

THEORY OF COGNITION AND PRACTICAL INTEREST IN KANT: ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND THING IN ITSELF

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Abstract. The article examines the significance of the distinction between phenomena and things in themselves for the foundation of Kantian practical reason. It holds that this distinction acquires its full meaning and the entire gamut of its validity only in the sphere of practical reason. In this way, it attempts to show that the Kantian epistemological distinctions and the fundamental steps in the construction of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are at the same time strategies to support practical reason, thus driven by an emphatically “practical interest”.

Keywords: Kant; theory of cognition; practical interest; critical metaphysics

Kantian philosophy is characterized by a series of binary distinctions: spontaneity and passivity, concept and sensibility, understanding and intuition, thing in itself and appearance, noumena and phenomena, freedom and nature, theoretical and practical reason. These distinctions, which assume the form of stiff “divisions”, of “rifts”¹, are directly associated with the core of what is termed “transcendental argument” or “transcendental foundation”. Given that Kant introduces these distinctions in his first critique, we may, at least initially, regard them as serving a pure cognitive interest, one referring in the grounding of theoretical reason. However, it can be shown that this theoretical interest is from the start oriented towards a “practical interest”, in a way indeed that fundamental distinctions of Kantian epistemology obtain, as it were, their full meaning, acquire the entire gamut of their validity only in the sphere of practical reason. This idea allows us to consider that the Kantian epistemological distinctions are, on the one hand, practically mediated, and, on the other hand, to theorize them as strategies for supporting practical reason.

The aforementioned distinctions are closely linked to the idea of critique and Kant’s self-comprehension of it as a “revolution in the way of thinking” (B XI)². This has been broadly understood as the *Copernican turn* or the *Copernican revolution*³

of Kant in the field of philosophy. The «revolution in the way of thinking» signifies definitely the *turn towards the cognitive subject* involving a radical inversion in the model of cognition. It is not anymore the subject, who, in order to found the validity of its knowledge, turns towards the inner structure of things in themselves. Inversely, the things are turned necessarily towards the subject to find, in the cognitive, inner structure of the subject (intuition, understanding, reason), the conditions of their constitution (B XVI f.). This inversion of the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge equals to a devastating blow at the heart of traditional dogmatic theory, entailing that the absolute and unconditioned which “with every right” metaphysics searches for (B XX) is no longer to be found in the things themselves, but in the concepts that the understanding and reason use in cognizing things. Consequently, as Kant remarks, “we can cognize of things a priori only what we ourselves have put into them” (B XVIII). At the same time, this Kantian inversion opens up the way for a radical critique of the real: if, in the first case, the real, in the form of things in themselves, made up the foundation and the ultimate grade for legitimizing knowledge, thus remaining immune from any critical approach, in the case of the Kantian inversion, the real is put in principle under critique and doubt. Now, it is reality that ought to turn itself towards human reason to find in it the criteria of its legitimation. It is worth noticing that the same principle which allows Kant to form a radical critique of dogmatic metaphysics provides essentially also the foundation of critique in any kind of positivism. The method chosen by an empirically oriented critique against metaphysics – to absolutize a criterion such as the criterion of verifiability and falsifiability, to absolutize an unmediated, empirically given, reality – is nothing more in reality than an inverted type of dogmatic metaphysics⁴.

However, it is true that the Copernican turn of Kant may be interpreted also as an attempt to carry the methods of mathematics and physics over to philosophy. In this sense, we might wrongly read the Kantian turn as a turn towards scientism and positivism. In any way, we find in the Kantian text the explicit incitement to “imitate” (B XVI) the methods of modern physics, meaning an idea for a constructivist and experimental method (B XX – XXI). However, the question of what exactly terms such as “experiment” and “experimental method” might mean in the field of philosophy remains open⁵.

