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TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM, TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM,  
AND THE POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVE REFERENCE

By

Eric Dane Walker

B.S. Cell Biology and Neuroscience, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, 2003  
B.A. Philosophy, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, 2003

Thesis

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Approved by:

Dr. David A Strobel, Dean  
Graduate School

Dr. Stephen Grimm, Chair  
Philosophy

Dr. Albert Borgmann  
Philosophy

Dr. Gordon G. Brittan, Jr.  
Philosophy, Montana State University, Bozeman, MT

Transcendental Idealism, Transcendental Realism, and the Possibility of Objective Reference

Chair: Dr. Stephen Grimm

The goal of my thesis is to understand why Kant thinks that transcendental idealism can secure empirical realism, the idea that there really exists an objective world that we can come to know through experience. I maintain that, according to Kant, the possibility of coming to know objective reality depends upon the possibility of referring to objects, which itself, Kant thinks, can be explained by transcendental idealism. The transcendental idealist worldview is supposed by Kant to explain the possibility of referring to objects because it recognizes that objects must conform to cognition and not the other way around. Therefore, I explore what Kant means by objects conforming to cognition. I start with the fact that Kant says that the conditions for the possibility of our experience of objects must be identical with the conditions for the possibility of those objects themselves. I then argue that this means that according to the transcendental idealist worldview, objective reality, if it is to be full-blooded objective reality, must be essentially able to show up for us in experience. In opposition to this worldview stands what Kant calls transcendental realism, the prevailing worldview that supposes that full-blooded objective reality simply cannot be essentially able to show up for us in experience. Kant says that the prevailing transcendental realist worldview, of which he claims all philosophies hitherto are variations, will never be able to explain the possibility of referring to objects, and that only his transcendental idealism can. Because Kant imputes so much importance to the opposition, I elaborate the distinction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism, and clarify why only the latter can, as the former cannot, explain the possibility of referring to objects and thus the possibility of knowing an objective world, and thereby secure an empirical realism.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am left wondering why I deserve a thesis committee comprising such generous and distinguished thinkers. I feel the way I would were a curious rain to coax some lavender out of my long-neglected garden. Gordon Brittan introduced me to metaphysics and to Kant, and Albert Borgmann introduced me to Gordon's remarkable book on Kant's philosophy of science. Albert and Stephen Grimm both patiently advised me, Stephen taking over as Chair when Albert went on leave. Stephen was an especially careful reader of later drafts, helping me to say what I mean. I am responsible, of course, for the imprecision that remains. So, Gordon, Albert, and Stephen, I thank you.

Although I have many to thank for the opportunity to think and to write about the philosophical problems that beguile me, I have but Albert to thank for shaping my approach to these problems. Albert's realist spirit has inspired everything that I have thought about and written over the last few years. Whatever I write, though, fails to capture the original abundance of his realist spirit. Thank you, Albert, for reminding us that "of course, we should be realists about these things."

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## INTRODUCTION

Kant says that the transcendental idealist can be an empirical realist. I take him to mean that transcendental idealism can secure the truth of empirical realism, the idea that there really exists an objective world that we can come to know through experience. The goal of my thesis is to understand why Kant thinks that transcendental idealism can secure empirical realism.

In the first chapter, “Objective Reference,” I maintain that, according to Kant, the possibility of coming to know objective reality depends upon the possibility of referring to objects, that is, the possibility of objective reference. I argue that the possibility of objective reference is what is primarily at stake in Kant’s theoretical philosophy and that Kant’s transcendental idealism is intended to explain it. If transcendental idealism is supposed to explain the possibility of objective reference, it seems odd that Kant would claim that objective reality is mere appearance. I try to justify Kant’s claim by arguing that, for Kant, objective reality must be appearance, in the sense that objective reality, in order to *be* objective reality, must be able to show up for us in experience as something to form judgments about.

Kant thinks that transcendental idealism can explain the possibility of objective reference because it holds that objects must conform to cognition and not the other way around. Therefore, in the second chapter, “The Possibility of Objective Reference,” I explore what Kant might mean when he says that objects conform to cognition, and I conclude that Kant means that the conditions for the possibility of our experience of objects must be identical with the conditions for the possibility of those objects

themselves. If I am right here, and if I am right in my earlier analysis of Kant's claim that objective reality must be appearance, then this implies that according to the transcendental idealist worldview, objective reality, if it is to be full-blooded objective reality, must be *essentially* able to show up for us in experience. I then articulate how understanding objective reality in this way is supposed by Kant to explain the possibility of objective reference.

In opposition to his transcendental idealist worldview stands what Kant calls transcendental realism, the prevailing worldview that, if my argument is correct, supposes that full-blooded objective reality simply *cannot* be essentially able to show up for us in experience. Kant says that this prevailing transcendental realist worldview, of which he boldly claims all philosophies hitherto are variations, will never be able to explain the possibility of objective reference, and that only his transcendental idealism can. Because Kant imputes so much importance to the opposition, I spend my third chapter, "Transcendental Idealism, Transcendental Realism, and the Possibility of Objective Reference," elaborating the distinction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism. I do this with the intent of clarifying why Kant thinks that only the former can, as the latter cannot, explain the possibility of referring to objects and thus the possibility of knowing an objective world, and thereby secure an empirical realism.

# CHAPTER ONE:

## OBJECTIVE REFERENCE

My aim in this first chapter is to argue that the notion of objective reference is decisive for Kant's theoretical project.<sup>1</sup> If we understand that Kant's motivation is to explain the possibility of objective reference, then, as I will argue in the second and third chapters, we will be able to understand how and why Kant thinks that transcendental idealism is the best way to secure empirical realism, the idea that there really exists an objective world that we can come to know through experience.

Kant's avowed project is to show that transcendental idealism can explain how we are able to have knowledge, in and through experience, of objective reality (B20, A155/B194).<sup>2</sup> But this project presupposes that we are, in fact, able to have knowledge, in and through experience, of objective reality. Therefore, we must begin where Kant begins, at least logically, with the idea that we can have experience of objective reality and come to have knowledge of it.

Kant's way of saying that there is an objective reality, that we can experience it, and that we can have knowledge of it is to say that there is such a thing as synthetic *a*

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<sup>1</sup> Although I do not refer explicitly to his work in this chapter, Gordon G. Brittan, Jr. has inspired me to interpret Kant this way. I refer the reader to a few relevant works: *Kant's Theory of Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); "The Reality of Reference: Comments on Carl Posy's 'Where Have All the Objects Gone?'" *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* (1986), XXV, Supplement; and "Kant and the Objects of Theory," in *New Essays on Kant*, ed. by Bernard den Ouden and Marcia Moen (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), henceforth referred to as the *Critique*. All references to the A or B versions of the *Critique* are to this edition.

*priori* judgment (B20, A155/B194).<sup>3</sup> And to say that there is such a thing as synthetic *a priori* judgment is to say, roughly, first, that we are assured, before any particular experience of the world, that we can possibly experience and come to know its objects, and second, that we are assured, before any particular experience of the world, that the objects we can experience and come to know are really possible ingredients of objective reality.<sup>4</sup>

My way of saying that there is an objective reality, that we can experience it, and that we can have knowledge of it is to say that there is such a thing as objective reference. It is reasonable to ask, if they are supposed to denote the same thing, what the difference is between saying that there is such a thing as synthetic *a priori* judgment and saying that there is such a thing as objective reference. The difference is one of emphasis, but it is significant. Both manners of speaking refer to the same thing; they denote that we can and do, as a matter of fact, have experience and knowledge of really existing objects. But the first emphasizes the knowledge of objects, while the second emphasizes the objects of knowledge. The problem with the first manner of speaking is that it gives Kant's project an epistemological sheen, when Kant's project, in my view, is not primarily an epistemological project.

In his book, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Henry Allison argues that transcendental idealism "is a doctrine of epistemological modesty, since it denies finite

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<sup>3</sup> See also Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, trans. by Paul Carus, ed. by James W. Ellington, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), pp. 17 and 30, henceforth referred to as the *Prolegomena*. All references are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the possibility, not the actuality, of objects is assured. I will clarify later on, in this chapter and the next, what a possible object is.

cognizers like ourselves any purchase on the God's-eye view of things.”<sup>5</sup> That is, “Kant’s so-called Copernican revolution is to be viewed . . . as a ‘paradigm shift’ . . . in our understanding of what counts as knowing.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, according to Allison, the Categories that Kant enumerated and identified as the conditions for the possibility of knowledge “function as epistemic conditions.”<sup>7</sup>

Now, I think Allison is right to point out that Kant effected a shift in our understanding of what it means to have knowledge of something. And Allison does explain that the epistemic conditions are also the conditions for the representation of objects. But what I want to say is that the shift in our understanding of what counts as knowing is effected through a shift in our understanding of the character of *what is known*, that is, the character of objective reality. Let me explain.

In the beginning of his letter of February 21, 1772, to his student, Marcus Hertz, Kant sketches the genesis of his three great *Critiques*, and recounts what has lately been occupying his thoughts.<sup>8</sup> He identifies the one question that guides both the critical project in general and the *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular. He writes,

While I was thinking through the theoretical part in its whole extent and the reciprocal relations of its sections, I noticed that there was still something essential that was lacking, which I (like others) in my long metaphysical inquiries had failed to consider and which indeed constitutes the key to the whole secret of metaphysics that had until then remained hidden to itself. I asked myself, namely: *on what grounds rests the reference of what in us is called representation to the object?*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised and enlarged (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. xvi.

<sup>6</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> The letter is reprinted in *Prolegomena*, pp. 117-122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117, my emphasis.

Kant says here that the “whole secret of metaphysics” lies in discovering how it is possible for our representations to refer to objects. We may infer, then, that transcendental idealism is designed to show how it is possible for our representations to refer to objects. But Kant also says, as any reader of the *Critique of Pure Reason* knows, that transcendental idealism is designed to show how knowledge is possible (B19-B20). How is the possibility of representational reference connected with the possibility of knowledge?

According to Kant, knowledge is a systematically unified body of objectively true judgments (A832-836/B860-864). We possess knowledge, therefore, only if we possess true judgments and only if those judgments are objective. Further, Kant says, we possess an objectively true or objectively false judgment depending upon whether the judgment agrees or disagrees with its object (A58/B82). That is, we possess an objectively true judgment only if the judgment agrees with its object and we possess an objectively false judgment only if the judgment disagrees with its object. But if this is the case, then objectively true judgments and objectively false judgments each must be about objects. An object must be there in the first place as something about which to make judgments, else our judgments would have nothing with which to agree or disagree. This is to say that an object must be there in the first place if judgments are to be possibly objectively true or false, that is, meaningful (A155/B194). The job of a representation, we may infer, is to give us an object about which we can make true or false judgments. This must be why Kant is concerned to show how representations refer to objects. Judgments, to be possibly objectively true or false, must be objectively meaningful, must have objects with which to agree or to disagree, and it is representation that is supposed to give us objects.

In short, then, knowledge consists in objectively true judgments, which, in order to be true or false, must be antecedently meaningful, which, for Kant, means that they must refer somehow to objects (B20). And this is how the possibility of knowledge is connected to the possibility of representation: Knowledge is possible only if representation is, so if we explain how it is possible in the first place for representations to refer to objects, then we have gone some way toward explaining how knowledge is possible.

So transcendental idealism is supposed to demonstrate how it is possible to represent objects, which in turn will help to show how knowledge is possible. Transcendental idealism does effect, in Allison's words, "a radical reconceptualization of human knowledge as based on *a priori* conditions."<sup>10</sup> But it does this only in the sense that these *a priori* conditions are set forth first of all as providing a basis for the possibility of referring to objects, which is required for any true and thus meaningful judgment. Allison rightly notes that the conditions for the possibility of knowledge are also the conditions for the possibility of representing objects,<sup>11</sup> but he does not accord the same significance to the possibility of representing objects as I think Kant does. That is, on my view, Kant's reconceptualization of human knowledge, which Allison correctly identifies, is based upon Kant's reconceptualization of objective reference. The ultimate question, the whole secret of metaphysics, is how objective reality shows up for us in the first place, as something to have any kind of thought about, true or false, certain or defeasible, justified or not. This is the principal reason that Kant's project should not be understood, at least in the first instance, as an epistemological project.

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<sup>10</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

But there is another reason. This second reason, which is closely allied with the first, is that Kant is singularly unmoved by epistemological concerns about the certainty and justifiability of our beliefs. For Kant, the certainty and justifiability of our beliefs are not really in question. In the Preface to the A Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he says,

Now and again one hears complaints about the superficiality of our age's way of thinking, and about the decay of well-grounded science. Yet I do not see that those sciences whose grounds are well laid, such as mathematics, physics, etc., in the least deserve this charge; rather, they maintain their old reputation for well-groundedness, and in the case of natural science, even surpass it (Axi, n.).

There are systems of well-grounded beliefs. This fact, according to Kant, is unassailable. As I have said, Kant *begins* his project with the fact that we have knowledge, and if the concept of knowledge is later analyzed, the analysis should take as a clue the knowledge we already actually have. Transcendental idealism, therefore, is not supposed to demonstrate what knowledge is *per se*, nor is it concerned with the questions that arise inevitably upon reflection on what knowledge is *per se*. Transcendental idealism is not supposed to answer the question of whether knowledge is justified true belief, or to answer the question, based upon what we conclude knowledge is *per se*, whether we really do have knowledge. Kant just assumes that we really do have knowledge and that the reason we do is that we have bodies of true judgments about objective reality. What is at stake originally for Kant is not the truth or certainty or groundedness of our knowledge, but the possibility of its objective reference.

The task, in Kant's own words, is to explain

the possibility . . . of all sciences that contain a theoretical *a priori* cognition of objects, i.e., the answer to the questions:  
How is pure mathematics possible?

How is pure natural science possible?  
About these sciences, since they are actually given, it can appropriately be asked *how* they are possible; for that they must be possible is proved through their actuality (B20).

Knowledge is actual and therefore possible, and the possibility of knowledge lies in the possibility of objective reference, which lies in the possibility of representing *objects*, mathematical, natural, or otherwise. As Kant says, “If a cognition is to have objective reality, i.e., *to be related to an object, and is to have significance and sense in that object, the object must be able to be given in some way*” (A155/B194, my emphasis).

Apparently, the objectivity of our knowledge requires that objects are given to us.<sup>12</sup> And, just as apparently, it is the essential task of transcendental idealism to explain how objects are given to us in the first place. If it is the essential task of transcendental idealism to explain how objects are given to us in the first place, as something to form beliefs about, then transcendental idealism is not primarily an epistemological theory. It is primarily a theory of objective reference.

