagination of the 1781 and 1787 editions of the Critique of Pure Reason.
\textsuperscript{2} See, e.g., A246/B303.
deed, Kant seems to infer the unknowability of things in themselves from the above knowledge claims about such things. (B) Again, and contrary to the view through the categories we cannot know things in themselves, Kant talks of objects in themselves as existing and noumenally affecting the mind, thus applying to them the categories of existence and of causality or ground. (C) Moreover, Kant affirms that "it is indubitably certain ... that things in themselves are not in space and time" (A48/B66), once more apparently contravening the restriction of our knowledge to appearances (and also ultimately instigating the well-known problem of the neglected alternative — the problem that even if Kant’s arguments show that our knowledge concerns only spatiotemporal appearances, objects in themselves may nevertheless themselves be spatiotemporal).

II. Unsuccessful Ontological Resolutions of These Problems: Strawson

On the above interpretation, the notion of a thing in itself is the ontological notion of an entity that has a cognition-independent existence (and in some cases may appear to the mind through intuition)\(^3\). This traditional interpretation goes back to Kant’s lifetime, and he accepts it when it is presented by correspondents\(^4\). For this and many other reasons, I think that it is textually correct; and it also gets at the philosophically core notion of such a thing\(^5\). But the usual view has been that, on this interpretation, the problems about things in themselves are irresolvable\(^6\).

P.F. Strawson adopts this view in his *Bounds of Sense* (1966), as do Paul Guyer (1987), James Van Cleve (1999), and many other authors, and I express sympathy with it in my own work (Howell 1992, 2007). Such interpreters argue, however, that transcendental idealism hasn’t been proved, and it isn’t needed for many important Kantian arguments (e.g., the Transcendental Deduction, the Second Analogy, the B-Refutation of Idealism). So the suggestion has been to reconstruct Kant without the idealism. As Guyer (1987) argues, the problems about things in themselves then disappear, not because Kant’s own views don’t lead to them, but because Kant’s arguments for his idealism are unsuccessful. Abandoning that idealism, we can accept things in themselves without the problems. This triage operation leaves a great deal alive in Kant’s work, but critics such as Henry Allison (2004) suggest that it throws out the baby with the bathwater — transcendental idealism is not an insignificant part of Kant’s position\(^7\).

III. Unsuccessful Ontological Resolutions: Langton

Another ontological interpretation of things in themselves has been proposed by Rae Langton (1998)\(^8\). According to Langton, Kant distinguishes things in themselves (for her, things in their own intrinsic, nonrelational natures) from phenomena (the rel-

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\(^3\) Things in themselves are sometimes described as mind-independent rather than as cognition-independent, but this description is mistaken, for, according to Kant, the mind and its cognitive states themselves exist in themselves.

\(^4\) See Howell (1992); and observe Kant to Mendelssohn, 16 August 1783, mentioned below in footnote 11. See also Lambert’s 13 October 1770 and Mendelssohn’s 25 December 1770 letters responding to the Inaugural Dissertation (Kant 1900, vol. 10, pp. 107—16), texts which accept the same general view of the nature of things in themselves as does the first *Critique*. And note Kant’s description of their views in his famous 21 February 1772 letter to Herz (Kant 1900, vol. 10, pp. 127—36), which speaks in the same terms about time and space as do, e.g., A26—28/B42—44 and A34—36/B51—53. (Hogan 2009c cites the 1770 correspondence at p. 357.)

\(^5\) This notion goes back to Descartes on formal reality and thence to medieval and classical thought.

\(^6\) See e.g. Strawson (1966, pp. 235—45). The great Kant scholars Vahinger and Adickes adopted a similar line, as have many other interpreters.

\(^7\) If we drop Kant’s idealism, goal (i) in the first paragraph above is not achieved. If we keep the idealism, the inconsistencies remain, and goal (ii) is not met.