At first, however, the Kantian revolution in the mode of thinking equals to Kant adopting a “twofold standpoint” (B XVIII – XIXfn.), a twofold method for treating the objects of knowledge. This twofoldness introduces the fundamental Kantian distinction between “appearance” and “thing in itself” and along with it – at least in nuce – all the rest binary distinctions of Kantian theory, connecting them explicitly with the notion of critique (B XXVII). This distinction refers in reality to a *reduplication of the objects* which are construed on the one hand as objects of experience and on the other hand as objects of thought (B XVIII – XIXfn.). While the first standpoint begins from the data of experience reducing them to the conditions of the understanding and

the intuition, in short to the conditions of the cognitive subject, the second one treats them purely as objects of thought that is it theorizes them *by abstracting from experience*. The first standpoint allows us to obtain knowledge of the objects, but solely as “object[s] of sensible intuition” namely as “appearances”; the second standpoint treats them as “things in themselves”, which indeed cannot, strictly speaking according to Kant, be “known”, but “we at least must be able to think them” (B XXVI). This is explained by the fact that, to obtain knowledge of an object, we must be assured that its concept refers to experience; in other words, the possibility of its concept referring to an object which can be given merely within the field of sensible intuition (B XXVII – XXVIII). But to be able to posit an object as an object of thought, it suffices only to be assured for its “*logical*” possibility. In other words, it suffices its concept to be constituted in a non-contradictory way. The “objective validity” of such a concept presupposes, however, its “*real possibility*” and this requires “something more” than its logical one. This “something more” is the reference to a somehow given object and makes up the way in which the concept has “significance and sense” (cf. A 155 / B 194, A 155 / B 195 and A 249 / B 298). “This ‘more’, however”, Kant writes, “need not be sought in theoretical sources of cognition; *it may also lie in practical ones*” (B XXVIII fn., emphasis added).

Based on the above, it seems clear to us that the thing in itself is initially a purely constructed object of thought, containing no contradiction, a logical object with no reference to experience, as its owes its construction precisely to a complete abstraction from experience. This abstraction is the reason for which its “objective validity” is problematical: its objective validity presupposes its reference to something which is beyond the concept, to something which is not only a logical object, presupposes the reference to a kind of “material” content which has reality (real possibility)⁶; at the same time, however, this object cannot, by definition, be an object of our sensible intuition – and Kant underlines again and again that the only kind of intuition that human cognition has at its disposal is none other than sensible intuition. But in the abovementioned excerpt, Kant shows us also the direction to which these objects, lacking any reference to experience due to their constitution, can be made use of: they have significance and sense as moral problems and tasks {Aufgaben} (B 7, AA: V,132), to be realized through praxis and, in this way, acquire “objective validity”. What is of interest in this excerpt is the fact that the thing in itself, which in the sphere of theoretical reason forms rather a “boundary concept” (A 255 / B 311 f.) – as it is the condition for constituting theoretical (natural-scientific) knowledge, for constituting the knowledge of phenomena⁷ without at the same time being able to know anything about it, (namely we cannot ascribe to it any predicate) –, obtains its substantive significance at the sphere of practical reason. What is of interest lies, in other words, in the fact that practical reason seems to give meaning not only to its own (practical) objects, but also to the constitutive conditions of theoretical knowledge – which otherwise would be nothing more than empty logical forms.

This remark urges us to ask whether the constitution of theoretical reason is ori-