Many philosophers have wondered whether there is such thing as knowledge of an objective reality. There are those who declare that reference to an objective world is impossible, and therefore claim that we have knowledge only of the contents of our own minds. These philosophers are “dogmatic idealists” (A377, B274). There are also “skeptical” (A377) or “problematic idealists” (B274), who declare that reference to an objective world, though not impossible, is indemonstrable, and therefore always and inevitably in doubt. Sometimes, Kant gathers the two kinds under one idealism that he

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<sup>12</sup> That is, it is not the case that Kant thinks that there are objects only insofar as we are able to make objective judgments. For Kant, at least, intersubjective agreement does not guarantee objectivity. Objects do.

calls “material” or “empirical idealism,” which is “the common idealism that itself doubts or denies the existence of external things” (B519, n.).

It is thus with a dramatic and deliberate artlessness that Kant simply grants knowledge, and thus objective reference. In granting knowledge, Kant implicitly rejects the sophisticated skeptical poses of wondering whether we can have knowledge and whether there really is an objective reality which our beliefs may or may not be about. We can have knowledge, and it can be of an objective reality. The question is not whether we can have knowledge of real objects. The question is, given that we can and do have knowledge of real objects, *how* we can do so. And any answer to this question will first have to answer the question of how we can refer to objects in the first place.

Just as some thinkers have questioned whether we *can* represent the world to ourselves, some influential philosophers have attacked the notion that we *represent* the world to ourselves.<sup>13</sup> But I will go ahead and follow Kant in using the expressions *to represent* and *representation*. I do this because their German equivalents, *vorstellen* and *Vorstellung*, translate literally into “to place before” and “a placing-before,” and these translations, I think, do not imply what antirepresentationalists might dismiss as ghostly images that intervene between knowers and the world. Thus, when Kant says that we can represent objects, he is saying that in and through experience, objects are, in some sense, placed before us.

There are various ways in which objects can be placed before us. Concepts and intuitions, the elements that are united in cognition, each can be understood as representations, in the sense that each serve to place objects before us, the first

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<sup>13</sup> For especially clear denunciations, see Donald Davidson, “The Myth of the Subjective,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, and Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), and Richard Rorty, “Introduction,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

immediately and singularly (A90-91/B122-123) and the second mediately and generally (A320/B376). Therefore, cognition, as the cooperative result of intuitive, sensuous representation and conceptual, rational representation, is a variety of representation (A50/B74, A320/B376).<sup>14</sup> In this paper, I will understand as the paradigm case of representation the cooperation of concepts and intuitions to place objects before us, objects about which we can then make judgments and possibly come to have knowledge. But I will still call it representation, instead of cognition, to emphasize its priority to the attainment of knowledge.

By understanding representation in this way, I hope to avoid the connotations of images and pictures, of shadows and specters, and of screens and veils that often accompany the notion of representation. For all Kant seems to mean is that in representation objects are placed before us. But Kant does intend further that these placings-before, as the unification of intuitions and concepts, are conceptually articulated. For Kant says that “cognition in the proper sense”—what I have referred to as the paradigm case of representation—is the result of a synthesis, which is “the action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition” (A77/B103), and doing so “in accordance with concepts” (A112). The conceptualizing activity of the understanding “collects the elements for cognitions and unifies them into a certain content” (A78/B104). Concepts, in addition to contributing to the generality of the representational content (A320/B376), also contribute to its unity. And Kant makes it clear that the conceptually guided bringing-together of the elements for cognition is a significant feature, if not the most significant

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<sup>14</sup> See A320 for a succinct typology of representation.

feature of representation. In fact, according to Kant, it is only if we begin with the idea of a successful, conceptually unified representation of an object that we can distinguish between the contributions of intuitions and concepts to representation. But even though concepts are a significant feature, or the most significant feature, of representation, there can be no representation without intuition. That is, concepts and intuitions must cooperate in order to yield representation in the paradigm case. Hence the well-noted emptiness of isolated thoughts and blindness of isolated intuitions (A50-51/B74-75). Every representation of an object is a conceptually articulated unification of concepts and intuitions. Therefore, to represent objects is to conceptualize them.<sup>15</sup>

Now, my identification of representation with conceptualization therefore may seem to undermine my wish to avoid connotations of intervening images. For concepts, no less than representations, have traditionally been understood as (at least involving) intervening mental pictures.<sup>16</sup> It is best at this point to defer to Kant's own definition of concepts. In the *Critique*, Kant defines concepts at least six different ways, but each of his definitions marks commonality as characteristic of concepts (A320/B276).<sup>17</sup> So, I will assume that to say that representations are conceptually articulated is at least to say that representing an object involves representing the object as having a property that is

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<sup>15</sup> I understand that, according to Kant, mere conceptual play does not yield knowledge, so that although we can, for example, form a concept of God, we cannot represent God. I will use the word "conceptualize" to denote the act of successful, experiential representation and use the word "think" to denote, as Kant does (B146), the act of merely transforming one concept into another.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by A. C. Fraser, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1959); and Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* (London: Penguin Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Hanna's article, "Kant's Theory of Judgment," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed., July 28, 2004, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-judgment/>, accessed January 12, 2008.

common, or possibly common, with other objects.<sup>18</sup> When we represent the number three, we represent it as being a number, which is a property common with other objects. When we represent an electron, we represent it as having a spin and being an electron, which are properties common with other objects. When we represent a blue sphere, we represent it as being blue and being a sphere, which are properties common with other objects.

But this does not mean that we experience and represent only generalities. For representation involves both concepts and intuitions, and intuition, according to Kant, brings with it the singularity of representational content (A90-91/B122-123). So, because representation is the cooperative result of concepts and intuitions, there is a singularity to our representations as well as a generality. I might make the same point differently by saying that an object we place before us will be both singular and general. I will characterize Kantian objects later, so for now I will just say that part of what it is to be an object is to be able to be singled out from other objects in the world but simultaneously understood as belonging with other objects in the world. Nothing else is the number three, but lots of things are numbers. This blue sphere is blue, like other things, and spherical, like other things, but it is still *this* blue sphere. To say that representation is conceptualization is to say that when we place an object before us, the object before us will be a conceptually guided union of particularity and commonality.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For an elaboration of this idea, see Hannah Ginsborg, "Empirical Concepts and Perceptual Contents," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 3, December 2006, pp. 349-372.

<sup>19</sup> There is some debate about whether the representational content that Kantian intuitions contribute is conceptual or nonconceptual. For Kant says such things as, "Objects can indeed appear to us without necessarily having to be related to [the concept-employing] functions of the understanding" (A89/B122). I assume that intuitions provide conceptual representational content only in the sense that intuitions give us objects with *general* spatiotemporal features. Even at the level of intuition, objects can have both particularity and commonality: We can be given *this* object at *this* spatiotemporal location, but lots of other things have spatiotemporal locations.

My identification of representation with conceptualization therefore should not undermine the need to avoid connotations of intervening images. In fact, if representation is conceptualization, then we might as well say that conceptualizing is just a way for objects to be placed before us. It is not some epistemologically dubious method of understanding objects, as one tradition, which revolves around Friedrich Nietzsche, might have it.<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche is an instructive foil here, because he vigorously argues that our concepts are “a mobile army of metaphors,” meaning, among many other things, that our concepts, in virtue of their generality, cannot capture the particularity of objects, and are therefore straightforward falsehoods.<sup>21</sup> Conceptualizing, according to this view, is a way to know the world, and it does not do a very good job of it. Nietzsche’s view exemplifies an entire way of thinking about our relationship to the world, a way of thinking of which Kant tries to disabuse us. This way of thinking supposes that objective reality is not essentially representable. I spend the second and third chapters defining and elaborating the contrast between this way of thinking and the way of thinking Kant recommends, so I will not discuss it here in any depth. I just want to point out that the way of thinking exemplified by Nietzsche holds that conceptualization is first of all a way to know objective reality. In this picture, it is easy to see that concepts are supposed to intrude somewhere between us and the real.

But for Kant, conceptualizing—representing—is a way to know objective reality only in the sense that it is a way, antecedently, for objective reality to be placed before us as something to know. It is probably better just to say that concepts, or representations,

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<sup>20</sup> See especially *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), Section 374, and “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” and *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1960).

<sup>21</sup> “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 47.

are not ways to know objects, that they are, rather, ways for objects to be given to us. That is, according to Kant, as I take him, representing, as conceptual *and* intuitive, is a semantic activity, not an epistemic one. Representations first of all carry meaning, not truth or falsity.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, as I will soon explain, falsity, misunderstanding, illusion, and the like can only happen later. Rather than potentially distorting objective reality, conceptualization, or representation, brings objective reality into view.<sup>23</sup>

But what is objective reality? Part of Kant's transcendental project, as I have suggested, is to redefine the notions of object, objectivity, and objective reality. He intends to show us that we have been thinking of objective reality, and our relation to it, in the wrong way, that is, in a transcendental realist way. Later on, in the following chapters, I will scrutinize both the transcendental realist way and Kant's transcendental idealist way of thinking about objective reality and our relation to it. So without going into too much depth right now, let me just give a sketch of what I take Kant to mean when he talks about objects and objective reality, with the hope that anything particularly contentious can be supported by what I say later.

Consider one of Kant's definitions of nature, namely, that it is the totality of objects of possible experience determined according to laws.<sup>24</sup> We can gather from this brief characterization that objects are things we can possibly experience, that objects must always be part of a larger, lawful whole, and that this whole is nature. As an approximation, then, we can think of objects as identifiable parts of natural reality, and

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<sup>22</sup> Another translation of *Vorstellung*, which is usually translated as "representation," is "meaning."

<sup>23</sup> Hegel latches on to this utterly Kantian idea and gives it an influential expression. See especially his "Introduction" in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A. V. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), paragraphs 73-76. John McDowell, calling it a "domesticated Hegelianism," enlarges the same idea in *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> *Prolegomena*, pp. 35-37.

think of natural reality as including anything that could possibly find itself in a natural theory—things such as galaxies, stars, planets, mountains, otters, cells, molecules, atoms, neutrinos, fields, and speech acts, and properties such as average fecundities, charge, spin, and specific gravities. And since possibility, not actuality, is at stake in the definition of objects, we should also include controversially or incorrectly postulated things such as libidos, death drives, rational consumers, strings, epicycles, the planet Vulcan, phlogiston, and the aether. For all of these, like galaxies and specific densities, are, in a wide sense, naturally possible, though perhaps not actual. They are naturally possible because they have found themselves in a theory at one time or another and have therefore been provided identity conditions that connected them with other natural phenomena, so that if they actually existed in nature, we could probably identify them. All of this is to say, roughly, that objects must be able show up for us in experience and must be able to fit into the wider patterns of natural reality.

Of course, I have left out a crucial and thoroughly Kantian aspect of this definition: that objective reality is appearance. But if we keep in mind the notion of objective reference, and the way Kant's project is built around it, then the idea that objective reality is appearance is less objectionable than we may suppose at first glance.

To understand why Kant thinks that objective reality is appearance, we have first to understand what Allison, for one, has called the transcendental distinction.<sup>25</sup> The transcendental distinction is the distinction between things that we can, in and through experience, represent and things that we cannot. The things we can represent Kant calls *appearances*, and the things we cannot he calls *things in themselves*. Whether the

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<sup>25</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, especially Chapters 1 and 2.

distinction between appearances and things in themselves is one between distinct ontological realms (the two-worlds view) or between distinct ways of knowing one and the same thing (the two-aspect view) is a subject for debate in Kant scholarship.<sup>26</sup> It is only for ease and generality that I say that the distinction is one between representable and unrepresentable *things*. I do not intend anything in my thesis to support either interpretation, though I certainly may be found to assume one or the other. What matters most for me here, however, is representability and unrepresentability.

What should occur to us right away is how peculiar Kant's transcendental distinction is. Transcendentally speaking, he says, we are not supposed to classify things ultimately according to whether they are substance or accident, material or mental, subject or object, or illusion or reality. We are supposed to classify things as essentially representable or essentially unrepresentable. According to Kant, those things that are essentially representable are those things that satisfy the conditions for the possibility of experience and knowledge. Those things that are essentially unrepresentable do not. So to classify things as representable or unrepresentable is to distinguish those things that fall under conditions for the possibility of experience—appearances—from those things that do not—things in themselves. From this fact alone, we may conclude that if we try to assimilate the transcendental distinction to more familiar ones, such as that between illusion and reality, we are likely to misunderstand it.

Given Kant's sometimes infelicitous way of putting things, however, it is easy to misread the transcendental distinction. We can always find Kant saying such things as,

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<sup>26</sup> See Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) for an articulation of the two-worlds view and Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* for an articulation of the two-aspect view. Allison is indebted to Graham Bird, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

“Matter and corporeal things . . . are merely appearances, i.e., mere modes of representation, which are always found only in us, and their reality, just as much as that of my own thoughts, rests on immediate consciousness” (A372). We may discover in passages like these, which pepper the *Critique of Pure Reason*, ideas to the effect that what we presume are objects are really just “appearances in us,” which supposedly means that objects are just mental items. Such ideas reasonably compel some thinkers, such as Paul Guyer, Karl Ameriks, and Peter Strawson, all of whom I will address in a moment, to take the transcendental distinction as a distinction between appearance and reality, where the objects of which we can have knowledge are just mental entities, the mind’s own creations, and where full-blooded reality is forever unknowable.

For example, Guyer says that in defining objects as appearances, Kant has acted to “degrade ordinary objects to mere representations of themselves, or identify objects possessing spatial and temporal properties with mere mental entities;”<sup>27</sup> Ameriks argues that Kant assigns a heavy metaphysical significance to things in themselves, and that any reading of Kant that gives us “no reason to think the non-ideal has a greater ontological status than the ideal” ignores Kant’s deepest metaphysical commitments;<sup>28</sup> and Strawson dismisses transcendental idealism as the doctrine that “reality is supersensible and that we can have no knowledge of it.”<sup>29</sup> So Guyer tells us that Kant thinks that objects are really just mental items, Ameriks tells us that Kant thinks that things in themselves are the really real, and Strawson tells us that Kant thinks that we can only know the mental items, and not the really real. These three interpretations combine in the idea that the

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<sup>27</sup> *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, pp. 334-35.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Ameriks, “Kantian Idealism Today,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9 (1992), p. 334.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 16.

transcendental distinction is one between appearance and reality. Allison neatly summarizes the situation:

According to many of its critics, transcendental idealism is a metaphysical theory that affirms the uncognizability of the ‘real’ (things in themselves) and relegates cognition to the purely subjective realm of representations (appearances). It thus combines a phenomenistic, essentially Berkeleian, account of what is actually experienced by the mind, and therefore cognizable, namely, its own representations, with the postulation of an additional set of [really real] entities, which, in terms of the very theory, are uncognizable.<sup>30</sup>

As Allison says, the usual gloss on the transcendental distinction, as we can see, is that it is one between appearance and reality.<sup>31</sup> Transcendental idealism is seen as relegating the world of objects in lawful relations to the realm of mere appearances, which, it is suggested, are just mental entities. Therefore, the suggestion continues, when we have knowledge of the supposed objective world, we really just have knowledge of the contents of our own minds—how things seem to us, not how they really are. If Kant is right, it is supposed, then there only *seems* to be an objective world and we only *seem* to have knowledge of it.

