

## ***Kant on Unknowable Things in Themselves: A Neglected Path through the Minefield***

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**Submitted for publication 9/13/2009**

Kant famously seeks to establish “our unavoidable ignorance in respect of the things in themselves” (Bxxix). Kant’s position appears to include these two claims:

Assertion: There are things in themselves.

Ignorance: We cannot have knowledge of things in themselves.

But the latter also seems to undercut the former. Thus Jacobi’s famous worry, referring to the thing in itself as a presupposition: “*without* that presupposition I could not enter into the system, but *with* it I could not stay within.”<sup>1</sup>

The tension is especially clear to see in familiar phenomenalist interpretations, on which Kant both asserts that there are external causes of our private, internal ideas or sense data—and also holds that we are ignorant of these external causes because we cannot know anything beyond the private mental ideas. We seem to have to accept the assertion in order to get to the ignorance claim, at which point we realize that we were never entitled to the assertion. It is no surprise, then, that Kant himself later rejects this interpretation of the first *Critique*: those who read him as similar to Berkeley in this way “put their own folly in the place of well-determined concepts” (P 4:293). For these reasons, and for others as well, recent interpreters tend to reject phenomenalist approaches.<sup>2</sup> And I will follow here. But this rejection leads to a surprisingly sharp further disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup> 1994, 336; translated from the 1787 edition of *David Hume on Faith*.

<sup>2</sup> Allison says that phenomenalist Kant would be “an inconsistent Berkeley” (1983, 4). Langton says that this would be “the worst of all veil of appearance philosophies: Berkeley plus unknowable things in

On the one hand, there is a non-phenomenalist approach that is also non-metaphysical; call it NM. NM stresses that Kant's critical philosophy is supposed to amount to a revolution against pre-critical metaphysics generally. How to make sense of this? NM answers that Kant's project is similar to later attempts, from the Twentieth Century linguistic turn in philosophy, to reject metaphysics by distinguishing metalanguage or metalevel claims from object level claims. Kant recognizes legitimate metalevel claims concerning the structure or form of our knowledge or cognition—concerning *epistemology*, and not *metaphysics* in any sense that contrasts.<sup>3</sup> On the metalevel, Kant makes the assertion that there is a *way of considering things*, not as subject to the *a priori* conditions of our knowledge, but as they are in themselves. And he allows us knowledge of what it is to consider things in this way. All this serves, Allison says, “a legitimate metalevel function within the framework of transcendental reflection.”<sup>4</sup> But it would be a confusion of levels to see here any metaphysical implications, or any implications at the object level about the existence of unknowable entities. So the assertion is there, but not in any sense that would be undercut by our ignorance of things in themselves.

On the other hand, there is a different non-phenomenalist approach that *is* metaphysical: the inner nature approach, as I will call it. The stress here is on Kant's

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themselves” (1998, 15). Van Cleve's reading (1999) is a prominent exception to this trend, to which I will briefly return below.

<sup>3</sup> I will not here try to map Kant's different uses of the term “metaphysics.” I use the term to try to explain Kant, so I stick to this simple sense: epistemology concerns our knowledge, cognition, experience, etc.; metaphysics concerns what there really is, and also dependence-relations between real things. Kant obviously allows that epistemological considerations of necessary conditions of the possibility of experience yields conclusions about the empirically real, e.g. empirically real causes and effects. The interpretation I call NM is “non-metaphysical” in rejecting all metaphysical claims about things supposed to be independent of our knowledge, so that the assertion that there are things in themselves would have to be meant to carry no metaphysical implications.

<sup>4</sup> Allison (2004, 68). For the recent history of this kind of approach, see Prauss (1974), especially on Kant as referring to a second way of considering objects and the threat of confusions between levels. And see Allison's defense of his alternative (1978), especially his way of explaining, without dismissing, Kant's claims about “affection.”

claims that we can know only “mere relations,” not “that which is internal to the object in itself”; and “through mere relations no thing in itself is cognized” (B66-7). So Kant endorses (on this account) a metaphysical assertion of the existence of unknowable entities: not unknowable objects, but an unknowable internal side, aspect or constitution of things. And ignorance allows us to know that there is such a thing; it rules out our knowing anything more about that inner constitution—it rules out our knowing things *as they are in themselves*. For example:

[I]f we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, as is fitting, then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them, although we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself ... the understanding ... admits to the existence of things in themselves. (P 4:314-5; my emphasis; cf. Langton 1998, 21-2)

What *is* the inner side of things, or the internal constitution? Langton prominently answers that it is the set of intrinsic properties of a thing, in the sense—also of importance in contemporary metaphysics—of the properties that an object could have even if existing entirely alone, or those compatible with “loneliness” (1998, 17). We can know that there are such properties, but not what they are.

Both approaches promise to explain how Kant could coherently endorse assertion and ignorance together. But both are subject to further worries. Perhaps some partisans of one side or the other will think that even the most prominent worries about their approach carry no weight, so that there is nothing to be gained by trying to accommodate the worries. And perhaps they will recognize passages difficult for their side, taking these to be occasions on which Kant strays from his own best insights. It is not my aim here to argue with those who would entrench in these ways. My aim is to show that there is also a neglected interpretation which can combine the strengths of both sides while resolving the most prominent worries about each—a neglected path through the extraordinary minefield of interpretive difficulties.