ented towards these significations which practical reason is about to make. At least, it allows us to inquire about the degree in which Kantian epistemology is from its beginning, already from its fundamental distinction between appearance and thing in itself, thus constituted, so that to underpin potentially the constitution of practical reason. Such an interpretation seems plausible given that Kant, at the beginning of the “Preface” to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, raises the question as to when our cognitive representations can be a priori (pro-empirical) and simultaneously be true⁸, referring to an object. His answer is twofold: “either merely *determining* the object [...] (which must be given from elsewhere)”⁹, “or else also *making* the object *actual*”¹⁰ (B X), clarifying that while the first case refers to the constitution of “*theoretical*” reason, in the second case we have to do with the constitution of the “*practical* cognition of reason”. In both of these cases, the representation determines a priori the object, because, without the representation, the object would not even exist for the subject. This conception provides us, in other words, with a double mode of signification and assurance of the “objective reality” of the concepts: one empirical and the other practical¹¹. Therefore, as regards the categories of the understanding, Kant demands an empirical signification, demands that the category refers to an object which is (potentially) given through sensible intuition (an object of “our possible experience”). The necessity of this reference can be understood if we take into account the way in which the categories of understanding are given to us, that is the (cognitive) function of the categories of the understanding. These categories, along with the a priori forms of intuition, are *the a priori part of our knowledge of phenomena*, which means that the distinction between a priori and a posteriori is a *distinction within our experience* (the experience of phenomena). As a consequence, the categories of the understanding can be used exclusively in an “*immanent*” way, they “function” only within the cognitive process referring necessarily, by their own construction, to experience¹²: they provide the a priori rules for the constitution of experience that is they organize the material of experience – the multiple data of sensible intuition¹³ – so that it is possible in general to be connected with an object (of experience)¹⁴. As regards the pure objects of thought, the things in themselves, which are not constituted within experience but by total abstraction from it, their objectivity, by its nature, cannot be assured by reference to an object whose materiality is given through sensibility; it is given (it ought to be given) through praxis.

It is noteworthy that Kant seems to substitute the reference to the “materiality” of sensibility which is required for the categories of the understanding with the “*materiality*” of praxis in relation to the pure objects of thought (the things in themselves)¹⁵. However, the nature of the relation between these two kinds of materiality is not clear. In any case, it is certain that these two kinds of “materiality” do not refer to two objects with different ontological status, neither to two ontologically different worlds, with the one being independent from the other¹⁶. They are derived as a consequence of Kant’s adopting the “twofold standpoint”. If the first, the materiality of sensibility, represents,

as it were, the materiality of natural-scientific experience, then the nature of the second would have to be inquired in the frame of a theory of praxis, which includes not only the issue of the “determination of the will”, but at the same time a theory concerning the ends of human praxis and a theory of the possibility of realizing these ends in historical experience.

From the reasoning provided thus far, it has been shown that the Kantian concept of the thing in itself is invested from the start with a critical potential. The abstraction from experience, in which it owes its construction, contains both an element of freedom as well as an element of critique. It means the “liberation” from this experience, containing a latent critique against it and also a – latent – demand for an ethical-practical use of it. The search for “objective validity” and for “real possibility” means in reality an attempt to reintroduce the material-empirical element, from which initially Kantian theory abstracted. However, the material element which is reintroduced is not the material of natural-scientific experience, neither the material of another type of intuition which we, humans, do not have such as “intellectual intuition”, showing Kant’s concern to avoid any kind of mysticism and irrationalism. The said material is the material of practically mediated experience that is of an experience which is practically-axiologically elevated.

These methodical steps Kant makes *to construct* the concept of the thing in itself – total abstraction from experience, conversion of the thing in itself into an ethical-practical task and reintroduction of the element of experience as ethico-practically now mediated – brings to the fore a critical demand for a practical alteration of empirical reality in a way that it will correspond to the thing in itself. An alteration so that this reality would confer to the concept the sought out and problematical objective validity. In other words, it posits the demand the reality to be constituted freely and autonomously (practically) in order to meet the axiological potential of the concept: its freedom and its critical character¹⁷.

Related to this critical distinction between phenomena and things in themselves is a *type of explanation* which is explicitly oriented towards the exemplar of Copernican turn, especially as is specified in the inversion involved in explaining the movement of the celestial bodies. This explanation reconstructs the real as a necessary inverted form, as a necessary epiphenomenon, of its true nature (explanation of the sunrise and sunset)¹⁸. The explanation, in other words, is achieved by simultaneously undermining and criticizing the phenomenon to be explained, while reconstructing the logic of its inversion. Taking into account the Kantian distinction between appearance and things in themselves and the aforementioned critical-axiological aspect of the latter, this type of explanation encourages the conception of (social) phenomena as inverted forms of a “true” real, which “underlies the phenomena”¹⁹ and at the same time has not yet been realized – of a true form which, however, is not true by itself, but it can become so if related to the praxis that realizes it. Appearances are explained and evaluated simultaneously as appearances in the mode of being denied in relation to a practical criterion

of truth²⁰. At the same time, the explanation should reconstruct also the mechanisms which generate and reproduce the inverted forms, distorting and suspending the realization of the true form of reality²¹.