I think there are, on the face of it, at least four things wrong with this line of interpretation. First, because Kant *introduced* it, presumably he did not intend the transcendental distinction between essentially representable things and essentially unrepresentable things to be the familiar appearance-reality distinction between how things seem and how things really are. Kant surely does not intend to rename a distinction that we have already long been acquainted with.

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<sup>30</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> In his book, Allison traces the arguments of Strawson, Guyer, and Ameriks. I do not have anything to add here. I am more concerned to show that there is a customary understanding of Kant as redescribing objects as mental items, permitting us knowledge only of mental items, and denying us knowledge of reality beyond those mental items.

Second, to conclude that the transcendental distinction is a distinction between how things seem and how things really are, and therewith to conclude that there only *seems* to be a knowable, objective world, is to dismiss the fact, which we saw earlier, that Kant *begins* his critical project by assuming that there really is an objective world and we can know it. The fact that there really is an objective world and we can know it is the given explanandum for which Kant's theoretical project is supposed to be the explanans. But the appearance-reality distinction implies that the world that appears to us in experience may be objectively unreal and that the objectively real may not even appear to us in experience. Yet this does not square with the empirical realism that Kant assumes and sets out to explain.

Third, the construal of the transcendental distinction as the appearance-reality distinction, and the consequent rejection of transcendental idealism, rest on transcendental realist assumptions. Earlier, I noted that one of transcendental realism's basic assumptions is that objective reality is not essentially representable. As I will explain in the third chapter, this assumption is actually an abbreviation of the following two, tightly connected, transcendental realist assumptions: first, that objects in lawful relations really exist only if they are not appearances, that is, have not fallen under the conditions for the possibility of experience and knowledge, and second, that knowledge of appearances, of things that have fallen under the conditions for the possibility of experience and knowledge, is an inferior imitation of a pure, divine, and therefore epistemically ideal knowledge. Hence, when Kant says that the objects of which we can have knowledge are appearances in us, critics suppose that by "appearances" Kant means whatever it is that is opposed to the really real, that their being "in us" means that they

are mental items, and that, regardless of Kant's claims, we therefore have no genuine knowledge of reality. That is, critics tend to settle upon transcendental realist interpretations of "object," "knowledge," "appearance," and "in us," and then try to fit these transcendental realist interpretations into Kant's transcendental idealism. This is unfortunate, since the success of Kant's project rests upon reinterpreting these notions in a transcendental idealist manner. Kant's transcendental idealism should not be evaluated from the standpoint of the very theory he is trying to invalidate.

Fourth, and quite simply, Kant explicitly rejects the common interpretation of the transcendental distinction as one between appearance and reality. He says in the *Prolegomena* that

we may at once dismiss an easily foreseen but futile objection, 'that by our admitting the ideality of space and of time, the whole sensible world would be turned into mere illusion.' . . . When an appearance is given us, we are still quite free as to how we should judge the matter. The appearance depends upon the senses, but the judgment upon the understanding; and the only question is whether in the determination of the object there is truth or not. . . . And it is not the fault of the appearances if our cognition takes illusion for truth . . . The senses represent to us the paths of the planets as now progressive, now retrogressive; and herein is neither falsehood nor truth, because as long as we hold this to be nothing but appearance we do not judge of the objective nature of their motion. . . . We say [the planets] appear to move backward; it is not the senses however which must be charged with the illusion, but the understanding, whose province alone it is to make an objective judgment on appearances. . . . [I]llusion or truth will arise according as we are negligent or careful. It is merely a question of the use of sensuous representations in the understanding, and not of their origin.<sup>32</sup>

Kant makes it clear that when appearances are given us, it is not as if we have thereby been given mere falsehoods and denied access to the truth. Appearances are just given, and it is only after they have been given that truth and falsity can arise, "according as we

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<sup>32</sup> Pp. 31-32.

are negligent or careful” in our deployment of the understanding. “It is not the fault of the appearances if our cognition takes illusion for truth,” Kant says. Or, to put it differently, as Kant does at the end of the long passage just quoted, both illusion *and* truth originate in the appearances that are given us. So it is not that illusion originates in the appearance of an unreal object and truth in the appearance of a real one. For, as Kant says, “truth and illusion are not in the object, insofar as it is intuited” (B350). It is rather the case that one and the same realm of (possible) objects can appear to us, from which both illusion and truth originate, depending upon our judiciousness. This makes sense, too, if, as I maintained earlier, Kant’s project is to explain how objective reality shows up for us in the first place, as something about which we can make true or false judgments.

I think, then, that it is wrong to interpret the transcendental distinction as one between appearance and reality, between how things seem and how they really are. The transcendental distinction is, rather, the distinction between those things we can, through experience, represent and those we cannot. As I noted earlier, Kant believes that those things that we can represent are those things that satisfy the conditions for the possibility of experience and knowledge, and those things that we cannot represent are those things that do not satisfy these conditions. And, as I have said, Kant calls the unexperienceable, unknowable things *things in themselves*, and calls *appearances* the experienceable, knowable things—the world of objects in lawful relations. The objective world, therefore, is appearance. But, as I have insisted, we should not let this at first striking equation lure us into thinking that Kant proclaims the objective world to be unreal. We should try to figure out why Kant would say that the commonsensically real world of objects is appearance.

We should begin with the word “appearance.” The German word for “to appear,” *erscheinen*, is ambiguous among “to seem,” “to happen,” “to show up,” and “to figure, as in a story.” The objective world is appearance in all of these senses. For it is certainly full of things that happen, that figure in stories, and that show up. The objects that occupy the world are always interacting with other objects, causing new states of affairs to appear, or to happen. And insofar as objects interact with other objects in patterned ways, instantiating a wider, lawful order, they figure in the universe’s natural story—its cosmology. The objects that figure in the natural story also appear in the sense of showing up, as when an old friend shows up at the door. In this latter sense of appearance, we of course do not contrast our old friend’s appearing at the door with some way things *really* are. We wonder why she is here and how she came to be here, not whether she is really here. Nor do we think she simply, magically, appeared at our door. We suppose that her showing up is part of a larger concatenation of happenings, part of a larger story. It is thus in these senses that the objects of our experience appear.

Now, in most philosophical contexts, we tend to think of appearing in the very first sense I mentioned, that of seeming, as when a stick, if placed in water, only appears to be bent but really is not. For the reasons I have given, however, I do not think this is the right way to understand Kant’s idea that the objective world is appearance. Although I do not think that Kant intended the objective world to be appearance in the sense of mere seeming, or illusion, I do think he intended it to be appearance in a more uncontroversial sense of seeming. We will approach Kant’s intention, I believe, if we understand appearing not as *mere* seeming, but as seeming in the rather uncontroversial

sense that the world must seem *one way or another*.<sup>33</sup> In this uncontroversial sense, we do not contrast the world's appearing one way or another to the world's *really* being one way or another. For the world's really being some way surely still *appears* to us as really being some way.

It might be helpful here to indicate the distinction between what we could call the *philosophical* sense of appearance, as mere seeming, and the *uncontroversial* sense of appearance, as appearing one way or another, or, as showing up for us. The distinction can be illustrated by the example of the stick in water. The stick in water *appears* to be bent, in both the philosophical sense of mere seeming and the uncontroversial sense of appearing one way or another, and then later *appears* really not to be bent, in the uncontroversial sense of appearing one way or another. So both the stick's appearing bent (in the philosophical sense) and the stick's really not being bent appear to us (in the uncontroversial sense) as a way things are. The stick's merely appearing bent appears to us as a way things are, albeit a false way. And the stick's really not being bent appears to us as a way things are, in this case, as the way things truly are. That is, illusory states of affairs and genuine states of affairs appear to us, each in the same uncontroversial sense as appearing one way or another.

And, in fact, both states of affairs *must* appear, if they are to be the states of affairs they are. The very idea of there being both a way things merely seem to be and a way things really are implies that both the way things merely seem to be and the way things really are can appear to us, in the uncontroversial sense. For if we are to be able to

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<sup>33</sup> I think I am justified in suggesting this even though Kant repeatedly characterizes appearances as "mere." For Kant invokes "mere" appearances usually in those contexts in which he wants to emphasize their difference from things in themselves, which transcendental realists, according to Kant, mistakenly claim are both the proper occupants of objective reality and the proper objects of knowledge.

make sense of the distinction between the way things merely seem to be and the way things really are, then we must be able to distinguish and refer to both the way things merely seem to be and the way things really are. We must be able to say: *this* is how things seemed but *this* is how things really are. If we cannot distinguish and refer to both states of affairs, then the distinction between the way things merely seem to be and the way things really are loses its piquancy.

So in order to distinguish and refer to both how things merely seem to be and how things really are, both states of affairs must be able to appear to us. Another way of putting the point is to say that the distinction between how things merely seem to be and how things really are is a distinction that can obtain only *within* the realm of things that can appear. Something must be able to appear to us in order for us to be able to make false judgments about it and to make true judgments about it, that is, in order either to be mistaken or correct about the way things are. What can appear to us are objects; they are those things about which we are able to form either true or false judgments, “according as we are negligent or careful” in our judging.<sup>34</sup> Since objective judgment depends upon objects possibly appearing to us about which we can form judgments, then it is only within the realm of possible appearances that objective judgment, and therefore knowledge of the way things really are, is possible.

We should not, therefore, conceive of things in themselves as being the way things *really* are. For if we take the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves as the distinction between how things seem to be and how things really are, we are assuming that the way things supposedly really are—the things in

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<sup>34</sup> *Prolegomena*, pp. 31-32.

themselves—can be distinguished from the way things supposedly seem to be—the appearances. But, as I have argued, it only makes sense to distinguish between the way things seem to be and the way things really are when both states of affairs can appear to us. So because the things in themselves cannot appear to us, they cannot be distinguished from the way things merely seem to be. And if things in themselves cannot be distinguished from the way things merely seem to be, then they lose their status as the way things really are. Thus, things in themselves should not be taken as the way things really are. Rather, we should see that the way things really are, in order even to *be* the way things really are, must be able to appear to us.

This is all to say that if we are able to represent an objective state of affairs, then it has appeared, and if an objective state of affairs has appeared, then we are able to represent it. Therefore, according to Kant, as I see him, objective reality *must* be appearance. For objective reality must be able to appear to us in the first place as something to which we can refer when we form judgments. Recalling, then, the notion of objective reference, which have I argued Kant's theoretical project is mainly built around, we can say, first, that Kant believes that we must be able to refer to objects—they must be able to appear—if we are to be able to form objective judgments; second, that we must be able to form objective judgments if we are to be able to form objectively true judgments; and, third, that we must be able to form objectively true judgments if we are to be able to have knowledge. Knowledge is possible, therefore, only on the condition that objects can appear to us. And Kant's theoretical project, I have argued, consists in explaining how it is possible for objects to appear to us.

When I say that objective reality, according to Kant, must be able to appear to us, I mean that objective reality must be able to appear to us in the uncontroversial sense of appearing one way or another. However, it is probably best to think of appearing, in this sense, as showing up for us in experience. This is because when something shows up for us in experience, our first reaction is to take it as something that is part of the wider objective world. To use an earlier example, when an old friend shows up at the door, we are not tempted to contrast her showing up at the door with some other, more real, state of affairs. Nor are we (seriously) tempted to think that she is a mere figment. She shows up at the door as a full-blooded part of objective reality. We do not wonder *whether* she is really there; we wonder *how* she came to be really there. It is in this sense, I have tried to demonstrate, that Kant thinks that objective reality shows up for us in experience. He does not question whether it does, but, rather, how it can.

If objective reality, according to Kant, must be able to show up for us in experience, then objects must be those things which are able to show up for us in experience. But if, according to Kant, objects are defined as things that must be able to show up for us in experience, then we might wonder how this definition differs from a Berkeleian definition of objects as things that must be perceivable.<sup>35</sup> It is worthwhile, therefore, to say something more about what Kant means when he says that an object must be able show up for us in experience, in order to demarcate his idea from Berkeley's.

The instructive point of contrast between Kant and Berkeley is how each deals with unperceived objects. According to Berkeley's account of the *minimum sensible*, to

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<sup>35</sup> *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *Philosophical Works*, ed. by Michael Ayers (London: Dent, 1975).

be a possibly existing object is to be perceivable, and if something is too small to be perceivable, it is not a possibly existing object.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to this, Kant believes that just because something is not perceivable, we do not thereby have license to proclaim that it is not a possibly existing object, for the possible existence of objects is not determined by their perceivability. Let me explain, using one of Kant's own examples.

About the perception of a hypothetical magnetic matter Kant says,

Thus we cognize the existence of a magnetic matter penetrating all bodies from the perception of attracted iron filings, although an immediate perception of this matter is impossible for us given the constitution of our organs. For in accordance with the laws of sensibility and the context of our perceptions we could also happen upon the immediate empirical intuition of it in an experience if our senses, *the crudeness of which does not affect the form of possible experience in general*, were finer. Thus wherever perception and whatever is appended to it in accordance with empirical laws reaches, there too reaches our cognition of the existence of things (A226/B273, my emphasis).

Here, Kant claims that our perception of the movement of iron filings justifies the inference to the existence of an object—magnetic matter—that is responsible for the movement of the iron filings. Berkeley, on the other hand, would have to appeal to a being with more powerful senses, or to deny flatly the possible existence of the magnetic matter, since it is clearly beyond the *minimum sensible*. If, however, we had a different *minimum sensible*, we might, Berkeley would say, be able to perceive the magnetic matter. And only then, he would go on, would we be justified in saying that it exists.