The most prominent worry about NM is that it renders Kant's claims about things in themselves implausibly "anodyne."<sup>5</sup> Langton says more specifically that NM cannot make sense of the idea that we are supposed to "desire" knowledge of things in themselves, so that "we are missing out on something in not knowing things as they are in themselves" (1998, 10). Fans of NM may protest that this idea would confuse metalevel claims about things in themselves with object level claims about the sorts of objects of which we might desire knowledge. But that is just the point: the worry is so prominent because so many interpreters see such ideas in Kant, and take them to tell against interpretations on which Kant's project is akin to more recent attempts to reject metaphysics by distinguishing a metaphysically innocent metalevel or metalanguage. I will not defend this worry here, although I will note many passages that I take to encourage it. Given the prominence of the worry, it seems to me worth investigating whether we can resolve the worry while retaining the interpretive strengths of NM. I argue that we can. Doing so will require an interpretation that can accommodate a third constraint:

Desire: The conception of things in themselves is a conception of something of which we seek or desire knowledge.

Desire and ignorance together will require reading the assertion that are things in themselves as a metaphysical claim that there is something of which we seek but cannot attain knowledge.

But there is also a worry about existing versions of the inner nature approach. On Langton's reading, for instance, Kant asserts with Leibniz that there must exist absolutely independent substances with absolutely intrinsic properties.<sup>6</sup> Allison worries that it cannot be the case that, during the critical period, Kant "remained

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<sup>5</sup> Guyer 1987, 4, 336-8, 367. See also Pippin's worry about "methodological" readings at 1981, 201.

<sup>6</sup> "Kant has *not* broken with the monadology completely ... things in themselves are substances, in something close to the Leibnizian sense" (1998, 200).

committed to the substantive metaphysical view that reality is composed of such substances.”<sup>7</sup> Now the complaint cannot *just* be that Kant’s ignorance claim precludes all such metaphysical assertions, for this would beg the question in favor of NM and against Langton’s reading of the same claim. So what precisely is the further reason for worry? I will argue below for what I take to be the strongest answer, insofar as it can stand entirely independently of any comparison between Kant’s project and any form of non-metaphysical philosophy. Consider rather the claims Kant ascribes specifically to *rationalist* metaphysics: *Any form of regress of dependence or conditioning must ultimately terminate in a corresponding form of the “unconditioned,” or something which would resolve at once all the questions concerning dependence in the regress. For example, for anything contingent, it must be contingent on something and so dependent in this sense. The resulting regress of dependence must end with a corresponding form of unconditioned ground: a necessary being, or God. Or consider a different form of dependence: Anything not itself an absolutely independent substance with absolutely intrinsic properties would have to be something dependent on something else for its existence. Such dependence creates a regress that must end with just such substance—that is, with the form of unconditioned endpoint corresponding to this kind of regress.* But now back to Kant: much the point of a *critique* of pure reason is to rule out, as “dogmatic,” rationalist assertions of the existence of such unconditioned endpoints. Accommodating this worry requires an interpretation that can accord with a fourth and last constraint:

Anti-dogmatism: We cannot legitimately claim theoretical knowledge of the existence of any form of the unconditioned.

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<sup>7</sup> Allison 2004, 10. Similarly, Bird says “by 1780 Kant had a more general argument against dogmatic rationalism, which did not encourage or allow an uneasy compromise in which noumena are known to exist with unknowable intrinsic properties” (2000, 106).

Now this dispute can seem intractable; surely there is no reading which is both metaphysical and not, in the sense at issue here. But once we clarify Kant's precise sense of "the inner of things" and the worry about inner nature readings (§§1-2), we can find an interpretation which combines the strengths and resolves the worries on all sides, accommodating all four constraints (§3). The basic idea is this: Kant's claims about "the inner of things" advance a metaphysics, but one that differs sharply from those he considers dogmatic—a metaphysics that leaves open whether or not there are any unconditioned grounds, including (more specifically) anything *absolutely* inner. I will then pose an objection and reply by considering Kant's account of natural laws and kinds (§4); I conclude by considering how this interpretation fits Kant's claims about the arguments for, philosophical benefits of, unknowable things in themselves (§5).

Note that I do not aim here to for a comprehensive interpretation of "transcendental idealism." That would require, along with the account here of Kant on things in themselves, a solution to an additional problem concerning *appearances*: how can Kant combine a form of idealism concerning appearances with his empirical realism? But I set this problem aside here. For the problem concerning appearances is also difficult. Some will want to answer with a non-metaphysical interpretation of Kant's idealism; others will find that approach to capture no real idealist commitment.<sup>8</sup> But no one should assume that they have a magic bullet solution and then insist on interpreting everything else in Kant into accordance. I take the problem concerning unknowable things in themselves to be difficult and important enough in its own right to be worth my direct attention here.

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<sup>8</sup> See van Cleve's complaint about non-metaphysical readings (1999, 4) and especially Allais' (2007) powerful non-phenomenalist alternative.

## **1. An Intrinsic Character of Substance**

Kant, again, holds that we can know “mere relations” but never “the inner constitution of things,” “a thing determinable by its distinguishing and inner predicates,” or just “the inner of things” (*das Innere der Dinge*).<sup>9</sup> The way to understand “the inner” here is as one form of what Kant calls “the unconditioned.” In making this connection, I am following Warren (2001). While Warren sees here a solution to the problem of unknowable things in themselves, however, I defend an account of the connection designed to show that it *is* the problem. But understanding the connection requires first appreciating two basic points from the first *Critique's* Transcendental Dialectic: first, we seek in all theoretical inquiry for the unconditioned; second, we cannot legitimately claim to know whether or not there is anything unconditioned.

Start with the first point. Kant argues that we do not rest content with knowledge, provided by the faculty of understanding, that such-and-such is the case. We engage in theoretical inquiry in the sense that we seek to *explain*, or to know *why*. What accounts for this? Kant answers: a faculty of reason. And this faculty of reason must then itself be characterized by an “aim” (*Zweck*) or an “interest” (*Interesse*). Insofar as we are rational we aim, first, for knowledge of the underlying *conditions* on which things depend. And not just to an arbitrary degree. If there is, as Kant assumes, a purely theoretical goal directing our inquiry, aside from our practical interests, then the goal must be to “never rest satisfied with an explanation that leaves something unexplained” (Allison 2004, 31)—to seek absolutely complete explanation. In Kant’s terms, reason demands: “find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding” (A307/B364). This demand plays a guiding or *regulative* role that is “indispensably necessary” (A644/B672) for our

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<sup>9</sup> Respectively, A270/B326, A565/B593 and P 4:353; cf. A278/B334.

scientific inquiry. And in this regulative role reason's demand is legitimate: reason demands the unconditioned "with every right" (Bxx).