Towards the same direction we should interpret also the aforementioned *experimental method* suggested by the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is obvious that the term “experiment” cannot refer to any kind of empirical verifiability and falsifiability, given that it refers in fact to the constitution and the form of rational human ability, of human reason itself. The experiment tests and affirms the correctness of the “twofold standpoint” (of the distinction between appearance and thing in itself), inasmuch as it shows that this distinction is capable to solve contradictions and inconsistencies of reason with itself. Kant himself names two privileged fields of this “experiment providing a checkup” (“Experiment der Gegenprobe”, B XX): the possibility of thinking the concept of the absolute without contradiction (B XX) and the possibility of founding morality in a non-contradictory way (B XXVIII – XXIX). The adoption of the aforementioned distinction, which regarding the concept of the absolute means that human knowledge is restricted to the field of “possible experience” and the refutation of traditional metaphysics, ensures both of these possibilities. This is the reason for which Kant refers to the result of the Analytic of pure reason as a negative result (restriction of human knowledge and refutation of metaphysics). However, under Kant’s perspective this refutation of metaphysics provides simultaneously the possibility of saving its essential contents, those which, as he writes, pertain to the “interest of human beings” (B XXXII) and “the universal human concern” (B XXXIII: “die allgemeine menschliche Angelegenheit”) –though this saving ought to take place now exclusively in the sphere of practical reason purely. It is exactly this restriction of theoretical reason in the field of appearances which “made room” (B XXI)²² for the practical, it is this restriction that creates a “vacant place” (AA: V, 103, 49), the things in themselves, which not only does not impede us, but, on the contrary, thus encourages us to fill this vacant place (B XXI – XXII). If, conversely, theoretical reason extended itself so as to include the things in themselves, if the field of sensibility took possession of everything, there would be no room for a “use of pure (practical) reason” (B XXV), use which necessarily transcends the “boundaries of sensibility” (B XXIV). Thus, to be precise, the “negative” result of the Analytic is converted now to “positive”, as it saves the concept of (transcendental) freedom, which can serve as the foundation of morality²³. The demand of metaphysics for transcending the limits of experience and knowing the absolute, a demand rejected in the sphere of theoretical reason (in the field of “cognition”), is preserved as a demand which can be satisfied in the sphere of practical reason (at the field of praxis) through the practical signification of the thing in itself, filling namely the “vacant place” created by theoretical reason and left it necessarily, due to its constitution, vacant. Thus, the three basic objects of metaphysica specialis – God, freedom, immortality of the soul – which in the field of cognition are under critique in the form of dialectical epiphenomena, are restored in the field of

praxis as postulates and claims of practical reason, drawing their validity through their reference to “the necessary practical use” of reason simply (B XXIX f.).

It seems now that the constitution of theoretical reason is attracted in total from the possibility of its practical use. From the start, Kant seems to direct the first towards the possibility of supporting the second. To achieve this, he constructs in advance those “receptables” on which later its practical use can be developed. This orientation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* towards a practical interest is captured by the following quotation in the “Preface” of the second edition: “Thus I had to deny {aufheben} knowledge in order to make room for faith» (B XXX), thus interpreting the whole of the first critique as a precondition for the founding of practical reason and of the “belief” in reason {“Vernunftglaube”}, which necessarily accompanies its practical use (see AA: V, 142 – 146).