\(^8\) Van Cleve (1999) also briefly suggests Langton’s kind of interpretation, as have others. But Langton gives the clearest and most developed version.
tional properties of things, or things as having relational properties). Kant also accepts epistemic humility: we can’t know things in themselves. And he takes the causal reactivity of our knowledge to imply humility. Why? Because we can know objects only insofar as they affect us causally. But causal relations are irreducible to the intrinsic properties of objects. So we can’t know objects in themselves, in their intrinsic natures, although we can know that they exist and have such natures.

Langton’s view denies the cognition-dependence of appearances and avoids the traditional problems about things in themselves. It fits parts of Kant’s pre-Critical work, and (Langton urges) it is philosophically plausible (or, one might suppose, at least not wildly implausible) on its own. But is it exegetically satisfactory? It seems to me not. Langton argues forcefully, but she doesn’t offer a convincing account of central parts of the Transcendental Aesthetic, e.g. the Argument from Geometry in the Transcendental Exposition of Space, which does not turn on the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction. (The Argument from Geometry holds that we know, a priori, synthetic necessary truths of Euclidean geometry about space and the objects in space. But we can have such knowledge only if space and those objects are cognition-dependent entities having no existence in themselves.) Langton also doesn’t account for the fact that, as Desmond Hogan and others note, Kant clearly denies not only that we can know the intrinsic natures of noumenal entities but also that we can know noumenal relations among those entities.

IV. Unsuccessful Epistemic Resolutions: Allison

Following strains of Kant reconstruction that began with J. S. Beck and J. G. Fichte, Allison (2004) tries to resolve the problems about things in themselves in an epistemic, deflationary manner. He argues that while these problems arise on the traditional ontological, cognition-dependence interpretation, Kant doesn’t in fact understand things in themselves in that way. For Allison, a thing in itself is simply an ordinary object of knowledge considered in abstraction from its satisfying the a priori, necessary conditions for our knowledge of it. This account is supposed to make no ontological claims about things in themselves, and it escapes the traditional problems about such things. It allows an interesting defense of transcendental idealism, and it has been popular recently. But is it exegetically and philosophically satisfactory? Many critics, including Guyer, Van Cleve, and myself, have answered no. (i) Kant allows for things in themselves that don’t appear via our sensibility and aren’t known by us (B306, B308—309, B71, A63/B88, A27/B43, etc.) (ii) Kant’s talk of things in themselves is thoroughly metaphysical, despite Allison’s deflationary proposals. (iii) Allison takes the unknowability and nonspatiotemporality of things in themselves to amount simply to our considering those things in abstraction from their satisfying the a priori conditions for our knowledge of them. But this idea involves a fallacy. (To consider a thing in abstraction from its spatiality is not yet to consider that thing positively to be nonspatial.) Contrary to the first edition of Allison (2004), it also is surely not “analytic,” for Kant, that things in themselves are nonspatiotemporal. (iv) Allison cannot make good sense of central Kantian arguments for transcendental idealism such as the Argument from Geometry. (v) If, as suggested above, Kant hasn’t proved transcendental idealism, then there is no need to read Kant in Allison’s way, in any case.


10 Or, to read Allison’s interpretation as Kant reconstruction, Allison holds that the most plausible form of Kant’s theory results when things in themselves are interpreted in Allison’s way.

11 In his letter of 16 August 1783 to Moses Mendelssohn, Kant says that one of the main theses of the first Critique is that there may be many objects, existing in themselves, that do not appear to us (Kant 1900-, vol. 10, p. 346). See also Howell (1992, pp. 22—23; and 2007).
V. A Successful Resolution? Hogan

Another traditional way of defending Kant’s claims about things in themselves is to accept the ontological, cognition-dependence account of things in themselves but then to stress the role of Kant’s practical philosophy in his claims about such things. Robert M. Adams (1997) takes new important steps in this direction. But his goal is not to solve the specific problems noted above about unknowability, noumenal affection, and nonspatiotemporality. However, Hogan has recently confronted these problems directly, in some of the best discussions of things in themselves to exist in the entire Kantian literature.\(^\text{12}\)

Hogan’s goal is not to defend the philosophical plausibility of Kant’s position. He is well aware that various of Kant’s premises are open to challenge (see, e.g., Hogan 2009c, pp. 369, 373—74). Instead, he wants to show that Kant’s arguments are valid and that his position is internally consistent and does not lead to the above sorts of problems. Relying on Kant’s libertarian, anti-deterministic account of free action, Hogan argues specifically that Kant can escape the objection that he asserts, inconsistently, that we know that things in themselves exist but are unknowable; the neglected-alternative difficulties; and the problems about noumenal affection.