The second basic point, however, is that we cannot legitimately assert that there is anything unconditioned. We are supposed to easily and naturally mistake reason's demand that we *seek* the unconditioned for a principle requiring that there must always *be* something unconditioned. Kant does seek to establish knowledge that every alteration in time has a cause. But that is not to say that for *absolutely anything* not itself unconditioned, X, there must always be a condition or series of conditions that is *complete, unconditioned or sufficient* to support X entirely of itself. The latter would be a version of the rationalists' principle of sufficient reason.<sup>10</sup> We are supposed to be tempted to endorse that principle, given the way reason guides us, and then to infer the existence of the various kinds of unconditioned grounds or endpoints.

Consider for example the rationalist cosmological argument mentioned above. One way to capture the intuition here would be to compare the idea that the earth rests on a turtle, followed after that by only turtles all the way down. If anything contingent must be contingent on something, or dependent in this sense; and if there cannot be contingency *all the way down*; then there must be an unconditioned endpoint in the regress of dependence: a necessary being. Given his account of reason, Kant takes this argument to have a natural appeal: "this is the natural course taken by every human reason" (A584/B612). But Kant argues that the inference must

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Eberhard attacks Kant on behalf of "the Leibnizian philosophy" by defending the principle of sufficient reason. Kant argues that his principle oversteps our epistemic limits (e.g. UE 8:198). Only restricted by the forms of sensible intuition is anything like a principle of sufficient reason justified, specifically in the form of the law of causality, a "ground of possible experience" (A201/B246).

nonetheless be resisted. We cannot on this basis nor on any other derive theoretical knowledge of the existence of God.<sup>11</sup>

It is also supposed to be “dogmatic” to *deny* the existence of the unconditioned. With respect to reason’s ideas of the unconditioned, “empiricism itself becomes dogmatic in regard to the ideas” when it “boldly denies whatever lies beyond the sphere of its intuitive cognitions.”<sup>12</sup>

Note that Kant worries generally about claims that transcend the bounds of experience or sensibility. But he also has different worries more specifically targeting claims for the existence of unconditioned grounds: these specifically cause the antinomial conflicts so important in the critical philosophy. Kant says:

The entire antinomy of pure reason rests on this dialectical argument: If the conditioned is given, then the whole series of all conditions for it is also given; now objects of the senses are given as conditioned; consequently, etc. (A497/B525)

This sort of argument for the existence of the unconditioned is supposed to be paradigmatic of metaphysics that is “dogmatic”; and a good part of the point of a “critique” of pure reason is to counter the threat that reason’s guidance might thus trick us into asserting such knowledge of the existence of something unconditioned.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. “any theoretical proof of the existence of the original being as a divinity ... is absolutely impossible from a theoretical point of view, even if only to produce the slightest degree of affirmation” (KU 5:466).

<sup>12</sup> A471/B499. Some non-metaphysical readers might disagree. But, again, I am not trying to directly argue against their approach—I am trying to show that we can get its interpretive benefits by means of a metaphysical approach not subject to worries about an “anodyne” non-metaphysical reading. But I will mention that I don’t take Kant on “transcendental illusion” to amount to a denial that there could be anything corresponding to reason’s ideas. Part of the reason is Kant’s account of the illusion as indispensable and beneficial, as stressed by Grier (2001) and Allison (2004). Also, *some* ideas of unknowable objects are supposed to generate contradictions. But this point is explicitly restricted to the ideas of the spatio-temporal world as a completed, unconditioned whole: ‘The first two antinomies ... are founded on such a contradictory concept’ (P 4:341). That claim does not apply to the ideas central to the second two antinomies. Nor does it apply to psychological and theological ideas (A673/B701).

<sup>13</sup> Kant says, for example, that the Antinomy arguments proceed “in accordance with principles that every dogmatic metaphysics must of necessity acknowledge.” And the arguments establish the need for a *critique*: “there is an hereditary defect in metaphysics that cannot be explained, much less removed,

Granted, Kant argues that we have some practical grounds for *belief* in some forms of the unconditioned.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this or some other further complexity will make for interesting continuities with rationalist metaphysics in other respects. But none of this should distract us from the sharp line of Kant's anti-dogmatism: we cannot legitimately claim theoretical knowledge of the existence of any form of the unconditioned. The sharp line is absolutely crucial to the project of a *critique* of pure reason; in asserting the existence of a necessary being, for example, rationalist metaphysics is supposed to find itself on the wrong side of that line.

What does all this have to do with Kant's contrast between "mere relations" and "the inner" of things? The answer is that the latter is a form of the general idea of unconditioned. Actually, it encompasses two different forms of the unconditioned—or two different endpoints in two different forms of regress of dependence.

The first form is a regress of ontological dependence, in the sense that the existence of something might depend on the existence of something else. Langton's Kant argues that extrinsic properties are ontologically dependent:

[R]elations, and relational properties, imply the existence of independent bearers; substances ... having properties capable of existence in the absence of relations to other things. (Langton 1998, 22)<sup>15</sup>

If X stands in relation to Y, then X must be an "independent bearer"—and it cannot be without having some character of its own, *something*—whatever it is—that is independent of its relation to Y. Why can't this independent character be X's relation to something else, say Z? It cannot *always* be more relations, else there would be a regress—turtles all the way down. So we must eventually get to some *absolutely*

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without ascending to its birthplace, pure reason itself, and so my *Critique* must either be accepted or a better one put in its place" (P 4: 379).