In this sense, it is probable that the primal concern of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not so much the philosophical founding of modern physics and the constitution of this theory of knowledge which makes it in general possible (a view championed by the neo-Kantian tradition in total)²⁴, but rather to found anew metaphysics through its radical critique and to reformulate it anew as a *critical metaphysics with practical targeting*. Kant is explicit about this intention – both in the Preface of the first critique (B XXXVI; cf. also B 22, A 11 / B 25), and in the *Prolegomena* (AA: IV, 255; cf. also AA: X, 123, 129) – as he stresses this targeting of a critical re-founding of “metaphysics” as “science”, underlining at the same time that the “essential end” of metaphysics, “toward which all the rest is only a means”, does not lie in this of its parts dealing with “concepts of nature, which always find their application in experience”, but in this part “concerned with pure concepts of reason [...] whose objective reality [...] whose truth or falsity cannot be confirmed or exposed by any experience” (AA: IV, § 40, 327)²⁵.

NOTES

1. It is for this very reason that they have become objects of sharp criticism from very early on. Cf. e.g. the criticisms of the young Schelling (Schelling [1795], p. 128fn.) and the young Hegel (Hegel [1802], pp. 301 ff.).
2. Numbers in parentheses, preceded by an A or a B, refer to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, quoted by the pagination of the first (marked A) and the second (marked B) original German edition. The English translation used is the translation by Guyer and Wood (Kant 1998). For the German text the “Akademie-Edition” [“Akademieausgabe”] is used. References in the text as AA: volume, page; e.g. (AA: V, 132).
3. In the Kantian text, we meet neither the term “Copernican turn” nor “Copernican revolution”. However, Kant draws indeed an analogy between his idea of “revolution in the way of thinking” for philosophy and the Copernican explanation of the motion of celestial bodies (B XV f.). The interpretation of this analogy is not without difficulties cf. Blumenberg 1981, pp. 691 – 713.

4. This line of reasoning will be used by Kant both in his treatment of the antinomies of pure reason (e.g. A 471 / B 499), and in one of the basic points while dealing with the antinomy of practical reason (AA: V, 16).
5. The constructivist and experimental method characterizes modern physics. The mode of cognition of nature is not anymore an attempt to accurately present its forms and its inner structure, but initially to construct models which afterwards are projected on the object (nature), with the intention of finding out the degree in which the object corresponds to these models. Hence the derivation of the idea of an experimental method, which starts from “hypotheses” and then proceeds to test them with the material of nature, ascertaining the degree in which a new hypothetical principle may explain in a better way the object, eliminating the contradictions of the previous one. Surely, in both cases, the goal of obtaining knowledge is achieved by a necessary reference to the object (to nature). However, in the first case, as Kant remarks, reason “is instructed by nature [...] like a pupil”, in the second case, reason is learning from nature “like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them” (B XIII).
6. For this “material” and “real” element cf. A 373: “This material or real entity, however, this Something that is to be intuited in space, necessarily presupposes perception, and it cannot be invented by any power of imagination or produced independently of perception, which indicates the reality of something in space. Thus sensation is that which designates a reality in space and time, according to whether it is related to the one or the other mode of sensible intuition. Once sensation is given (which, if it is applied to an object in general without determining it, is called perception), then through its manifold many an object can be invented in imagination that has no empirical place outside imagination in space or time”. Cf. also AA: XXVIII, 271 f. “All objects of outer sense are material”.
7. Cf. B XXVI – XXVII and AA: IV, 315.
8. Kant distinguishes (B 84 – 85) between a “formal” and a “substantive/material” criterion of truth. The first is solely a “logical”, “negative” criterion and refers to the agreement of one knowledge with “the general and formal laws of understanding and reason”; the second is a “positive” criterion which concerns “the material (objective) truth of the cognition” and refers to the agreement of knowledge with its object. For similar formulations cf. e.g. A 58 / B 83, A 157 / B 196 f. and A 237 / B 296.
9. It holds true, namely, “if it is possible through it alone to cognize something as an object” (A 92 / B 125).
10. This holds true in the case of the moral law, where the representation of what is good determines as a cause the realization of that object which corresponds with the representation.
11. In a series of passages, Kant uses indeed the term “practical objectivity” of the concepts, cf. e.g. AA: V, 48, 56, 175, 453; AA: VIII, 297; AA: XX, 300, 305, 309.