A key claim of Hogan’s is that while Kant clearly holds that (1) various features of noumenal reality cannot be known a priori by creatures with our human capacities (this is Hogan’s “a-unknowability”), Kant holds also that (2) there are features of reality that we can claim, a priori, are unknowable simply because they lack determining grounds through which they could be known (“b-unknowability”). For example, a libertarian free act cannot be known

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12 Hogan 2009a, 2009b, and 2009c.

13 “The relation a-unknowability holds between a feature of reality and a particular epistemic agent if and only if nonempirical cognition of this feature of reality exceeds the agent’s cognitive competence in a strong sense ... a feature of reality possesses the property of b-unknowability if and only if that feature of reality lacks a determining ground through which it could be known” (Hogan 2009c, p. 367).

14 Hogan here builds on work by Keith DeRose (Hogan 2009a, pp. 51—52). For a priori knowledge = nonempirical knowledge, recall B2—3: “knowledge absolutely independent of all experience.” For a priori knowledge = knowledge through a ground, see e.g. Reflection 4338, “reasons comprehend[s] something” when it cognizes it a priori, that is, through grounds ... Now first beginnings have no grounds, thus no comprehension through reason is possible” (Kant 1900-, vol. 17, p. 511; Hogan translation, 2009b, p. 525).

15 I here simplify the complex discussion in Hogan (2009c), which gives a clear understanding of Hogan’s project. He applies the same strategy in Hogan (2009a, 2009b). I lack space to discuss the details.

16 This premise seems inherently implausible. But, as Hogan notes, at B71—72 Kant argues that if (i) space and time were conditions of some things in themselves, then (ii) they would be conditions of “existence in general”; and so (iii) they would apply to all things in themselves, including God, a conclusion from which Kant recoils. On the face of it, this argument is fallacious: if (ii) follows from (i), then (ii) can at most imply that space and time are conditions of some “existences in general,” which will not yield (iii). Hogan is acutely aware of the difficulties here (2009c,
themselves, determinism would hold among all things in themselves. (Hogan argues that Kant’s view of mathematics requires that deterministic, causal laws should hold given the truth of our pure mathematical description of space and time.) If, however, determinism holds among all things in themselves, then all those things could be known through their determining grounds. So (in the rationalist, through-the-ground sense) they could all be known a priori. However, the reality of absolute freedom can be known, according to Hogan’s interpretation of Kant’s mature views; it is a condition of the validity of morality. And absolutely free, libertarian acts of the sort that Kant takes us, noumenally, to perform cannot be known through their determining grounds, for they have none. Hence (to put these points together) determinism cannot hold among all things in themselves. So space cannot be an objective form of all things in themselves. So, also, space cannot be an objective form of any things in themselves. And this last conclusion is known a priori, using the rationalist sense of “knowledge through the ground” indicated above. Given this interpretation, Kant has a logically valid argument that eliminates the neglected alternative. He does not argue, fallaciously, that because our a priori geometric knowledge concerns only space and objects in space, it therefore follows that objects in themselves are not spatial.