<sup>14</sup> Kant famously aims "to deny knowledge in order to make room for *Glaube*" (faith or belief) (Bxxx).

<sup>15</sup> See also Pereboom: Kant "does not thoroughly reject the claim that intrinsic properties must ground the reality of extrinsic properties" (1991, 69).

*intrinsic character* of substance. (I will use “absolutely intrinsic character” to refer to this kind of unconditioned endpoint because the term “intrinsic property” can have different meanings; I will use “inner” and “intrinsic” interchangeably.)

This notion of an absolutely intrinsic character of substance is very demanding. Spatio-temporal properties cannot be included. Even shape properties—which can seem to be intrinsic—depend on the existence of parts (otherwise there is nothing to be arranged in that shape). Absolute substance with such absolutely intrinsic character would have to be non-extended, simple substance—a monad in this sense. Kant says, interpreting Leibniz:

The simple is therefore the foundation of the inner in things in themselves. But that which is inner in their state cannot consist in place, shape, contact, or motion (which determinations are all outer relations) (A274/B330).

Now Langton discusses most thoroughly Kant’s pre-critical writings; I will limit my claims to the *Critique* and the following works. Here there are plenty of passages where Kant characterizes rationalist views of substance. And passages where he claims that we must think or conceive of things as such substances, just as we must think or conceive of the unconditioned generally in order to seek it. But, contra Langton, here Kant also *refuses to assert* the rationalist conclusion that there must really be substances with absolutely intrinsic characters. Kant takes Leibniz to go astray by missing the point that mere concepts, uncombined with intuition from sensibility, cannot amount to cognition of an object. Thus, after the above passage, in the “Amphiboly” critique of Leibniz, we find:

I cannot say that since without something absolutely inner no thing can be represented through mere concepts, there is also nothing outer that does not have something absolutely internal as its ground in the things themselves.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A284/B340. Bird (2000) makes a case that Langton’s citations from the critical philosophy are drawn from portrayals of a view under criticism. So does Rosefeldt, who emphasizes the passage cited

Kant takes Leibniz to imagine that the pure (non-schematized) concepts or categories entirely determine or constitute reality in itself.

Of course, Kant does prominently consider an argument for the existence of the absolutely inner: there cannot be dependence, in the sense of composition, *all the way down*; otherwise there would then be nothing for things to be composed of: “nothing at all would be left over” (A436/B464). But this argument is from the Second Antinomy, where it is rejected. Granted, part of the point here is that nothing can be both object available to our sensibility, in space and time, and also absolutely simple (Langton 1998, 98). But the idea here of absolutely independent (and so absolutely simple) substance is clearly supposed to be a form of reason’s general idea of the unconditioned. This is clear elsewhere as well: “reason cannot avoid” the “representation of an object as simple,” because “it alone contains the unconditioned for every composite” (UE 8:209). So Kant’s *critique* of the way reason tempts us toward whatever it “cannot avoid,” and specifically Kant’s criticisms of rationalist metaphysics, commit him to avoiding a theoretical philosophy that would asserting of existence here, just as in the case of a necessary being.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, we have seen that the critical Kant does *employ* the notion of the “absolutely inner” (A284/B340), and these passages show that at least of part what he means here is the absolutely intrinsic character of substance, or the unconditioned endpoint in a regress of ontological dependence. Employing such notions of unconditioned endpoints is consistent with Kant’s position that we must

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here (2001, 268). Langton does try—I remain unconvinced—to take account of this passage with a very different translation of her own (1998, 61). I also agree with Breitenbach (2004) in criticizing Langton, but, of course, I do not accept the non-metaphysical approaches defended in these reviews.

<sup>17</sup> The *opponent* of the critical philosophy will assert parallel premises needed in rationalist arguments for the existence of both absolute substance and a necessary being: “Everything that is, exists as substance, or a determination dependent on it, ‘Everything contingent exists as the effect of another thing, namely its cause’ etc.” But the premises, and so the conclusions, cannot be proven: “he will never prove his proposition” and must end up “fully renouncing the pure and sense-free judgment” (A259/B315).

conceive of the unconditioned, but cannot legitimately claim knowledge that there is anything unconditioned—including knowledge that there is, more specifically, anything absolutely inner.

## ***2. An Intrinsic Basis in Virtue of Which Things Do What They Do***

There much discussion, couched in greatly varied terminology, concerning whether there is more to Kant's distinction between "mere relations" and "the inner"—and, if so, whether any further distinction here is metaphysical or epistemic. Langton focuses on a further metaphysical issue concerning reducibility to the intrinsic.<sup>18</sup> Warren says that Kant's notion of the inner requires not only "ontological" but also "epistemic priority" (2001). Allais focuses on what is supposed to be a non-metaphysical, epistemological distinction between opaque and transparent specifications of causal powers (2006). I think that there is in Kant a second distinction between "mere relations" and "the inner," best understood in terms of another kind of regress, with all the associated *metaphysical* options raised by any potential regress of dependence.