12. A 310 / B 366 f.: “Concepts of the understanding are also thought a priori before experience and on behalf of it [...] their objective reality [of concepts of the understanding] is founded solely on the fact that because they constitute the intellectual form of all experience, it must always be possible to show their application in experience”. Cf. also AA: IV, 328, 474.
13. Cf. A 374: “it is certain beyond doubt that it is perception through which the material must first be given for thinking objects of sensible intuition”.
14. It is highlighted at this point the anti-positivist stance of Kant, which is shown by the fact that not only the categories of the understanding but also sensible intuition is not able to provide us directly with any object; connecting the data of intuition with an object presupposes their mediation by the understanding, cf. A 258 / B 314: “With us [human beings] understanding and sensibility can determine an object only in combination. If we separate them, then we have intuitions without concepts, or concepts without intuitions, but in either case representations that we cannot relate to any determinate object” (emphasis added).
15. Cf. A 266 f. / B 322 f., where Kant seems to assign “materiality” {Materie} directly with the pure objects of thought.
16. In the relevant literature the view of the “two worlds” is supported by Paul Guyer (Guyer 1987), while the view of the “two standpoints” by Gerold Prauss (Prauss 1974) and Henry E. Allison (Allison 1983; Allison 1996). Cf. also Ameriks 2003, Wille 2009.
17. It is exactly in this critical sense that Hegel writes that if “the definition [of the concept, bracket added] does not correspond to the mental image, this is all the worse for the mental image” (Hegel [1821], § 2 Addition). It is noteworthy that such a conception of the thing in itself allows its interpretation as a regulative standard of praxis; this issue is expressly taken up by Kant in the second critique when he theorizes “natura archetypa” and “natura ektypa” (AA: V, 43).
18. This type of explanation has a tremendous influence in the field of social and political theory. We can refer to the Hegelian critique of forms of consciousness as distorted and inverted {verkehrt} forms in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel [1806], especially pp. 107 ff., 263 ff.) and to Marx’s critique of ideology and false consciousness in *Capital* (Marx 1979, pp. 85 ff.).
19. AA: IV, 315: “Therefore the understanding, just by the fact that it accepts appearances, also admits to the existence of things in themselves, and to that extent we can say that the representation of such beings as underlie the appearances, hence of mere intelligible beings, is not merely permitted but also inevitable” (English translation: Kant 2004, § 32, p. 66).
20. For this type of explanation cf. Psychopedis 1995.
21. An exemplary case of this explanation can be found at the beginning of the second part of Kant’s *The conflict of the faculties* {*Der Streit der Fakultäten*} [1798] (AA: VII, 1 – 116, while explaining the evil nature of humans, of humans “such as they are” (AA: VII, 80). For a similar line of reasoning cf. AA: VIII, 378 f.

22. B XXI. Similar formulations: A 286 / B 343; A 288 / B 344; A 289 / B 345.
23. The “Analytic” and “Dialectic of pure reason” can be considered in total as an experimental arrangement, as that “experiment of reason” which has as its object reason’s own form. Cf. B XXIIn.: “This experiment of pure reason has much in common with what the chemists sometimes call the experiment of reduction, or more generally the synthetic procedure. The analysis of the metaphysician separated pure a priori knowledge into two very heterogeneous elements, namely those of the things as appearances and the things in themselves. The dialectic once again combines them, in unison with the necessary rational idea of the unconditioned, and finds that the unison will never come about except through that distinction, which is therefore the true one».
24. Indicatively compare Hermann Cohen’s comments of the Critique of Pure Reason which emphasizes the restriction of “transcendental philosophy” in the first part of metaphysics, namely to the “metaphysics of experience (Cohen 1989, pp. 20, 210).
25. I would like to thank my colleague Thomas Noutsopoulos for his invaluable help in the English translation of the text.

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