Hogan’s papers are based on deep scholarship and philosophical imagination. They are break new ground, and future discussions of the thing in itself will have to take them centrally into account. Hogan succeeds in showing that Kant does not commit the sorts of gross logical or philosophical blunders about things in themselves that critics point to. Or, at least, there are textual grounds for interpreting Kant in a way that relieves him of the charge that he commits such blunders. However (and to continue to simplify a complex discussion), it seems to me that what Hogan actually shows is simply that, given various assumptions and points that Kant makes in various places, Kant’s position about things in themselves can be made logically consistent and one of his arguments for that position becomes valid. If Hogan is right here, he has established an exceptionally important result — he has made it plausible that condition (ii) at the start of this essay (about such consistency and validity) can be met. But this isn’t yet to meet condition (iii) by showing that Kant’s position about things in themselves is based on philosophically plausible premises. (As I’ve stressed, Hogan is well aware of this point and does not undertake to defend all Kant’s premises.) Nor (to note condition (i), reasonable fidelity to Kant’s own views) is it to show that, in Kant’s central arguments for Transcendental Idealism — as, crucially, in the Argument from Geometry — Kant argues in the way that Hogan suggests.

To develop these concerns a bit further: (a) why suppose that if space is an objective form of some things in themselves, it must be an objective form of all things in themselves? (A dualist such as Descartes will immediately deny that claim, and I don’t see convincing reasons for accepting it.) (b) The Argument from Geometry is a powerful (although, I think, ultimately an unsuccessful) argument for transcendental idealism. But the Euclidean geometry considered in that argument surely implies nothing about the existence of deterministic causal laws governing the physical world, whatever Kant himself may have thought. Moreover, I don’t think that, in the Argument from Geometry, Kant appeals to any such implications. Nor does he reason, in that argument, from the fact that we know that geometry applies to the physical world to the conclusion that there exist such deterministic causal laws.

**Notes:**

17 Critique of Practical Reason (Kant 1900, vol. 5, p. 55; see Hogan 2009c, p. 379) and also ibid. (Kant 1900, vol. 5, p. 30; see Hogan, 2009a, p. 59).

18 Hogan (2009c, p. 376) notes that (a) the Argument from Geometry does not on its face involve the claim that the application merely of geometry implies causal determinism and (b) causality involves the relational cate-
Kant supposes that, taken by itself, that argument establishes transcendental idealism.\(^{19}\)

gories and is introduced only after that Transcendental Aesthetic argument, when the deterministic Second Analogy is first argued for. But, he indicates, such points (and others) do not undermine the claim that the application of geometry implies determinism. However, if the Argument from Geometry is by itself sufficient for transcendental idealism, as the Aesthetic certainly seems to imply, then the claim that geometry requires determinism does not appear to play any role in that major Kantian reasoning for such idealism. Nor does the Argument from Geometry rely on the premise (at best established only in the Transcendental Analytic) that our geometric knowledge of the physical world can obtain only if causal determinism applies to that world. So the knowledge, as expressed in transcendental idealism, that things in themselves are not spatiotemporal is not, as developed in the Argument from Geometry, an a priori knowledge that rests on a claim that such things cannot be known through their determining grounds. Kant thus seems committed, by that central argument, to a knowledge of things in themselves that cannot be explained in Hogan’s style. Hogan (2009c, pp. 376ff.) offers further textual and philosophical considerations in favor of the geometry-determinism link. These texts text individual discussion, for which there is no space here. However, I think none of them forces us to take Kant’s central grounds for transcendental idealism, as those grounds appear in the first Critique, to proceed as Hogan’s interpretation suggests. Hogan has fundamentally recast our understanding of Kant’s view of things in themselves. But I believe that he is at best noting materials in Kant’s work from which one can generate the kind of reasoning that he attributes to Kant, not fundamental features of Kant’s main, explicit arguments for transcendental idealism.