To see the potential regress, consider a dispositional property or power. A material body has the power to attract other bodies, and the power to repel them on contact. Some salt has the property of water solubility. Set aside considerations of ontological dependence and compatibility with loneliness, and consider instead a different kind of dependence—perhaps this could be called "determining dependence." All can agree that a dispositional property or a power is something graspable or conceivable in relational terms—e.g. in terms of the potential relation between salt and water. Imagine asking why the salt dissolves in water. We can't

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<sup>18</sup> And she elsewhere recognizes an epistemological distinction between relational and non-relational ways of conceptualizing properties (2006, 173).

explain by saying that it has the property of *water solubility*.<sup>19</sup> If we are to explain, then better to identify some further property or properties of salt, or some inner nature or constitution of salt—something which is such as to be graspable in terms independent of salt’s water solubility, and something in virtue of which salt is water soluble or which determines salt to be water soluble. We might call this an *intrinsic basis* of a disposition or power in virtue of which things have their powers and dispositions.<sup>20</sup>

Whether or not there are such intrinsic bases is a metaphysical question. And we find here all the metaphysical options raised by other forms of dependence: Fans of unsupported turtles might say that something can have a disposition or a power without this necessarily being so in virtue of on any underlying basis. Fans of turtles all the way down will see the need for a basis, but will hold that the basis is always a further dispositional property, and so on all the way down. Fans of rationalist arguments will hold that there is a regress of dependence here, and that it requires termination in a form of unconditioned endpoint, an *absolutely intrinsic basis*: we must ultimately get features or properties or natures that are such as to be graspable (at least by an ideal mind) in absolutely non-relational terms, and in virtue of which things are specifically disposed as they are, or have the powers they do.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Warren (2001, 51) on “vacuous explanation” and what he calls “epistemic priority.”

<sup>20</sup> Blackburn describes us as imagining that “[t]here will be a categorical ground, G, for the (multi-track) disposition D whereby we know of mass or charge. It will be in virtue of the instancing of such a G that an object has the mass that it does, or a region of space the charge” (1990, 63). For all that I say here, such an intrinsic basis might itself be a further aspect of the same property also graspable in relational terms. Armstrong, for example, says: “to speak of an object’s having a dispositional property entails that the object is in some non-dispositional state or that it has some property (there exists a ‘categorical basis’) which is responsible for the object manifesting certain behaviour in certain circumstances ... states are *identified* in terms of their manifestations in suitable conditions, rather than in terms of their intrinsic nature” (1968, 86). But I won’t try to find terminology that highlights the possibility of a further aspect of the same property being the basis.

<sup>21</sup> To say that something is such as to be graspable in absolutely non-relational terms is to say that it is *ideally* graspable in such terms, but not that it is so graspable *by us*.

So, to be clear about terminology, the general idea of the absolutely inner or intrinsic encompasses two kinds of unconditioned endpoints: an absolutely “intrinsic character” of ontologically independent substance, and an “intrinsic basis” in virtue of which things do what they do. Note also that it is in fact recently popular to hold that science can only achieve knowledge of dispositions all the way down. For example:

Resistance is par excellence dispositional ... mass is knowable only by dynamical effects... the magnitude of a field at a region is known only through its effects on other things in spatial relations to that region... science finds only dispositions all the way down. (Blackburn 1993, 63)

Some might want to hold that there must be absolutely intrinsic bases, but that we cannot know what they are.<sup>22</sup> But not Kant. Kant’s anti-dogmatism prevents him from asserting that there must be such unconditioned endpoints.

Nonetheless, all this is again part of what Kant means by “the inner of things.” In seeking the inner of things, we seek for an absolutely “intrinsic character” and an absolutely “intrinsic basis.” But our limitation to knowledge of “mere relations” means that, just as we cannot know the former, we also cannot know the latter. For example, Kant allows knowledge of spatio-temporal relations:

[E]verything in our cognition that belongs to intuition contains nothing but mere relations, of places in one intuition (extension), alteration of places (motion)...

But Kant immediately adds a second point:

...and laws in accordance with which this alteration is determined (moving forces). But what is present in the place, or what it produces in the things themselves besides the alteration of place, is not given through these relations. ... since nothing is given to us through outer sense except mere representations of relation, outer sense can also contain in its representation only the relation of an object to the subject, and not that which is internal to the object in itself. (B66-7)

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<sup>22</sup> Langton (2006) suggests the possibility of attributing to Kant such a view in giving a metaphysical reconstruction of Allais’ proposal (2006) of what is supposed to be a non-metaphysical intrinsic nature reading.

This is not about ontological dependence; it is about what *determines* things to behave as they do: “laws in accordance with which” certain results or effects are “determined.” There are cases in which we can know these laws. But even here we cannot grasp the properties which figure in the laws in terms independent of the potential effects on other things and ultimately on us—on “the subject.” So we cannot know “that which is internal to the object” in the sense of any intrinsic basis or inner nature in virtue of which it can effect us as it does. Kant later returns to the point—now back in the Amphiboly critique of Leibniz—allowing knowledge of “nothing but relations”:

We know substance in space only through forces that are efficacious in it, whether in drawing others to it (attraction) or in preventing penetration of it (repulsion and impenetrability) (A265/B321)

So we cannot know absolute substance, neither in the sense of finding some intrinsic character things would have if absolutely alone, nor in the sense of finding in things an absolutely intrinsic basis for how they affect others. Kant mentions the point also in third *Critique* (KU):

[W]e name a cause after the concept that we have of its effect (though only with regard to its relation to the latter), without thereby meaning to determine its internal constitution intrinsically by means of the properties that are all that we know about such causes and which must be given to us by experience... (KU 5: 457)

A natural worry is this: we are supposed to be ignorant of “the inner of things”; but then how could the notion of “the inner” be of any use or importance to us at all? I think that Warren has entirely resolved this worry: Kant’s position is that reason requires us to seek knowledge of the unconditioned in the form of the *absolutely* inner in things, and we can thereby at least achieve knowledge of the *comparatively* inner. Warren explains by means of this central example: We can explain the manifest features of a composite by progressing to knowledge of the spatio-temporal features of its parts, such as their shape (Warren 2001, 43-4). The shape of the part

is comparatively intrinsic, relative to the whole and its properties: the part can exist without the whole, and in grasping the shape of the part we grasp it in terms that are independent of its contribution to the capacities of the whole. If we know the shape of a gear—Warren’s example—we can explain in those terms how it contributes to a capacity of the whole, without merely grasping the part as having the property of contributing to that capacity. But none of this is knowledge of anything absolutely intrinsic: the part could not exist without its parts, and so on. So Warren can explain Kant’s account of how the notion of the “inner” allows us to make progress: we can acquire knowledge of the comparatively inner but “we never reach an irreducibly inward characterization of objects” (Warren 2001, 54).