Against Berkeley, Kant claims that the possible existence of an object, and its showing up for us in experience, has nothing to do with the utterly contingent grain of our senses. If our senses happened to be finer, Kant says, we would perceive the magnetic matter. And, presumably, if our senses happened to be coarser, we would not perceive

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<sup>36</sup> *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, §132.

even the iron filings. But all of that is incidental to the existence of, and our cognition of the existence of, the magnetic matter, the iron filings, or any other possible object. For

what is required [for the cognition of possible objects] is only the progress from appearances to appearances, even if they should not yield any actual perception (if this perception is too weak in degree to become an experience for our consciousness), because despite this [the possible objects] would still belong to possible experience (A522/B550).

Kant's claim is that the magnetic matter's possible existence, that is, its possibly showing up for us in experience, is neither necessarily connected to our *actually* perceiving the magnetic matter nor necessarily connected to our *possibly* perceiving the magnetic matter. Whether we can perceive an object does not decide whether that object is possible or can possibly show up for us in experience.

We can see that Kant believes that the possible perception of an object is not a criterion of that object's possible existence. That is, the possible existence of an object has no necessary connection to the object's perceivability. It is reasonable to ask, then, what Kant does say the possible existence of magnetic matter, or any other object, is connected to, if not to the object's perceivability. As Kant suggests in the passage quoted above, at A226/B273, the possible existence of an object, and that object's possibly showing up for us in experience, depends upon the object's lawful connection to other objects that are able to show up for us. The hypothetical magnetic matter, or any other possible object, is able to show up for us in the sense that it is able to fit lawfully into the wider, experienceable, objective world. This coheres with the preliminary definition of Kantian objects that I gave earlier in this chapter. As I said there, and as I am saying here, something's being a possible object, something's being able to show up for us in

experience, depends upon its possible connection to other natural phenomena, and not necessarily upon its perceivability.

Therefore, when I say that, for Kant, objects must be able to show up for us in experience, or that objects are essentially representable, I am not saying, and Kant certainly is not saying, that objects must be perceived in order to be real. If Kant were to think that possible objects depend for their existence upon our being able to perceive them, then he would have to conclude, with Berkeley, that objects might be just mental items, or collections of sense data. And this conclusion would run afoul of Kant's explicit aim to secure empirical realism, the idea that there really exists an objective world that we can come to know through experience (A370-371).

In this chapter, I have tried to give an idea of what Kant's project looks like when we understand it as essentially concerned with explaining the possibility of objective reference. I have argued that it is nearer to Kant's intention to understand representing as above all a semantic activity rather than an epistemic one. That is, I think Kant is first of all concerned to show how it is possible for objects to show up for us in experience as things to know.

I have put things this way because I think it helps us to remember that Kant is not denying the reality of the objective world, the world whose reality we are commonsensically tempted to accept. He is trying to *explain* the reality, and the knowability, of the objective world. It is difficult to remember this when Kant says that the objective world is "mere appearance." And it will be difficult to remember when we consider, as we will in the next chapter, that Kant says that objects conform to cognition.

But we must try to remember that the discourse about mere appearances and cognition-conformed objects originates in the mind of an empirical realist, someone who believes that there is an objectively real world that we can come to know through experience.

Kant believes that the best way to be empirical realists, the best way to understand that the world we experience and know is an objectively real world, is to be transcendental idealists.<sup>37</sup> As I have stated, my thesis is an attempt to understand why Kant thinks that transcendental idealism is the best way to secure empirical realism. The answer to this question I think lies in the distinction Kant draws between two worldviews: transcendental idealism and transcendental realism. Kant distinguishes transcendental idealism from transcendental realism by saying that the latter, unlike the former, thinks that when we refer to objects, we refer to those objects as they are in themselves (A491/B519). This is another way of saying that transcendental realists think that objects do not conform to cognition (Bxvi).

This confusion, Kant claims, forces the transcendental realist to conclude that we can never know whether our representations refer to objects, and this motivates all the familiar skeptical problems. Kant thinks that we can preclude the skepticism only if we can explain how our representations can refer to objects, and, as I have argued, his transcendental idealism is built, in part, to explain this possibility. The explanation of the possibility of objective reference consists in Kant's claim that objects must conform to cognition (Bxvi).

The point of this is both to summarize and to indicate the direction I am heading. In the next chapter, I will try to figure out what Kant might mean when he says that

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<sup>37</sup> See *Prolegomena*, p. 29, where Kant, urging that space must be transcendently ideal, says, "In this and no other way can geometry be made secure as to the undoubted objective reality of its propositions against all the chicaneries of shallow metaphysics."

objects conforms to cognition, since that is supposed to explain the possibility of objective reference. In the final chapter, I try to figure out why transcendental realism, with its assumption that objects do not conform to cognition, supposedly fails to explain objective reference.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THE POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVE REFERENCE

Kant says that the possibility of representing really existing objects is explained by the fact that objects conform to cognition (Bxvi). In this chapter, I would like to explore what Kant might mean when he says that objects conform to cognition and to understand how objects conforming to cognition is supposed to explain the possibility of representing objects.

In the first chapter, I argued that Kant sets out in his project to explain how it is possible for objective reality to show up for us in the first place as something about which we can form true and false judgments. I hope that putting things this way helps us to remember that Kant is trying to preserve the idea that there really exists an objective world that we can know as independent of our particular judgments about it. Part of my argument consists in noting that Kant's transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves should not be taken as the distinction between the way things merely seem to be and the way things really are. I suggest, rather, that we take Kant as saying that, in order for it to be objective, objective reality—the way things really are—must possibly appear to us, for we must be able to distinguish between how things merely seem to be and how things really are, and to do that, both states of affairs must appear for us to refer to. Objective reality must possibly show up for us in experience, and then we can articulate particular judgments about it, some true, some false. The objective world, then, as Kant says, is the world of things that can appear.

I recognize that in attempting to make it more palatable, I risk trivializing Kant's claim that the objective world is appearance. For we might say, "Yes, it would be odd indeed if objective reality did not appear to us in any way whatsoever—did not even appear, somehow, as 'imperceptible in principle,' like some quantum phenomena. And so, yes, in some minimal sense, objective reality must appear one way or another. But who would argue with that?"

Now, if that were the only thing that Kant meant when he says that objective reality is appearance, then his claim might dissolve into triviality. And if Kant's claim that the objective world is appearance were to dissolve into triviality, then the rest of his theoretical philosophy might follow. For Kant's basic criticism of all metaphysics before him—that it confuses objects, things that appear, with things in themselves, things that do not (A491/B519)—is a cornerstone of Kant's belief that transcendental idealism, not transcendental realism, is the best way to secure empirical realism, the idea that there is a really existing objective world which we can come to know through experience. So if there were little substance to the claim that the objective reality we can know is appearance, then there would be little substance to the claim that metaphysics hitherto has mistaken *mere* appearances for things in themselves.<sup>38</sup>

But I do not think I have trivialized Kant's claim. For, as I have said, his critical project depends upon his distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Kant's claim that the objective world is appearance has a corollary that the supposedly trivialized version does not: that along with the notion of appearances comes the notion of things in themselves (A251-252). What I am saying, then, is that it would be difficult

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<sup>38</sup> Again, "mere" qualifies "appearances" in the service of emphatically distinguishing knowable appearances from unknowable things in themselves, not in the service of degrading appearances vis-à-vis things in themselves (Cf. B69).

to trivialize Kant's claim that the objective world is appearance, precisely because that claim will always carry with it the notion that appearances are to be distinguished from things in themselves.<sup>39</sup> So, yes, it may be easy to accept that the objective world must appear to us in one way or another if it is to be the objective world. But the objective world, on Kant's view, will always be defined, in some sense, by what it is not, namely, the things in themselves. Yet, of course, as I have tried to demonstrate, this does not imply that when the objective world does show up for us, we are thereby missing out on the really real. For the world that shows up for us, according to Kant, *is* objective reality.

Thus, I hope that instead of enervating Kant's claim that objective reality is appearance, I have vivified it by situating it in a certain picture of Kant's project, a picture according to which: first, Kant believes that our representations can and do refer to really existing objects; second, Kant's principal aim is to explain how it is possible for our representations to refer to really existing objects; and, third, Kant's explanation of the possibility of such reference begins with his recognizing that objective reality must show up for us in the first place if we are to be able to refer to it. (I will need to elaborate just *how* Kant thinks objective reality can show up for us in the first place, but for now, it is enough to say that he thinks it must.) I hope, that is, that I have gone some way toward making Kant's claim that objective reality is appearance into a declaration of empirical

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<sup>39</sup> And it will do so regardless of some attempts to sanitize Kant's transcendental idealism by ignoring the thing in itself. Cf. John McDowell, in *Mind and World*: "But Kant also has a transcendental story, and in the transcendental perspective . . . receptivity figures as a susceptibility to the impact of a supersensible reality, a reality that is supposed to be independent of our conceptual activity in a stronger sense than any that fits the ordinary empirical world. If we restrict ourselves to the standpoint of experience itself [instead of the entire transcendental perspective], what we find in Kant is precisely the picture I have been recommending . . . . As I said, if we abstract from the role of the supersensible in Kant's thinking, we are left with a picture in which reality is not located outside a boundary that encloses the conceptual. [My] picture is not offensive to common sense, but precisely protective of it" (pp. 41-44).

realism, an affirmation of the idea that the objects that show up for us are real and can be known.

Of course, the reasonableness of the foregoing depends upon what sorts of object Kant says can show up for us. As I have said, according to Kant, those sorts of object that can appear are those that conform to cognition. But what sorts of object are *these*? Rather than enumerating the general characteristics that an object must have in order to appear, I think it would be most helpful to address the prior question of what it might mean generally for objects to conform to cognition. For appreciating what it means for objects to conform to cognition is important for understanding why Kant thinks that his transcendental idealism is the best way to explain how we are able to represent really existing objects. Indeed, Kant thinks that transcendental realism's failure to give us a satisfying account of how we can represent really existing objects consists precisely in transcendental realism's failure to acknowledge that objective reality conforms to cognition. In sum, my reason for asking what it means for objective reality to conform to cognition is this: Kant's criticism of transcendental realism, a criticism that I will explore in my third chapter, is that it does not appreciate that objective reality must conform to cognition, yet it is unclear *what* is supposed to be understood when one *does* understand that objective reality conforms to cognition. And so I will devote this chapter to an exploration of what Kant might mean when he says that objective reality conforms to cognition.

First of all, whatever it does mean, Kant makes it clear that the idea that objective reality conforms to cognition is the whole secret of metaphysics, the solution to the

question of how to guarantee the referential bond between representations and real objects. As Kant tells us in the Preface to the Second Edition,

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us (Bxvi-xvii).

As I have said, we need to ask what it means to say that objects must conform to cognition. It will be helpful to begin, however, by elaborating exactly what it does *not* mean to say that objects must conform to cognition.

Kant says that “there are only two possible cases in which synthetic representation and its objects can come together, necessarily relate to each other, and, as it were, meet each other: Either if the object alone makes the representation possible, or if the representation alone makes the object possible” (A92/B125). As far as I can gather—from Kant’s letter of February 21, 1772 to Marcus Herz, from the Criticism of the Fourth Paralogism of Transcendental Psychology (A367-A381), and from the first paragraph of the Transition to the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, the first few lines of which I quote just above—Kant thinks that there are, historically, two ways that the object has been understood to make the representation possible and two ways that the representation has been understood to make the object possible. The two ways that the object has been understood to make the representation possible are, first, by the object acting as the efficient cause of which the representation is the effect and, second, by the

object acting as the archetypal cause of which the representation is the ectypal effect.<sup>40</sup>

Correlatively, the two ways that the representation alone has been understood to make the object possible are, first, by the representation acting as the efficient cause of which the object is the effect, and, second, by the representation acting as the archetypal cause of which the object is the ectypal effect.

Given these choices, Kant espouses the view that representation makes objects possible. This is part of what it means, we must assume, for objects to conform to cognition. But Kant will conclude that the representation makes the object possible neither by acting as an efficient cause nor by acting as an archetypal cause. Instructive for my purposes in this chapter are the reasons why Kant rejects the efficient and archetypal causal explanations and the ways in which he modulates the view that representation makes the object possible. Therefore, I will run through all of the historically available ways that are thought to secure the bond between representations and their objects. I will then discuss Kant's way of securing the bond.

Let me first ask after the two ways in which the object can make the representation possible. In the first of these two cases, the object is the efficient cause of the representation. In this case, we can see how it could happen that a representation could be connected to what it is supposed to represent, how it would come into existence as a representation of its object: there could be a causal chain uniting the effect, the representation, to the efficient cause, the object. But two problems arise in this case. First, there is no reason that an effect should resemble its efficient cause, yet there is some

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<sup>40</sup> *Archetype* and *ectype* are Kant's terms, as used in his letter to Marcus Herz of February 21, 1772. As I will explain later, they refer to a prototype and its copy, respectively.

sense in which a representation is supposed to resemble what it represents, whether the resemblance be spatial, temporal, analogical, or whatever.

Second, if the only connection between representations and objects were causal, then we would be able, from our representations of them, only *to infer* the existence of real objects as the efficient cause of our representations of those same objects. And an inference from a representation as effect to its object as cause is a weak inference, since the representation could have been caused by, for example, faulty neurological connections, rather than the object to which the representation is supposed to refer.<sup>41</sup> As Kant notes in the beginning of the Criticism of the Fourth Paralogism,

the inference from a given effect [the representation, for example] to its determinate cause [the object, for example] is always uncertain, since the effect can have arisen from more than one cause. Accordingly, in the relation of perception [that is, representation] to its cause, it always remains doubtful whether this cause is internal or external, thus whether all so-called outer perceptions [representations of external objects] are not a mere play of our inner sense, or whether they are related to actual external objects as their causes (A368).

Given a representation, as effect, there is no way to ensure that its efficient cause is the object the representation purportedly refers to, rather than, say, “a mere play” of our minds. Therefore, if, as I argued in my first chapter, representations are ways for us to get in cognitive touch with objective reality—ways for objects to be given us—and if our only way to get in cognitive touch with objective reality were by inferring from a representation as effect to its object as cause, then it is difficult to see how representations would *necessarily* get us in cognitive touch with objective reality, as something about which we can make true and false judgments. What is needed, Kant thinks, is a *necessary* connection between our representations and the objects to which they refer. For if we

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, this depends upon the idea that causes are sufficient conditions—one among many ideas of what causes might be.

cannot be sure that our representations refer to objects, then we cannot be sure that our judgments will be objective, because we cannot be sure that our representations are giving us *objects* about which we form judgments. What Kant is saying, I believe, is that a merely causal connection to objective reality does not ensure the desired semantic connection to objective reality.<sup>42</sup> But even further, it is not only the case that the inference from our representation as effect to its object as cause is a weak inference. It is undesirable that an inference has to be made at all. Recall that Kant assumes the truth of empirical realism, which “grants to matter, as appearance, *a reality which need not be inferred*, but is immediately perceived” (A371, my emphasis). But if an object were merely the efficient cause of its representation, then the reality of that object could *only* be inferred, and empirical realism would be false, an altogether un-Kantian result.