\(^{19}\) See B41, third paragraph of the Transcendental Exposition of Space. Note also the “Conclusions from the Above Concepts”, A26/B42ff, where the empirical reality but transcendental ideality of space and outer objects is affirmed. The “Conclusions from the Above Concepts” of course also draw on the Metaphysical Exposition of Space, Kant’s other major Transcendental-Aesthetic reasoning underlying his idealism. But the Metaphysical Exposition does not say anything that implies that the mere spatiality of objects, or our knowledge of the geometry of that spatiality, entails the subjection of such-objects to deterministic causal laws. Similar

Perhaps (although I have doubts) Kant does in some places take the applicability of mathematics to the spatiotemporal world (or our knowledge of that applicability) in and of itself to imply causal determinism about that world. If he does, Hogan could use this fact to get him out of the neglected-alternative problem. But Hogan would do so only at the cost either of taking the Argument from Geometry as it now stands (lacking any appeal to that implication) to be invalid or else of maintaining that, in the text of that central Kantian argument, Kant is not really giving the actual reasoning for idealism to which he is committed.\(^{20}\) In addition, the idea that knowledge of, specifically, the applicability of geometry commits us to knowledge of physical determinism — or that the applicability of geometry entails the holding of determinism with regard to the physical world — is implausible in itself.

(c) Again, it is a matter of great controversy whether any libertarian free actions (actions that lack determining causes) really exist. Both hard determinists and compatibilists (soft determinists) give reasons for believing that they do not. Compatibilists also argue that morality does not require the existence of libertarian freedom. The reality of libertarian freedom is therefore not at all a philosophically uncontroversial premise from which Kant can pro-

\(^{20}\) Hogan could still argue that the Argument from Geometry can be used to show the cognition-dependence at least of, roughly, space as we know it and the objects of our knowledge in the forms that we know them. The Argument from Geometry would then be read as not itself showing that space cannot exist in itself and belong to objects existing in themselves. Rather, Hogan could hold, it is the role of the geometry-implies-determinism argument to demonstrate that further conclusion and so to eliminate the neglected alternative. However, Kant seems clearly to regard the Argument from Geometry as itself showing the further conclusion.
ceed. (And, as Hogan is well aware, there is controversy about whether Kant ultimately takes us to know and not simply to presuppose that we have such freedom, insofar as we act morally, although I think Hogan is right that, in the end, Kant takes the 'fact of reason' to show that we have a kind of practical, nontheoretical knowledge of that point)\textsuperscript{21}

(d) Hogan follows Karl Ameriks in taking Kant, in his pre-Critical discussions of knowledge, more or less to assume (as a non-idealist Kant can assume, with justification) that things in themselves exist and affect the mind in knowledge. Kant then retains this idea as he moves into his Critical period and argues for transcendental idealism. I agree with Ameriks and Hogan here. But in the Critical works Kant should give better reasons for the existence of things in themselves than what he actually offers ("no appearance without something that appears," Bxxvi-xxvii, A251, B306; and so on)\textsuperscript{22}.

VI. Conclusion: Where We Now Stand

To the extent that Kant reasons as Hogan suggests, he does not commit the famous blunders about things in themselves that I have noted at the beginning of this essay. In this sense, Hogan’s account meets — or certainly goes a long way towards meeting — condi-

\textsuperscript{21} See e.g. Hogan (2009c, pp. 379—81); (2009a, pp. 59—60). I myself think that Kant hasn’t really justified calling this a knowledge of libertarian freedom. At best he shows we are required to assume such freedom insofar as we accept the bindingness of the moral law; and we can’t reject that bindingness. But that is not yet knowledge, as against an inescapable but perhaps illusory presupposition that we must make. Moreover, I don’t think that Kant demonstrates that libertarian freedom is an inescapable presupposition of the bindingness of the moral law. But Kant’s idea of a practical, nontheoretical knowledge of this sort remains deeply interesting. For the fact of reason, see Critique of Practical Reason (Kant 1900, vol. 5, p. 31).

\textsuperscript{22} This issue, however, needs further thought, given other parts of Hogan’s, Adams’, and other scholars’ work.

\textsuperscript{23} Patricia Kitcher also accepts such a strategy in her important recent book (2011).
search for such a resolution. But I suspect that they will not find one. That is not, however, a reason not to study Kant. The depth and interest of the non-idealistic parts of his ideas remain — as does also at least the tantalizing and still influential hope that, somehow, somewhere, somewhen, some form of transcendental idealism may still itself be shown to be correct.

References


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