But Warren takes the connection between Kant’s notion of the inner and his account of the unconditioned to resolve the problem of the content of the notion of things in themselves. And it seems to me that the connection *is* the problem. Recall the four constraints that make so difficult the problem of the coherence of Kant’s claims about things in themselves:

Assertion: There are things in themselves.

Ignorance: We cannot have knowledge of things in themselves.

Desire: The conception of things in themselves is a conception of something of which we seek or desire knowledge.

Anti-dogmatism: We cannot legitimately claim theoretical knowledge of the existence of any form of the unconditioned.

What makes this problematic is that Kant treats assertions in the context of theoretical philosophy as implicitly laying claim to knowledge; in criticizing rationalist metaphysics, Kant holds that its assertions should be restrained by restrictions on our knowledge. Now Warren proposes: “to represent something as it is in itself is to represent it through its *absolutely* inner properties” (2001, 47). And:

[T]he content of the notion of the absolutely inner, and consequently, of the thing in itself, derives from the role it plays in specifying an endpoint for an explanatory regress. (2001, 55)

So Warren and Langton agree in holding that knowledge of things in themselves would be knowledge of something absolutely inner (in one sense or another). This promises to accommodate desire, given Kant's account of our interest in the unconditioned. But regardless of how we read ignorance, there is absolutely no hope of jointly accommodating the other two constraints. If the conception of things in themselves is the conception of something absolutely inner or intrinsic, or of *any* form of the unconditioned, then the assertion makes precisely the claim which, according to anti-dogmatism, we cannot know to be true. And anti-dogmatism would deny us theoretical knowledge of whether there are things in themselves, ruling illegitimate Kant's own assertion.<sup>23</sup>

Other approaches focusing on regress problems face the same difficulty. Franks' "two essences" reading holds, for example, that in Kant "as in Leibniz, there are two orders of grounding"—things in themselves have unconditioned grounds; appearances have either infinite chains, chains that end arbitrarily, or circular chains of dependence.<sup>24</sup> Van Cleve's phenomenalist interpretation applies a similar claim

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<sup>23</sup> The latter appears to be the horn of the dilemma preferred by Warren, who more specifically says that in the critical works "we are meant to recognize ... the possibility of an explanatory regress without limit" (2001, 54); but this would mean the possibility that there is nothing absolutely inner, and so on his own reading *no things in themselves*. A view of this kind, giving up the assertion, but focused more generally on the unconditioned is embraced by Pippin: with respect to what "Kant means by claiming that there must be a 'supersensible' ground for appearances": "Such language refers only to a regulative way of *thinking* about appearances ... not meant to be description of some factual or metaphysical relation between appearances and things in themselves" (1982, 210). Perhaps instead of giving up on the assertion, one could retreat to a non-metaphysical reading of it, taking it as a non-metaphysical assertion *that there is a way we have of considering or thinking of objects, namely, as having absolutely inner properties*; but this would re-raise the "anodyne" objection.

<sup>24</sup> (2005, 51). Franks does say that this positive characterization of things in themselves is supposed to be warranted differently than a negative characterization, with a different "mode of commitment": the former is warranted by reason's "requirement that genuine groundings terminate in an absolute" (2005, 46). I am arguing rather that the metaphysics of *which Kant asserts theoretical knowledge* is carefully designed to include *no commitment* to the existence of anything unconditioned. See also Adams: "things in themselves must have, or at any rate *must be thought as having*, internal, non-relational properties that are prior to their relations (1997, 811; my emphasis). I grant the "must be thought" and deny the "must have." See also Pereboom: Kant "does not thoroughly reject the claim that intrinsic properties must ground the reality of extrinsic properties"—he does not reject it for things in themselves (1991, 69)

specifically to a regress from relations: with respect to “Leibniz’s principle that relations supervene on nonrelational properties,” he says, “Kant’s position ... is that this principle *holds for things in themselves, but not for appearances*” (2003, 154). On such interpretations, part of what it would mean for Kant to assert that there are things in themselves would be that there are unconditioned grounds; this is just the kind of assertion targeted by Kant’s anti-dogmatism.

In sum, Kant uses terminology like “the inner of things” to refer to unconditioned endpoints in two kinds of regress from “mere relations” to “the inner.” But this connection to the unconditioned does not solve the problem concerning Kant’s claims about things in themselves; precisely this connection makes it so problematic to reconcile Kant’s assertion that there are things in themselves with his anti-dogmatism denying us knowledge of whether there is anything unconditioned.

### ***3. Solution: Non-Sensible Inner Grounds that need not be Absolute***

The basic solution to the problem is this: Kant conceives of things in themselves, in asserting that there are some, as non-sensible inner grounds of things—without specifying whether these need be or include anything *absolutely* inner, or any unconditioned endpoint in any regress toward the inner.

On this interpretation, Kant’s conception of things in themselves is compound. First, the sharp line distinguishing things in themselves is drawn, at base, in epistemic terms. Where is the sharp line? At the bounds of experience or sensibility. Our “cognition” requires access not just to concepts but also to intuition. And we have access to intuition only from a receptive faculty of sensibility. Something is within “the bounds of sensibility and thus of possible experience” only “insofar as it can be presented in a corresponding intuition (which for us is always sensory)” (UE 8:188-9).