The second of the two ways in which the object alone can make the representation possible is the case in which the object is the archetypal cause and the representation is the object’s ectypal effect. The terminology is odd, but we can think of archetypes as prototypes and ectypes as copies of the prototype. In this case, then, the representation is supposed to be a copy of the object. We can, in this case, see how a representation could, in one way or another, resemble the object it purports to refer to. But there are a couple of things wrong with this idea. First, the idea that representations are copies of objects misses the fact that the objects that show up for us in experience always show up for us *in*

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<sup>42</sup> In “Non-reductive physicalism,” from *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Richard Rorty recommends that we countenance only causal commerce between bodies of belief and the external environment. If non-reductive physicalism were true, then we could not preclude brain-in-a-vat and Matrix-type scenarios, since, as Kant points out, we could not ensure that the object we purport to have beliefs about was causing those beliefs. What is more, if objects were merely the causes of our beliefs, it is hard to see how our beliefs would *mean* anything. In *Mind and World*, John McDowell expresses this latter concern by noting that Donald Davidson, an arch non-reductive physicalist, “helps himself to a body of [meaningful] beliefs” (p. 68), yet cannot, within his own non-reductive physicalism, say how those beliefs come to be meaningful in the first place.

*a certain way*. This means that we do not automatically know everything about the object when it shows up for us. If everything about the object were given when we represent it, the point of judgment, that is, of further determination, would be lost. Moreover, when an object shows up for us in experience, *more* than just the particular object shows up for us. That is, when we represent an object, it shows up for us not only as an instance of a wider kind, but also as an instance of a kind which, at least possibly, has its lawful place in the wider objective world. This follows from how I characterized Kant's notion of object and objective reality in my first chapter, but it is also supported by what Kant says at A582/B610, that "nothing is an object *for us* unless it presupposes the sum total of empirical reality as condition of its possibility." Thus, when we represent objects, we get both less and more, in a sense, than we would were our representations mere copies of their objects.

The second thing wrong with the idea that our representations are copies is that we risk construing representing as a merely passive reaction to objects, when, according to Kant, the representation of objects, and also the full-fledged knowledge of them, necessarily involves the *spontaneity* of the understanding, as well as the receptivity of the sensibility (A50/B74). The representation of objects is spontaneous insofar as when an object has shown up for us in experience, we have already, in a minimal way, *made sense* of the object by "ordering different representations under a common one" (A68/B93). The "different representations" here would be of an object's different properties, and the "common" representation would be a unified representation of an object as a unified object. The object that appears has already been unified by our cognitive activity into an object; we are, in some manner, as knowers, responsible for the ways in which objects

show up for us in experience.<sup>43</sup> The difficulty, of course, is to understand how we can be responsible both *for* real objects and *to* real objects as independently existing things about which we form judgments. But of all that there will be more later. For now, it should be enough to note that the idea that representing real objects is a matter of passive copying fails to capture both the extent to which, according to Kant, representing and judging are activities and the extent to which representing an object gives us more and less than the particular object itself.

Now, there are two ways in which the representation can make the object possible, the first due to the fact that the representation is the efficient cause of which the object is the effect and the second due to the fact that the representation is the archetypal cause of which the object is the ectypal effect. Each of these two cases gets the *direction* of the relation right—representations in some sense making objects possible—but they do not get the *character* of the relation right. For both cases suppose that the representation is the cause of its object. In the first case, where the representation is supposed to be the lawfully efficient cause of the object, we can see the necessary “coming together” of the representation and its object, since, *ceteris paribus*, given the representation as cause, its object as effect obtains.<sup>44</sup> But there are two things wrong with this idea. First, it is difficult to see how the representation, as the cause of its object, could, in any sense, be a *representation* of the object. Presumably, the representation of an object depends for its aboutness upon being responsive to its object. Second, if the representation were the only cause of its object, then the knowledge based on this representation would be, according to Kant’s definition, not theoretical but *practical* knowledge. For, unlike theoretical

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<sup>43</sup> This is not, of course, an invitation to view objects as mere subjective constructions. Kant intends the Transcendental Deduction to show that unified objects are necessary conditions of unified subjects.

<sup>44</sup> Once again, this depends upon the idea that causes are sufficient conditions.

knowledge, which depends upon its objects in some sense being given from elsewhere, practical knowledge brings its objects into actuality (Bix-x), as when my practical knowledge that my health is a good thing to attain actually works to bring my health—the object of my practical knowledge—into existence.<sup>45</sup>

In the second case, where the representation is supposed to be the prototype of which the object is the copy, we can see how a necessary relation of representation to its object would obtain: The objects, as copies, necessarily resemble the representations. But, as I noted above, it is difficult to understand, if the objects were copies of our representations, in what sense our representations would be responsive to, and thus *representations of*, the objects. But further, we are, Kant says, finite, discursive knowers, which means that we bring objective reality into view by mobilizing concepts (A68/B93). If, by the mere act of conceptualizing, or representing, we could make copies, that is, objects, then we would not in fact be discursive knowers at all. We would be divine knowers. For a divine intellect, knowing and creating are the same. A divine intellect is not one which would “represent given objects, [but one] through whose representation the objects would themselves at the same time be given, or produced” (B145). Since we have discursive intellects, objects cannot be the copies of our representations.

Let us look back at where we have been. We are trying to narrow down what it means for objective reality to conform to cognition, for the reason that objective reality’s conforming to cognition is, Kant believes, how we are able to explain the possibility of representing real objects. To get an idea of why Kant believes objective reality conforms to cognition, I have considered four influential alternatives mentioned by Kant, each of

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<sup>45</sup> For a fruitful explication of this idea, see Stephen Engstrom, “Kant’s Distinction Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge,” *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, X, 2002, pp. 49-63. The example is Engstrom’s.

which were supposed to explain the possibility of representing objects. I have shown why Kant rejects each of these alternatives. Representations can be neither mere causes nor mere effects of objects, and objects can be neither mere prototypes nor mere copies of representations. But of the two general means to secure the possibility of objective reference, by representations making their objects possible or by objects making their representations possible, Kant in fact claims that only the former can explain the possibility of representing real objects. So there must be some other way, beyond efficient and archetypal causation, for representations to make their objects possible.

As I indicated, Kant's revolutionary claim is that the way that representations can make their objects possible is if objects *conform* to cognition. If what I have said above is correct, then the idea that objects conform to cognition can mean neither that objects are copies of their representations nor that representations are the efficient causes of their objects. This is because only for a divine intellect is the representation of an object at the same time the creation of the object, and only in the case of discursive, practical knowledge can a representation bring its object into actuality. And it is difficult, in either case, to see how the representation would be a (theoretical) *representation* of the object.

It is here that we encounter what might be termed the *standard model* of what Kant means when he says that objects must conform to cognition.<sup>46</sup> The standard model is meant to explain, as the archetypal and efficient causal models cannot, how representations can refer to real objects. And it follows Kant in drawing a distinction between the *form* and the *matter* of the objects that show up for us, and goes on, again

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, the editors' introduction to Kant in Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, eds., *Philosophic Classics, Volume III: Modern Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), pp. 448-449.

following Kant, to suggest that our cognitive capacities determine the *form* for objects, while the objects' *matter* is supplied from elsewhere (Bx).

From here, however, the standard model has a tendency to morph into a metaphor that, though simple and therefore useful for first getting a grip on Kant's transcendental idealism, is too coarse to capture the fineness of Kant's solution to the secret of metaphysics. Often, we take the standard model, apply the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves, and go on to suggest that things in themselves are the matter which our concepts form, or shape, or mold, into the objects that appear to us. This, it is supposed, is what Kant means when he says that objects must conform to cognition: Our concepts shape some given, amorphous stuff—the things in themselves—into the objects that appear to us. It is this sort of view that Jacques Barzun seems to have in mind when he writes, for example, that “Kant posited a mind that acts like a waffle iron on batter.”<sup>47</sup>

As evocative and easy to understand as it may be, however, the waffle iron metaphor is misleading. In the first place, there is a clear disanalogy between things in themselves and things like batter, namely, things in themselves are supposed not to have spatiotemporal properties, while things like batter obviously have spatiotemporal properties like texture, temperature, color, and so on. On the standard model, spatiotemporal properties are part of objective reality's form. If things in themselves are supposed to be our batter, then we would have to imagine our batter to be extensionless, textureless, temperatureless, colorless, etc.

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 508.

The waffle iron advocate could perhaps try to salvage the metaphor by suggesting that we could simply subtract properties, one by one, from the batter. But if we did that, it would be hard to say *what* we were supposed to be shaping when we represent—shape—objects. Now, the idea of concepts shaping reality denotes a two-term causal relation, but if one of the relata lacks its referent, then the relation, and thus the idea, lacks good sense. So, in the second place, the waffle iron version of the standard model falters because it presumably cannot tell us what, in Kant’s scheme, our concepts are supposed to shape. It cannot give us the direct object that would complete our transitive verb. Furthermore, if we cannot say what it is we are supposed to shape, then we might as well conclude also that things in themselves should not be identified with some substantial but shapeless reality which, once we lay hold of it and shape it according to our concepts, finds itself in the overall composition of objects of our experience and knowledge, the way the batter finds itself in the waffle. Kant surely understood that things in themselves, which we cannot know, are not some kind of substance.

In the third place, the idea of a shapeless reality that awaits conceptual shaping suggests that the shapeless reality can be shaped in a variety of arbitrary and possibly irreconcilable ways. Even if there were—and Kant thinks there is not—some “subjective necessity” (B168) dictating that any discursive knower must shape the shapeless stuff in such-and-such a way, there would still be nothing to make the supposed “subjective necessity” at all necessary, for the subjective necessity would still be arbitrarily implanted (B167). The idea that reality can be shaped variously, arbitrarily, and incommensurably can lead, therefore, to a subjectivism according to which particular

claims, pretending to objectivity, cannot be adjudicated.<sup>48</sup> And this, Kant says, “is precisely what the skeptic wishes most” (B168). But Kant certainly does not intend to give the skeptics what they want most.

But there is something else wrong with the waffle iron metaphor, a problem that would remain whether or not we can save the analogy between thing-in-itself and batter, find a direct object for our transitive verb, or contort Kant’s intentions. What is wrong with the waffle iron notion is that it is a *causal* notion.

Shaping things in themselves into objects would be a causal process. But on Kant’s view, causal relations obtain only *within* the realm of appearances. There can be no causal commerce across the transcendental divide, between appearances and things in themselves. It is for this reason, too, that the so-called problem of affection arises. The problem of affection is that things in themselves are supposed by Kant to “affect the mind in a certain way” (A19/B33) or to be the “cause” (A288/B344) of the appearances. But only objects that have already appeared are subject to causal determination. The problem of affection is a widely discussed problem in Kant scholarship, but I will not discuss it in any depth here.<sup>49</sup> I bring it up because it is a well-known problem, and I want to use its notoriety to point out that it is the converse of the problem that I now address. That is, if there is a question as to how things in themselves could in any way cause appearances, there must be a question as to how our concepts can cause, or in any way manipulate,

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<sup>48</sup> In “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” from *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Donald Davidson demonstrates that the idea of radically incommensurable conceptual schemes, an idea presupposed by claims of extreme subjectivism and relativism, is incoherent. Along the way, and perhaps tacitly admonishing Kant, Davidson abolishes the duality of mental items that shape and stuff that is shaped. Since I am sure that Kant did not intend his Copernican turn to mean that we shape things in themselves into objects, then I am sure that Kant’s transcendental idealism can accommodate Davidson’s basic conclusion, which is that conceptual disagreement presupposes a common conceptual grip on the world.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Allison analyzes the problem in Chapter Three of *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism* and points the reader to the body of work on the problem. Allison argues that affection is not necessarily a causal notion.

things in themselves to make objects. For, according to Kant, as I have said, things in themselves cannot enter into *any* causal relations, as cause or as effect.

What Kant has in mind when he says that objects conform to cognition must, therefore, be something quite different. Indeed, we should remember that Kant says that *objects* must conform to cognition, which means that what conforms to cognition are things that have already shown up for us, not things that have yet to show up for us. It cannot be the case that when we represent an object, we have brought a thing in itself into objecthood. So we should not be led to think that the waffle iron metaphor captures what Kant intends by his Copernican turn. The standard model, however, not taken to its waffle iron extremes, does partly capture what Kant intends.

Again, the standard model says that the objects that show up for us have a form and a matter and that we determine the form while the matter comes from elsewhere. We can, following tradition, think of the form of something as the something's most general and minimal definition, taking "definition" in the sense of a clear, sharp demarcation of that something's essential features. The form of an object, then, would be its essence, the minimal features it must have to be an object at all. But what would the matter of objects be? If I am right about what I said above, then we should try not to think of the matter of objects as stuff, as a sort of noumenal substrate that awaits molding. Rather, we should, following Kant, identify the matter of objects with their *sheer existence* (A92/B125).

It is reasonable to ask whether we are really following Kant when we identify matter and sheer existence. The matter of an object, historically, has not been understood as that object's sheer existence. Consider a passage I referred to earlier, one in which Kant contrasts theoretical and practical knowledge. Kant says that "cognition can relate

to its object in either of two ways, either merely *determining* the object . . . or else also *making* the object *actual*. The former is *theoretical*, the latter *practical* cognition of reason” (Bx). In this passage, Kant suggests that the case in which cognition merely determines its object is different from the case in which cognition both determines and makes actual its object. There is a difference, when we represent objects, between determining the objects we represent and bringing into existence the objects we represent. In theoretical cognition, that is, in mathematical and scientific cognition, we do not make the objects actual when we represent them. “[R]epresentation in itself,” Kant says, “does not produce its object as far as its *existence* is concerned” (A92/B125). Returning to Kant’s distinction between objective reality’s form and matter, where the former is what we are supposed to determine and the latter is what is supposed to be supplied from elsewhere, we can conclude that what we determine is objective reality’s form—its general, essential features—and what is supplied from elsewhere is objective reality’s sheer existence.

Some questions arise here. We understand that we do not determine objective reality with respect to its sheer existence, but we still do not know what it means to determine objective reality with respect to its *form*. And we understand what Kant does *not* mean when he says that objects conform to cognition, but we have yet to answer, positively, the question of what he *does* mean when he says that objects conform to cognition. What is more, we do not yet know how objective reality’s conforming to cognition is supposed to explain the possibility of representing objective reality. Now, I think that if we first address this last question, that of how objective reality’s conforming to cognition is supposed to explain the possibility of objective meaningfulness, then it

will remind us why, in the first place, we are talking about determining objective reality with respect to its form. Then, eventually, I hope to clarify what Kant might mean when he says that we determine objective reality with respect to its form.

Kant states in one sentence, albeit an epigrammatic one, what turns out to be the whole secret of metaphysics, the solution to the problem of explaining objective reference: “The *a priori* conditions of a possible experience in general are at the same time conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience” (A111).<sup>50</sup> The way I have been putting things, this means that the conditions that define the way objects show up for us in and through experience are the very same conditions that define the objects that show up for us in and through experience. These conditions, however, are not conditions for the *actuality* of representations and objects. For, if we recall, representations do not determine, or condition, objects with respect to their sheer existence. Rather, the conditions are conditions for the *possibility* of representations and objects. As Kant says in the quoted passage at A111, the conditions for a *possible* experience, or representation, of objects are at the same time the conditions for the *possibility* of the objects of experience, or representation. So the idea is that the conditions that make it possible to represent objects, that make it possible for objects to show up for us, are, identically, the conditions that make those objects possible.

It will be instructive here to invoke, once again, the transcendental distinction between things that show up for us—objects, objective reality—and things that do not—things in themselves. As I argued in my first chapter, things in themselves cannot be objectively real, in any full-blooded sense, because they do not show up for us. Let me

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<sup>50</sup> See also A158/B197.

put this in terms of possibility conditions. Objects are things that satisfy the conditions for the possibility of showing up for us, and things in themselves are things that do not satisfy the conditions for the possibility of showing up for us. But this just means, as I have argued, that things in themselves are not possible objects. That is, if something cannot show up for us, then it cannot be objectively real, and if something cannot be objectively real, then it cannot show up for us. Equivalently, then, we can say that something can be a really existing object if and only if it can show up for us. Thus we have had all along the beginning of a definition of objects, one minimal feature that objects in general must have if they are to be objects at all: To be an object is to be able to appear to us.

Now we will be able to see how Kant's identification of the conditions for the possibility of representation with the conditions for the possibility of objects is supposed to secure the possibility of representing the objectively real. The conditions under which it is possible for an object to appear to us are the conditions under which it is possible for an object to be an object at all, which means that if something has appeared to us, then it is already, simply in virtue of its having appeared to us, a possibly real object.<sup>51</sup> Possibly existing objects, and, by extension, actually existing objects, are *necessarily* able to be represented; it will never be the case that an object actually exists which we cannot place before us in a certain way. And if it is impossible for there to be a really existing object

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<sup>51</sup> One might reasonably wonder how a possible object can appear. We should note what Kant says it means, generally, for an object to show up for us. He says, "To give an object . . . is nothing other than to relate its representation to experience (whether this be actual or possible)" (A155/B194). Because the notions of possible appearance and possible object are so tightly connected, I risk circularity here, but let me just say, following Kant, that a possible object can appear if we can say what its appearing would be like. Thus, for example, the aether appeared. For we had a handful of identity conditions; we knew how it might fit in lawfully with other objects that we experience. But though the aether was and remains a possible object, it turns out, by dint of experience, not to be actual.

that we cannot represent, then the possibility of representing really existing objects is secured. Objective reality will always be able, at the very least, *possibly* to appear to us.

Of course, this does not mean that objective reality *must* be represented in order to be objective reality, only that it must possibly be represented. Kant aims only to secure the possibility, in the first place, of representing any object at all, actual or possible, and he does this, if I am right, by arguing that one of the essential features of objective reality is that it is able to show up for us in and through experience. And this is how Kant intends to explain the possibility of representing objective reality.

There are other, and more specific, essential features of objective reality besides its representability. I enumerated some in my first chapter. But one of the most concise definitions of Kant's notion of objective reality comes from Gordon G. Brittan, Jr.<sup>52</sup> Brittan says that, according to Kant, the objective world is "a world having a particular spatial-temporal-causal form that contains enduring centers of attractive and repulsive forces."<sup>53</sup> Any object that appears, that is, any possibly real object, will assume this definition. Objects must be able to be located in space and time, and must be able to push back and get pulled away, and to do so lawfully.<sup>54</sup> This is objective reality's form. But since the conditions for the possibility of objective reality are at the same time the conditions for the possibility of our representing objective reality, it is also the general way objective reality will appear to us in and through experience. We determine objective

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<sup>52</sup> *Kant's Philosophy of Science*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. According to the Transcendental Deduction, objects must have a determinable location in space and time, for their being *objects* depends upon their being somewhere and somewhen other than where and when I am. Further, my being a *subject* of experiences depends upon objects being elsewhere and elsewhen. And according to the Analogies of Experience, the causal determination of the world helps to establish the distinction between a succession of subjective perceptions and a succession of objective states of affairs. See Chapters 6 and 7 in Brittan (op. cit.) for a helpful discussion.

<sup>54</sup> This means that objective reality must obey some causal laws, not that it must obey the causal laws it now obeys.

reality with respect to its *form*, and not its existence, then, in the sense that any possible experience or representation we can have of an object will have this form, and so will any possible object that we can experience or represent, regardless of whether the object is actual. Thus, analogous to the way that we are assured that we can represent really existing objects because really existing objects *must* be representable, in virtue of their being objects, we are assured that we can represent objective reality because a spatially-temporally-causally arranged world of objects is the only general kind of world that we can represent, but, if Kant is right, it is also the only general kind of world that there can be (A93/B125).

So I hope that we now understand how the fact that we determine reality is supposed to explain the possibility of representing really existing objects, and that we have an idea of what it means for us to determine objective reality with respect to its form. But in what sense do we *determine* objective reality? About our determining objects, Kant says that “the representation is still determinant of the object *a priori* if it is possible through it alone to *cognize something as an object*” (A92/B125). There seem to be at least three senses here, now that we have cleared away the more prominent misconceptions, in which Kant says that we determine objective reality. The first sense in which Kant seems to suggest that we determine objective reality is that through our representing, which always assumes an objective character, we can only bring into view a reality that has an objective character. The second sense, which stresses the *a priori* aspect of our representations, is that because the form of experience is the form of the world, we are able to know, prior to any particular experience of an object or of objective reality, the general features of that object or of objective reality, and we can do this

simply by reflecting on the general features of the way in which objects show up for us in experience. That is, based on the form of our experience of the objective world, we can determine, prior to any particular experience, the form of the objective world. The third sense in which Kant seems to suggest that we determine objective reality is that because our peculiar cognitive activities represent objective reality in a certain way, objective reality must therefore *be* that certain way.

We should note that all three of the above senses seem to get at what Kant intends by his Copernican turn. For if through the representation alone we are able *a priori* to know something as an object, then surely it must mean, first, that we are able only to represent a certain kind of world, namely an objective one; second, that it is only by reflecting on the form of experience that we can know the form of objective reality; and third, that we are able, because of how we represent, to ensure that objective reality must be a certain way. All of these senses, then, capture what Kant intends.

At the same time, however, all of these senses of determination might be supposed to be objectionably anthropocentric. For what should the character of objective reality have to do with the way that we represent it? The worry is legitimate, since Kant is trying to justify empirical realism, the idea that the world we can represent is a really existing, independent world. But I think there is a way of understanding our determination of objective reality that is faithful to the three senses of determination, that coheres with the rest of what I have said so far, and that does not imply anything too objectionably anthropocentric.

The first sense—the idea that we can, because of the character of our representations, only bring into view a reality of an objective character—is right as far as

it goes, as long as we remember that it is the character of our representations that allows us only to bring into view a nomologically *possible* reality of a *necessarily* objective character. Our representations allow us, necessarily, only to refer to possible objects and, if reality obliges, to actual ones. We should also make sure that we are not bewitched by the “only,” which is akin to the “mere” in “mere appearances.” The objective world that shows up for us is indeed the only world that can show up for us, the only world our representations allow into view, but we are not, I hope I have shown, therefore missing out on the really real. We are just referring to the only things we could ever refer to. And even though it is the case that our representations allow us “only” to refer to a certain kind of reality, we should also keep in mind that the “only” kind of reality that our representations allow us to refer to is an *objective* reality. Representations give us objects so that we can make objective judgments (A155/B194).

Regarding the second sense, since Kant *identifies* the conditions for the possibility of representation, or experience, with the conditions for the possibility of objects, the fact that we can inspect the way objects show up for us in experience and determine by that inspection what the objects we experience must be like may do nothing more than point up the fact that we are finite, discursive, and sensuous knowers who can come to know something about objective reality only through representation, or experience. Here is what I mean. Imagine things the other way around, as if we could, instead of inspecting the general features of experience in order to draw conclusions about objective reality, somehow inspect the general features of objective reality in order to draw conclusions about our experience. In that case, we would be able to enumerate the general features that any representation or experience must have, given the general features of objective

reality—on the condition, of course, that the general features of experience are just the general features of the world. But this cannot be the case, since we are finite, discursive, sensuous knowers. We cannot inspect anything except through experience. As Kant says in the opening sentence of his Introduction to the *Critique*'s B Edition, *all* of our knowledge, including, presumably, transcendental knowledge, begins with experience (B1). This not only means that we cannot bring objects into view except through experience, it means that we cannot reflect upon the general features of objective reality except through reflection upon the general features of our experience of objective reality. Our lot is to get at things by way of experience. Without the possibility of experience of objective reality, we, as finite, discursive, sensuous knowers, could not draw any conclusions about objective reality or its general features. But since experience is possible, and if Kant is right that the conditions that make it possible for us to experience objects are the same conditions that make objects possible, then we are able to draw conclusions, based on the character of our experience, about the character of objective reality. This is not necessarily anthropocentric, since the conditions for the possibility of experience, which are the conditions for the possibility of objects, are not *necessarily* human conditions. Kant's argument is that given *these* general features of our experience of objective reality, *these* conditions must obtain. This does not imply that we or our minds have anything to do with the obtaining of the conditions.<sup>55</sup>

The same sort of consideration can apply to the third sense in which we may be said to determine objective reality, the idea that objective reality *must* be the way it is because that is the way our representations are. For since Kant identifies the form of

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<sup>55</sup> As Brittan points out, Kant does not give a separate argument, over and above his "quasi-psychological suggestions," for the conclusion that the conditions lie permanently "in the mind." See *Kant's Theory of Science*, pp. 26-27.

representation with the form of the world, we can just as well say that our representations *must* be the way they are because that is the way objective reality is. The conditions for the possibility of representation and the conditions for the possibility of objects are the same conditions, so representations and objects each *must* be the way they are because of the other. Again, this does not imply an anthropocentrism, for Kant's argument is that given *these* general features of our experience of objective reality, *these* conditions must obtain, and we do not necessarily have a say in the obtaining of these conditions.

To summarize, then, let me say that, according to Kant, as I see him, we determine objective reality in the senses: first, that we are able to represent only a certain kind of reality, namely, an objective one; second, that we are able to inspect the general features of objective reality only by inspecting the general features of our representations of it; and third, that because our representations of objective reality have certain general features, we are assured that objective reality will have those general features. None of these senses is objectionably anthropocentric if we remember that our determining objective reality just means that the conditions that make it possible for us to represent objective reality are identical with the conditions that make it possible for objective reality to be objective reality. That is, if any possible representation has certain general features, then any possible object must have those features, and if any possible object has certain general features, then any possible representation must have those features.

In emphasizing the identity of the conditions for the possibility of representation with the conditions for the possibility of objects, saying, in effect, that representations and objects each must be the way they are because of the other, it may seem that I am again trivializing Kant. For putting things this way seems to gloss over the radicality of

Kant's shift in perspective, from the precritical view that cognition conforms to objects to the critical view that objects conform to cognition. I might seem to be suggesting that to say that objects conform to cognition is just another way of saying that cognition conforms to objects.

On the contrary, I have been arguing that Kant's shift in perspective, to the critical view that objects conform to cognition, or that we determine objective reality, consists precisely in the idea that the (possibly) objectively real must necessarily be able to show up for us in experience, that there is a necessary connection between the possibility of representing objective reality and the possibility of objective reality itself. On the precritical, cognition-conforming-to-objects view, there is no necessary connection between these possibilities, which is to say that on the precritical view, objective reality is thought not to be able, by necessity, to appear to us.

Kant is not making the vacuous claim that we can represent objects because objects are representable. He is making the claim that the conditions that make objective reality possible must be the very same conditions that make it possible for us to represent objective reality. This is a substantive claim about the obtaining of certain conditions that connect possible objects necessarily with their possible appearance to us. To make the substance of the claim salient, consider what its negation claims, which is that if the conditions did not obtain, there would be neither the possibility of objective reality nor the possibility of representations of it. We can also make the substance of the claim salient by noting that while it connects possible objects necessarily with their possible appearance to us, it also connects impossible objects necessarily with their impossible

appearance to us.<sup>56</sup> That is, the claim that we can represent things that appear to us is always coupled with the claim that we cannot represent things that do not satisfy the conditions for the possibility of appearing to us. If something cannot appear to us, then it cannot be an ingredient of objective reality.

In saying that we determine objective reality, or that objects conform to cognition, Kant has redefined what it means for something to be objectively real. Kant rethinks the character of objective reality in an attempt to explain the possibility of representing the objectively real. He says that an essential feature of objective reality is that it can be represented. That is, objective reality should be understood not as something that is radically divorced from our ability to represent it, but understood rather as something which *must* possibly show up for us, as something which we *must* be able to represent. On this picture, it is impossible for us to be cognitively out of touch with objective reality.<sup>57</sup>

In this chapter, I have tried to clarify what I think Kant means when he says that objects conform to cognition and to clarify how the conforming of objects to cognition is supposed to explain the possibility of representing objects. What I think it means to say that objects conform to cognition is that the conditions for the possibility of representing objects are identically the conditions for the possibility of the objects we represent. This

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<sup>56</sup> Impossible objects being things like God, which, because they are not spatiotemporal, cannot show up for us in experience.