These bounds encompass more than the particular objects of which we have sense experience. First, we can have within these bounds synthetic *a priori* knowledge—but only where it is made possible by *a priori* intuition *from sensibility*—which can only be intuition of the *a priori* forms of our sensibility itself, space and time. For example, given our *a priori* intuition of time, we can know that every alteration *in time* must have some cause.<sup>25</sup> Second, given such principles, we can also infer our way to empirical knowledge of things we cannot experience. For example, if we know of an alteration in time, we can infer that it has a cause, even if this undetectable given our sense organs. But we can do this only where the objects in question are such as could *possibly* be presented in sensible intuition, in accordance with its *a priori* forms. We can infer our way to knowledge of an unobservable only where

...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. (A226/B273)

Very small things are still things in space, and would be detectable with “finer” senses; such things are sensible in Kant’s sense. The bounds of sensibility do not turn on *empirical* claims about our sense organs but on a *transcendental* claim in the sense of a claim about the *a priori* forms of sensible intuition. And insofar as part of what it is to be a “thing in itself” is to be non-sensible, things in themselves are in this respect distinguished *in kind* from anything accessible within the bounds of sense.

But, again, Kant’s conception of things in themselves is compound: it picks out whatever is both (i) *non-sensible* or beyond the bounds of sensibility, and (ii) a *ground* on which things that we know about depend.

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<sup>25</sup> On the synthetic status of the principles of the understanding, and the connection to the *a priori* intuition of time, see Allison (2004: 225-8).

Kant's assertion that there are things in themselves, in the sense of non-sensible grounds, shows up clearly in many of his later summaries of his position in the first *Critique*. That book's "*consistent way of thinking*," with respect to objects of experience, "insisted ... on putting things in themselves at their ground and hence on not taking everything supersensible as a fiction and its concept as empty of content" (KprV 5:6). In Kant's defense against Eberhard's rationalist attack, in *On a Discovery* [UE], Kant says that the first *Critique* "posits this ground of the matter of sensory representations ... in something super-sensible, which *grounds* the latter, and of which we can have no cognition" (UE 8:215). And Kant refers to "the super-sensible which underlies that appearance as substrate ... as thing-in-itself" (UE 8:210).

In what specific sense are things in themselves *grounds* or *substrates*? Some possibilities are ruled out by their non-sensibility: they are not the causes of alterations in time, nor the spatial parts of composites—all this is in principle sensible. But there is also a sense in which Kant, given the goal of avoiding dogmatism, should and does leave open questions about what kind of grounds there might or might not be beyond the bounds of sensibility. For example, if there were to exist something corresponding to the ideal of God as an "all of everything," then everything would be thereby grounded in this sense: "the thoroughgoing determination of every thing rests on the limitation of this All of reality" (A577/B600). But it is crucial that Kant denies us theoretical knowledge of whether or not there is such a God.

The more difficult question, then, concerns Kant's own assertion, central to his theoretical philosophy, that there are things in themselves: what sort of ground is here specifically asserted to exist? Although his claim that the objects of our knowledge are "appearances" requires separate discussion, it is clear that this claim means something from which it is supposed to follow analytically that there are

unknowable things in themselves. That is to say, insofar as Kant aims to justify the assertion that objects of our knowledge are “appearances,” he is in so doing trying to justify the assertion that there are non-sensible grounds.<sup>26</sup> Kant rejects the “the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears” (Bxxvi). And, “if the senses merely represent something to us as it appears, then this something must also be in itself a thing” (A249). Watkins refers to a “grounding thesis,” and cites Kant:

...we must admit and assume behind appearances something else that is not appearance, namely things in themselves, although, since we can never become acquainted with them but only with how they affect us, we resign ourselves to being unable to come any closer to them or ever to know what they are in themselves. (G 4:451)

And Watkins cites from transcripts of Kant’s 1782-3 Mrongovius Lectures, concerning things in themselves which

...underlie the appearances [*liegen ... zum Grunde*], and I can therefore surely infer the actuality of the things from the appearances, but not the properties of the things themselves from the properties of the appearances... (Ak 29:857; Watkins 2005, 326)

Given the connection of Kant’s assertion to appearances, I take it to require things in themselves that are not distinct objects, leaving appearances as separate objects with properties of their own. The assertion is rather that things have an aspect, constitution or properties in themselves—distinct from their aspect, constitution or properties knowable by us within the bounds of sensibility. And some of the features we can know about are supposed to be as they are (at least partly) in virtue of the way things are in themselves: we can know how they affect us, but we have no separate

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<sup>26</sup> So I see no refuge for non-metaphysical interpretations in the analyticity (contra Allison 1983, 254). Kant does not just consider, but he *asserts*—and takes himself to *prove* and so to *know*—that the objects of our knowledge are appearances, in some sense from which it is supposed to follow directly that there are unknowable things in themselves. Also, Pippin—although he seeks to avoid a metaphysical interpretation—notes as a difficulty for methodological readings “the many passages in the *Critique* where so considering the ‘supersensible substrate’ of appearances” plays a “positive” role in the transcendental philosophy (1981, 203).

grasp on what it is about them in virtue of which they affect us as they do. So what Kant asserts is that there exist inner grounds or intrinsic bases in things—inner constitutions or natures in virtue of which things have their knowable features:

There are things given to us as objects of our senses existing outside us, yet we know nothing of them as they may be in themselves, but are acquainted only with their appearances, i.e., with the representations that they produce in us because they affect our senses. (P 4:289)

And, “the understanding ... admits to the existence of things in themselves,” something that “underlies” appearances, although “we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself” (P 4:314-5).

It is easy to see why we should desire knowledge of such an unknowable inner constitution: reason demands that we always seek to follow a regress of dependence. And this is a metaphysical reading of the assertion, not subject to worries about “anodyne” non-metaphysical readings.

Note that all of the last four citations make clear that the ignorance claim allows knowledge *that* there are non-sensible inner grounds in things; it denies us knowledge of *what* these are. In other words, we cannot know things *as they are in themselves*. Repeating the above order: We cannot “know what they are in themselves”; “we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself”; “we know nothing of them as they may be in themselves”; we can infer the “actuality” of things in themselves but not the “properties of the things themselves.”