<sup>57</sup> I am ignoring the possibility of transcendental illusion, which, Kant seems to think, is rationally inevitable. But surely, based on what he says about the Antinomies of Pure Reason, Kant thinks that he has succeeded in designing a worldview that can show us when we are grasping at impossible objects, thereby preventing us from being deceived by transcendental illusion. And that we can and do, from time to time, grasp at impossible objects seems to require that we have a firm grasp on which objects are possible and real.

is supposed to explain the possibility of representing objects, I think, in the following way. If the possibility of objects and the possibility of their appearing to us share the same conditions, then if something has shown up for us, then it is, in virtue of its having shown up for us, a really possible object, and if something is a really possible object, a genuinely possible ingredient of objective reality, then it can show up for us.

The reason I have tried to clarify what Kant means by objects conforming to cognition and have tried to clarify how objects conforming to cognition is supposed to explain the possibility of representing objects is that Kant believes that his transcendental idealism, which supposes that objects conform to cognition, is the best way to explain the possibility of objective reference. He opposes the view that objects conform to cognition to the view that objects do not conform to cognition. The latter view is that of transcendental realism. In the next chapter, I will elaborate the contrast between transcendental realism and Kant's transcendental idealism, and explain why Kant thinks that transcendental realism cannot adequately explain the possibility of objective reference.

CHAPTER THREE:  
TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM, TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM, AND  
THE POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVE REFERENCE

In this chapter, I would like to explore the distinction that Kant draws between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism, and to figure out why Kant thinks the former is a better way to secure empirical realism than the latter. In the previous chapters, I have characterized transcendental idealism, and I have tried to say why Kant thinks that it can explain the possibility of objective reference. What I have not done yet, and what I need to do now, is to supply a characterization of transcendental realism, the worldview to which Kant opposes his own, and to explain why Kant thinks that transcendental realism cannot explain the possibility of objective reference. The most extended treatment that I have found of the opposition that Kant sets up between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism is in Henry Allison's book, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*.<sup>58</sup> In what follows, then, I refer often to Allison's account.

So far, through two chapters, I have tried to demonstrate that Kant's transcendental idealism is built to explain the possibility of representing objects and that it explains this possibility by saying that the conditions that make objects themselves possible are the same conditions that make it possible for us to represent them. If Kant is right, then if an object has shown up for us, we can be sure that that object is a really possible ingredient of objective reality, and not just some figment that could never be objectively real. Likewise, we can be sure that if something is a really possible ingredient

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<sup>58</sup> See especially Chapter Two, pp. 20-49, but also note that Allison says that the contrast is the "centerpiece" of his interpretation (p. xv).

of objective reality, then we would be able to represent that something, or, to say the same thing, that something would be able to show up for us as a part of the objective world.

The possibility of objects showing up for us in experience, that is, the possibility of objective reference, is important because judgments can be objectively true and false, that is, objectively meaningful, only if they refer to objects (A155/B194). And we can have knowledge only if we have objectively meaningful judgments. But we all ought to agree, Kant says, that we do have knowledge. So since we do have knowledge, then we must have objectively meaningful judgments, which means that really existing objects must be able to show up for us in experience. And of course, as I have argued, Kant's project consists in explaining how objects can show up for us in experience.

Moreover, because we have knowledge, and because it is of really existing objects, we ought to be empirical realists. That is, we ought to hold as basic to our worldview the belief that we have knowledge of an objective world that shows up for us in experience (Bxxxix, footnote). Any worldview that cannot accommodate this belief should be abandoned (*ibid.*). Therefore, since an empirical realist worldview depends upon our having knowledge of really existing objects, and our having such knowledge depends upon our possibly referring to objects, any worldview that cannot explain the possibility of objective reference should be abandoned.

It is no secret that Kant thinks that transcendental idealism is the best, if not the only, way to explain the possibility of objective reference.<sup>59</sup> Transcendental idealism's success, Kant says, is a result of its acknowledging the transcendental distinction, or,

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<sup>59</sup> Again, see *Prolegomena*, p. 29, where Kant says that transcendental idealism is the only way to ensure, as against "the chicaneries of shallow metaphysics" that geometry is valid of real objects.

what comes to the same thing, its saying that the conditions for the possibility of the objects we represent just are the conditions for the possibility of our representing those objects. What is less well-known, or at least not often talked about, is that to his own transcendental idealism Kant opposes a worldview whose adherents, according to Kant, repeatedly treat appearances as things in themselves, that is, as things that are unconditioned by our being able to represent them. This chronic confusion of appearances with things in themselves Kant calls the “common prejudice” (A740/B768) or the “common but fallacious presupposition of the absolute reality of [what Kant calls] appearances” (A536/B564). Since it confuses appearances with things in themselves, that is, since it does not acknowledge the transcendental distinction, Kant apparently thinks that this worldview cannot explain the possibility of objective reference. This worldview Kant calls transcendental realism.

The references in the *Critique* to transcendental realism are few, which is perhaps the reason it is not often talked about. It might be supposed that the scarcity of references belies any supposed importance of the contrast between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism. But Allison points out that although Kant does not often call it by name, Kant does refer to transcendental realism when he speaks, as I mentioned before, of the “common prejudice” and of the “common but fallacious presupposition,” and when he accuses philosophers of many sorts of granting “absolute” or “transcendental” reality to objects, which Kant thinks are appearances (B53).<sup>60</sup> That is, anybody who confuses appearances with things in themselves is a transcendental realist, whether or not we dub her so.

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<sup>60</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 22.

The significance of the opposition between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism issues from Kant's claim that they are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive standpoints and that the latter standpoint rests on a fundamental mistake.<sup>61</sup> This claim is arresting. For if transcendental idealism more or less begins with Kant, then all philosophies before Kant, despite their many and remarkable differences, are just versions of transcendental realism. And this implies that all philosophies before Kant rest on a fundamental mistake.

We should, of course, be wary of such an extreme claim. That the disjunction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism is mutually exclusive we can allow, for its mutual exclusiveness just follows from Kant's definitions of the two standpoints. That the disjunction is exhaustive we cannot as effortlessly allow. It would take some work to show that all philosophies before Kant are defined by the "common but fallacious presupposition of the absolute reality" of objects. Nevertheless, as Henry Allison argues, it might be helpful to remember that Kant makes a parallel claim, in his practical philosophy, about all *moral* theories before him.<sup>62</sup> That is, Kant introduces autonomy as the condition for the possibility of a genuinely categorical imperative, contrasts autonomy with heteronomy, and goes on to say that all previous moral theories were committed to the latter and could therefore never account for the possibility of a genuinely categorical imperative. Taking this parallel into consideration does not make Kant's claim about transcendental realism less bold, but it does make it understandable. Transcendental realism and the principle of heteronomy each are supposed to be a

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<sup>61</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. xv.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

standpoint, or even a confusion, that is shared by all philosophies that do not acknowledge what the theoretical and practical critical philosophy acknowledges.<sup>63</sup>

But let us get back to the contrast between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism and see what Kant has to say about it. Kant's most thorough and explicit treatment of the contrast is in his Criticism of the Fourth Paralogism of Transcendental Psychology (A369-71). The only other explicit reference to transcendental realism is in the Antinomy of Pure Reason (A490-91/B518-19).

I will soon have occasion to quote these passages at length and to scrutinize them more closely. For now, a summary will have to do. In these passages, Kant says, as I have said, that the defining feature of transcendental realism is its confusion of what Kant takes as appearances with what Kant calls things in themselves. This is to say that transcendental realists suppose that the objects that show up for us in experience are as they are in themselves, unconditioned by the possibility of their showing up for us in experience. Kant also says that it is precisely because transcendental realism confuses appearances with things in themselves that it "gives way" to an empirical idealism. Based on the definition of transcendental realism, and based on Kant's evocations of transcendental realism giving way to empirical idealism and of the transcendental realist "afterward playing the empirical idealist" (A369), we may infer that transcendental realism's basic assumption—that the objects that show up for us in experience are unconditioned by the conditions for the possibility of their showing up for us—is an assumption that, if true, would rationally compel an empirical idealism.

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<sup>63</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. 23.

From the start, then, and without much scrutiny, we have found some things to consider and some questions to ask. First of all, if transcendental realism yields empirical idealism, then transcendental realism is not actually what it intends to be, namely, a worldview that recognizes the objective reality of things that we think about and talk about. Second, and simply for the sake of reminding ourselves of one of Kant's guiding intentions, we should note also that Kant finds empirical idealism's inevitability, on the hypothesis of transcendental realism, regrettable. Kant wants to avoid any worldview that precludes our being empirical realists; it is for the sake of empirical realism that he elaborates his transcendental idealism. Third, we need to investigate transcendental realism further in order to see why it would lead inevitably to empirical idealism. It is to these matters that that rest of this chapter attends.

Let me begin the characterization of transcendental realism by indicating a slight, but, by my lights, helpful disagreement I have with Allison's characterization. While Allison says that the distinction between transcendental idealism and transcendental realism is one between metaphilosophical standpoints, I say that it is a distinction between substantive worldviews.<sup>64</sup> Allison calls them metaphilosophical because

transcendental realism [for one] . . . encompasses a wide variety of metaphysical and epistemological views. Accordingly, what unites the various forms of such realism, many of which would not be viewed as realisms in any of the commonly accepted senses of the term, can only be an implicit commitment to a philosophical methodology, a way of analyzing metaphysical and epistemological issues that is shared by rationalist and empiricist, dogmatist and skeptic, and first challenged by Kant. . . . [I]t follows that [transcendental] idealism must be interpreted as itself a methodology or standpoint rather than as a substantive metaphysical doctrine.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, p. xv.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Allison's point in describing the two transcendental worldviews as metaphilosophical apparently has to do with his wanting to capture the fact that transcendental realism, for one, encompasses "a wide variety of epistemological and metaphysical views." And Allison's point in describing them as standpoints apparently has to do with his not wanting to suggest that they are "substantive metaphysical doctrines," and his thinking that standpoints are more like methodologies: weaker, more commodious, implicit, and maybe just less brazenly metaphysical than substantive metaphysical doctrines. That is, I think that Allison wants to call transcendental idealism and transcendental realism metaphilosophical standpoints because they embrace a lot of different philosophies and presumably cannot, at the risk of excluding a philosophy or two, say something too contentful.

With Allison, I too hesitate to call transcendental idealism and transcendental realism strictly metaphysical doctrines. And I too want to say that commitment to one or the other entails a philosophical methodology or "a way of analyzing metaphysical or epistemological issues." And transcendental realism, at least, is likely a largely tacit commitment, sunken into our way of picturing things. But I would not hesitate to call transcendental idealism and transcendental realism substantive worldviews. Indeed, it is because they are substantive worldviews, I will suggest, that they each both entail certain ways of analyzing philosophical issues and encompass a wide variety of views, epistemological and metaphysical. Let me explain.

As I discussed in my first chapter, Allison views Kant's transcendental idealism as a primarily epistemological standpoint and Kant's critical project as one which effects a shift in what counts as knowing and which, as a consequence, effects a shift in

perspective about the character of what is known, that is, of objective reality. Correspondingly, Allison views transcendental realism as a primarily epistemological standpoint. Not only is transcendental realism defined negatively as a refusal to acknowledge the transcendental distinction, but it is defined positively, Allison says, by “a commitment to a theocentric paradigm or model of cognition.”<sup>66</sup> The theocentric model holds as ideal “an eternalistic, God’s-eye view of things.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, transcendental realists, with their commitment to the theocentric model, think that genuine knowledge is always of (what Kant considers as) things in themselves, things that are as they are independently of the conditions for the possibility of their appearing to finite, discursive, sensuous knowers. Human knowledge, on the theocentric model, unavoidably fails to be genuine knowledge, or at least succeeds only in being a simulacrum of genuine knowledge. For Allison, Kant’s critical turn consists of the rejection of the theocentric model of cognition and the promulgation of an anthropocentric model of cognition, thus making it possible to see how humans could have genuine knowledge.<sup>68</sup>

Allison is right to seek a positive definition of transcendental realism, in addition to a negative one. But I think he has had a positive one all along. If transcendental realists refuse to acknowledge the transcendental distinction, then this means that they confuse appearances with things in themselves. And if transcendental realists confuse appearances with things in themselves, then this means that they suppose that objective reality is as it is independently of the conditions for the possibility of its showing up for us in experience, or of our representing it. This means that transcendental realism is

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<sup>66</sup> *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

defined by a commitment to the view that if there can be such thing as full-blooded objective reality, then it must not be essentially able to show up for us in experience. According to transcendental realism, objects, if they are to be real objects, must be as they are, independently of their being able to appear to us.

Correlatively, according to transcendental idealism, objects, if they are to be real objects, must be essentially able to show up for us in experience. Objects are conditioned by the same conditions that make it possible for them to show up for us in experience. This is how Kant attempts to explain the possibility of objective reference. But if this is the case, then we can conclude that transcendental realism was not, by Kant's lights, doing a good job of accounting for the possibility of objective reference. And since Kant finds it necessary to rethink the character of and our relation to objective reality in order to explain the possibility of objective reference, then it is quite plausible, though admittedly not necessary, to conclude that transcendental realism's commitment to a certain view of the character of and our relation to objective reality is preventing any of its versions from explaining the possibility of objective reference. In sum, that is, Kant has to rethink the character of and our relation to objective reality in order to explain the possibility of objective reference, which most likely means that, since transcendental realism cannot explain the possibility of objective reference, transcendental realism has the wrong idea about the character of and our relation to objective reality. But this implies that transcendental realism has an idea about the character of and our relation to objective reality. It is therefore reasonable to think that transcendental realism says, explicitly or not, something of the form: Objective reality must have such-and-such a

character and we must have such-and-such a relation to it. But this means, I think, that it is a positive, substantive worldview.

The transcendental realist worldview says that objective reality, in order to be objective reality, must be independent of the conditions for the possibility of representation. Because transcendental realists think this, they think also that genuine knowledge must be of whatever is independent of the conditions for the possibility of representation. This accords with what I said in my first chapter, that there are two tightly connected transcendental realist assumptions: first, that objects in lawful relations really exist only if they are not essentially conceptualizable, that is, only if they are independent of the conditions for the possibility of representation; and second, that knowledge of essentially conceptualizable things, of things that fall under the conditions for the possibility of representation, is an inferior imitation of a pure, divine, and therefore epistemically ideal knowledge. What I am now saying is that the tight connection is, more specifically, one of entailment. The transcendental realist's commitment to a certain view of what objective reality must be like in order to be objective reality entails the transcendental realist's commitment to a theocentric model of cognition: If the really real is whatever is independent of its being able to appear to us, then genuine knowledge, necessarily of the really real, is of whatever is independent of its being able to appear to us.

Thus, it is precisely because transcendental realism is a substantive worldview about the character of and our relation to objective reality that it entails a certain epistemological model of what knowledge is. It also, of course, says something metaphysical. It says of any possible objective reality that it must be of such-and-such a

character in order to be objective reality. But transcendental realism also entails a view of how the mind is supposed to get in cognitive touch with the objectively real. If, according to transcendental realism, the objectively real is supposed to be as it is, independently of the conditions for the possibility of our representing it, then this both intimates a certain philosophical problem of how we come to represent the objectively real and delimits the kind of response to the problem that philosophers can offer. That is, transcendental realism, with its commitment to a certain understanding of the character of and our relation to objective reality, “encompasses a wide variety” of philosophical views and also suggests “a way of analyzing metaphysical or epistemological issues.” The fact that transcendental realism does so does not mean that it is not a substantive worldview. It just means that it is a deeply embedded, firmly rooted, and implicitly sustained substantive worldview. And this may be why it is so difficult to topple.

Transcendental idealism must therefore also be a substantive worldview. It is neither deeply embedded, firmly rooted, nor implicitly sustained, but it is a substantive worldview. As I have been arguing, it says something about the character of and our relation to objective reality, and based on what it says, we can derive a new epistemological model, and a new set of questions with a new way of addressing them, and a new way to think of our cognitive relationship to objective reality. Transcendental idealism says of any possible objective reality that it must fall under the same conditions that condition the possibility of its showing up for us in experience. And because objective reality is so conditioned, it is essentially able to show up for us in experience. That is, part of what it is to be objective reality is to be able to show up for us in experience. Transcendental idealism, therefore, is defined positively by its commitment

to the view that if there can be such thing as full-blooded objective reality, then it *must* be able essentially to show up for us in experience.

We now have the requisite materials to address the question of why transcendental realism turns into an empirical idealism. Let us remind ourselves of what Kant says. There are at least three relevant passages, two of which I have already mentioned, and the last of which is found a little later in the Criticism of the Fourth Paralogism:

The transcendental realist therefore represents [that is, interprets] outer appearances (if their reality is conceded) as things in themselves, which would exist independently of us and our sensibility and thus would also be outside us according to pure concepts of the understanding. It is really this transcendental realist who afterwards plays the empirical idealist; and after he has falsely presupposed about objects of the senses that if they are to exist they must have their existence in themselves even apart from sense, he finds from this point of view all our representations of sense are insufficient to make their [that is, the objects of senses'] reality certain (A369).

In contrast, transcendental realism necessarily falls into embarrassment, and finds itself required to give way to empirical idealism, because it regards the objects of outer sense as something different from the senses themselves and regards mere appearances as self-sufficient beings that are found external to us; for here, even with our best consciousness of our representations of these things, it is obviously far from certain that if the representation exists, then the object corresponding to it would also exist. (A371).

If we let outer objects count as things in themselves, then it is absolutely impossible to comprehend how we are to acquire cognition of their reality outside us, since we base this merely on the representation, which is in us. For one cannot have sensation outside oneself, but only in oneself . . . (A378).

At A371 and A378, Kant discusses the suggestions that the only way to access objects is by way of representation and that the only way to know that the objects we are accessing are really possible objects is by way of representation. The latter is what Kant

means when he says that our knowledge of the reality of objects outside us must be based “merely on the representation.” This just follows from what I mentioned in my second chapter, that to know anything at all about objective reality—its form, its content, its real existence—objective reality must show up for us in experience (B1). We are finite, discursive, sensuous knowers; we could never, by some non-experiential, purely logical means, be assured of the really possible existence of objects.<sup>69</sup> So, if we want to know whether the objects corresponding to our representations really exist, we can only come to know this through our representations of those objects.

In these passages, Kant also provides a definition of transcendental realism. The transcendental realist interprets “outer appearances . . . as things in themselves, which would exist independently of us and of our sensibility,” and “falsely presupposes” that if objects of the senses “are to exist, they must have their existence in themselves even apart from sense” (A369). Now, what the translators here term “existence” should not be confused with the sheer existence of which I spoke in my second chapter. For, as I explained in my second chapter, objects do indeed have their sheer existence “independently of us and our sensibility.” Kant would not disagree on that point. What Kant means here by “existence,” I suppose, is what I have sometimes called full-blooded objective reality. Thus the transcendental realist interprets outer appearances as having full-blooded existence independently of our sensibility. The mistake that transcendental realists make, that is, is to think that full-blooded objects—electrons and the cloud chambers that detect them, stars and the planets that orbit them—must have their (possible) full-blooded existence independently of the conditions for the possibility of

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<sup>69</sup> Hence the failure, in Kant’s eyes, of the ontological proof for the existence of God.

showing up for us in experience. But this is to say that transcendental realists, according to Kant, take a stand, albeit an incorrect one, on the character of and our relation to objective reality. So, just as I argued just above, transcendental realism, except only derivatively, is not defined by some epistemological stance, as Allison would have it. As Kant says, transcendental realists interpret “outer appearances”—the objective world—as things in themselves and falsely presuppose that if objects are to exist—if there is to be such thing as objective reality—then these objects must have their existence in themselves (A369). What defines transcendental realism is its supposition that objective reality, if it is to be full-blooded objective reality, must be as it is independently of the conditions for the possibility of its showing up for us in experience.

We should also note in these passages the ambiguity of what Kant means by objects being outside us. At A369, Kant says that the transcendental realist mistakenly thinks that objects, in order to be objects, must exist “outside us according to pure concepts of the understanding.” But at A378, Kant laments the fact that transcendental realist cannot account for our cognizing objects whose reality is outside us. So Kant first chides the transcendental realist for thinking that objects are outside us, but then chides the transcendental realist for not accounting for the reality of objects outside us. The ambiguity is resolved when we realize that there are two ways for something to be outside us, and, correlatively, two ways for something to be inside us. Kant says,

[W]e are talking . . . about the empirical object, which is called an *external* object if it is *in space* and an *inner* object if it is represented simply in the *relation of time*; but space and time are both to be encountered only *in us*.

But since the expression *outside us* carries with it an unavoidable ambiguity, since it sometimes signifies something that, *as a thing in itself*, exists distinct from us and sometimes merely something that belongs to outer *appearance*, then in order to escape uncertainty and use this concept in the latter significance—in which it is taken in the proper psychological

question about the reality of our outer intuition—we will distinguish *empirically external* objects from those that might be called ‘external’ in the transcendental sense” (A373).

Kant here distinguishes between something’s being inside or outside us empirically and something’s being inside or outside us transcendently. Outer objects, like flowers, are outside us empirically, insofar as they are, Kant says, “things *that are to be encountered in space*” (*ibid.*). Inner objects, like the scents of flowers, are inside us empirically insofar as they are “represented simply in the relation of time.” This coheres with what I argued in my first chapter, that mere seemings—inner objects—and objective states of affairs—outer objects—must both, in order to be inner and outer objects, possibly show up for us in experience. That is, they both must be possible appearances. The distinction we draw between how things seem to us and how things really are in the world is an empirical distinction, one that we can draw only within the bounds of possible appearance. It is not a distinction we can draw between something that can appear and something that cannot appear.

If something does lie beyond the bounds of possible appearance, then it is, according to Kant, “outside us according to pure concepts of the understanding,” or outside us transcendently. Accordingly, something is inside us transcendently if it lies within the bounds of possible appearance, that is, if it is conditioned by the conditions for the possibility of its showing up for us in experience. Since both the possibility of the representation of objects and the possibility of the objects we represent fall under the same conditions for the possibility of showing up for us in experience, then both our representations of objects and those objects themselves are inside us transcendently.

We can say, then, that the transcendental realist, by refusing to countenance the transcendental distinction, thinks that objective reality, which is outside us empirically, must also be outside us transcendentially. To put it another way, transcendental realism supposes that objective reality, if there is such thing, and in order to *be* objective reality, must be unconditioned by any conditions for the possibility of showing up for us in experience. That is, transcendental realism supposes that objective reality must not be essentially able to appear to us. It is for this reason, Kant thinks, that transcendental realism rationally compels an empirical idealism, since “if we let outer objects count as things in themselves, then it is absolutely impossible to comprehend how we are to acquire cognition of their reality outside us, since we base this merely on the representation, which is in us” (A378). And since, on the hypothesis of transcendental realism, we cannot be certain, based on our representations, of the reality of the objects that we represent, then we must be skeptical, or empirical, idealists, that is, we must admit that “the existence of all objects of outer sense is doubtful (A367).

Let us expand Kant’s argument. We must concede, first of all, that if we want to know whether the object of which we have a representation is a possibly existing object, we can only come to know this through the representation of the object (A371, A378). We cannot step outside our representation of the object, determine whether the object possibly exists, then step back inside our representation, and carry on with the assurance that our representation has referred to a possibly existing object. For such determining would just be more representing. The representation, Kant says, is in us, and cannot be otherwise (A378). This is also a way of pointing up the fact that on both the transcendental idealist and the transcendental realist worldviews, we can always be quite

sure that we have a representation, for we are immediately aware of it (A367, A370).

What is at stake, of course, in both worldviews, is whether that representation, which is “in” us and of which we are immediately aware, can refer to a really existing external object.

Now, according to both transcendental realism and transcendental idealism, representations are in us empirically, yet they are supposed to refer to objects that are outside us empirically. Transcendental realism, though, because it does not acknowledge the transcendental distinction, supposes that the objects that are outside us empirically are also outside us transcendently. This means, if what I have been saying is right, that the objects that are outside us empirically are supposed by transcendental realism not to be essentially able to show up for us in experience. The reference of the representation, which is in us empirically, to the object, which is supposed to be outside us transcendently, must therefore, on the hypothesis of transcendental realism, be a relation between that which is essentially able to show up for us in experience and that which is not.

But if that were the relation between representations and the objects they supposedly represent, then, as transcendental realism rightly concludes, we would never be sure that our representations were referring to possibly existing objects. Given our representations, we would not be able to guarantee, by way of those representations, that they refer to possible objects, since, on the hypothesis of transcendental realism, possible objects are not necessarily representable, not necessarily able to show up for us in experience. And if possible objects were not necessarily able to show up for us in experience, then they would be only contingently able to show up for us in experience, if

at all. There would be nothing about the fact that we have representations that would indicate necessarily whether the objects we have representations of were possibly real. That is, since we can only cognize the possible existence of objects *through* our representing them, then we would be able, if the fact that we represented a possible object said nothing of the object's possible existence, only to guess whether our representations referred to possibly existing objects. As Kant puts it, "[E]ven with our best consciousness of our representations of these things, it is obviously far from certain [on the hypothesis of transcendental realism] that if the representation exists, then the object corresponding to it would also exist" (A371).

A juxtaposition of transcendental idealism and transcendental realism should sharpen the contrast. As I have sometimes put it, according to transcendental idealism, if an object has shown up for us in experience, then it is necessarily a possibly existing object; and if an object possibly exists, then it necessarily can show up for us in experience. Therefore, if objects are necessarily able to show up for us, then we will always be able to refer to really existing objects—they will be within our cognitive reach. And if an object that shows up for us in experience is necessarily a possibly existing object, then we will always be able to say, based simply on our representation of it, that our representation has succeeded in referring to a really possible object—something that, if actual, would necessarily fit into the wider objective world.

According to transcendental realism, on the other hand, if an object has shown up for us in experience, then it is only contingently a possibly existing object; and if an object possibly exists, then it is not necessarily able to show up for us. Therefore, if an object is not necessarily able to show up for us, then we may never be able to refer to that

part of objective reality—it will be out of our cognitive reach. And if something that shows up for us in experience is not necessarily a possibly existing object, then we may never be able to say, based simply on our representation of it, whether our representation has succeeded in referring to a really possible ingredient of objective reality—for that something may be a mere figment, not able to fit into the wider objective world.

Transcendental realism, then, allows that a really existing object may never be able to show up for us in experience and allows that something that does show up for us in experience may not be a possibly existing object. Because it allows that something that shows up for us in experience is not necessarily a possibly existing object, transcendental realism allows that our representations, which are in us empirically, may not refer to empirically external, really existing objects. That is, it allows, at best, that we can guess correctly as to whether our representations refer to really possible objects, and, at worst, that we may be aware only of our representations, not of the objective world to which they purportedly refer. And if transcendental realism allows that really existing objects are possibly mere figments, then transcendental realism is actually an empirical idealism, a worldview that supposes that “we can never be fully certain,” based on “any possible experience” of them, that the “external objects of sense” are real (A368).<sup>70</sup>

In this chapter, I have tried to show that transcendental realism cannot explain the possibility of objective reference because, according to Kant, transcendental realism, as a substantive worldview, has mistaken the character of objective reality. The mistake

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<sup>70</sup> I should add here that Kant thought that even Humean impressions are outside us transcendently, since, on Hume's hypothesis, they do not fall under any conditions for the possibility of showing up for us in experience. On Hume's hypothesis, according to Kant, there is nothing to guarantee that we could make reference to our impressions. That is, there is nothing to guarantee that the impressions are really there.

transcendental realism makes is to suppose that objective reality, in order to be full-blooded objective reality, simply cannot be essentially able to show up for us in experience. But, Kant says, if objective reality must not be essentially able to show up for us in experience, then we cannot secure the necessary bond between representations and their objects. Two considerations help to explain why, if we were transcendental realists, we could not secure the necessary bond. First, it is only through the possibility of representing objects that we could ever know whether the objects we purport to represent are possibly existing objects, instead of, perhaps, mere figments. And second, if objects were not necessarily able to show up for us in experience, then they would be only contingently able to show up for us in experience. But then we could not be *guaranteed* that when we have a representation of an object, the representation, rather than being “a mere play” of our minds, is referring to a possibly existing object, since the fact that we have the representation would indicate nothing about the really possible existence of its object. Transcendental realism, in Kant’s eyes, wants the impossible. It wants our representations to refer to real objects, but it does not want those real objects to be essentially representable.

Transcendental idealism, on the other hand, supposes that objective reality, in order to be full-blooded objective reality, must be essentially able to show up for us in experience. Objective reality is essentially able to show up for us because, according to Kant, the conditions for the possibility of representing objects are the same as the conditions for the possibility of those objects themselves. We are thereby guaranteed that if we are able to represent an object, then the object is possibly real, and that if an object is possibly real, then we are able to represent it. We are also thereby guaranteed objective

judgments, since our representations cannot fail to refer to (at least possibly) real ingredients of objective reality, which are brought into view for us to form objectively true or false judgments about. It is in this way, finally, that Kant thinks he has secured empirical realism, the idea that there is a really existing objective world that we can come to know through experience.

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