Unlike Langton’s reading, however, mine also accords with Kant’s anti-dogmatism. The idea is this: we know that there are non-sensible inner grounds of things, but given their non-sensibility we cannot know what these are. So we cannot know, more specifically, whether or not any of them are *absolutely* inner. With respect to the absolutely inner, and (more generally) the unconditioned, we are ignorant in the much stronger sense that we cannot know even whether there is any such a thing. Again, we “cannot say” whether a thing must have “something

absolutely internal as its ground in the things themselves” (A284/B340). But this is not in any way to retreat from the assertion that there are things in themselves; contra Langton (and Warren as well) the conception of things in themselves is not any conception of anything absolutely inner.

We can now refine the gloss on Kant’s assertion in a manner bringing out the connection to ignorance and anti-dogmatism: to assert that there are things in themselves is to assert that there are non-sensible inner grounds. This is to say *that* the regress toward the inner extends beyond the bounds of sensibility. But those bounds leave us unavoidably ignorant of *how* the regress proceeds after this point. So we cannot know whether it ever reaches any kind of unconditioned endpoint, including (more specifically) whether it ever reaches anything absolutely inner or intrinsic. We cannot know whether the regress of ontological dependence reaches an absolutely intrinsic character of absolutely independent substance; nor whether the regress of determination dependence reaches an absolutely intrinsic basis in virtue of which things are disposed as they are. Perhaps, for all we can know, the regress toward the inner ceases at some point, beyond the bounds of sensibility, without reaching anything unconditioned—an unsupported turtle. Or perhaps it extends infinitely inwards, without reaching anything unconditioned—turtles all the way down. In any case, we cannot know.

Granted, those who prefer one side in the existing debate will want to read Kant as having only one kind of epistemic limit—either a very strict limit disallowing any knowledge that there is anything beyond the bounds of sense, or a very permissive limit allowing knowledge that there are absolutely inner grounds beyond those bounds. But the key to understanding the coherence of Kant’s position is that he has different reasons for different kinds of limit: First, he has some reasons for worrying about claims concerning things that exceed the bounds of sensibility. To make sense of Kant’s assertion (and his references in this context to non-sensible grounds) we

must take worries about the bounds of sense to be meant allow knowledge *that* there is something beyond the bounds of sense, while disallowing knowledge of *what* it is. We cannot “cognize” whatever it is as an “object” in the *empirical* sense, cannot apply schematized categories of substance, causality, etc.—but that is not to say that there is no such non-sensible ground. Second, Kant has *additional* worries about claims *specifically* asserting the existence of something unconditioned: for example, we have seen that such claims specifically cause antinomial conflicts. To make sense of Kant’s anti-dogmatism, we must take these different worries to be meant to disallow even just knowledge *that* there is anything unconditioned. Whether or not Kant’s different reasons succeed in supporting precisely their desired conclusions would require separate discussion; but his attempt seems to me coherent and his desired conclusions mutually consistent.

Kant takes special pains to emphasize our ignorance of whether or not there is any absolutely inner unconditioned endpoint, specifically when he engages with Eberhard over whether the critical philosophy boils down to Leibniz’s rationalism. Again, unconditioned endpoints in a regress of ontological dependence would be absolutely simple or non-composite—monads, in this sense, with the absolutely intrinsic characters of their own. Now the first *Critique* does assert that that there are things in themselves, meaning non-sensible inner grounds. Eberhard takes this to as Leibniz’s claim for the existence of monads. But Kant responds that his point is rather to rule out our having knowledge of whether or not there are monads:

[N]obody can have the least knowledge of whether the super-sensible which underlies that appearance as substrate is, as thing-in-itself, either composite or simple. (UE 8:210)

Kant asserts that the regress toward the inner proceeds farther than our knowledge can follow—it extends at least to a “super-sensible” ground which “underlies”—so

that “nobody can have the least knowledge of whether” the regress reaches anything like an unconditioned endpoint in anything absolutely inner, like a monad.

Kant’s point here is complex, because he does hold that faculty of reason requires us to *seek* the unconditioned and so to *conceive* of it—and of (more specifically) the absolutely inner and so absolutely simple substances. But Kant also holds that neither reason or anything else can provide us knowledge that there is such a thing:

The representation of an object as simple is a merely negative concept, which reason cannot avoid, because it alone contains the unconditioned for every composite (as a thing, not as mere form), the possibility of which is always conditioned. This concept does not, therefore, serve to extend our cognition. (UE 8:209)

The *a priori* forms of our sensibility provide the ground of appearance “as mere form”; but reason must also think an unconditioned ground of every composite “as a thing.” Since we cannot know things as absolutely inner, we must *conceive* this unconditioned ground as among the non-sensible grounds of things:

If I now say: that which *grounds* the possibility of the composite, and therefore alone can be conceived as not composite, is the noumenon (for it is not to be found in the sensible), I am not saying thereby: that an aggregate of *so many simple beings*, as pure objects of understanding, grounds body as appearance; but rather that nobody can have the least knowledge of whether the super-sensible which underlies that appearance as substrate is, as thing-in-itself, either composite or simple... (UE 8:210)

So Kant does assert that there are non-sensible things which could at least *conceivably* be or include an absolutely inner unconditioned endpoint; but he does not assert that there exists any such absolutely inner unconditioned endpoint.

Note the way in which this last passage rules the assertion of the existence of things in themselves indeterminate or negative in a sense emphasizing the limits of our knowledge. Kant posits a “noumenon,” but only in a negative sense stressing its non-sensibility: “it is not to be found in the sensible” (UE 8:210). *If* all we had to say

here was that Kant asserts that there are non-sensible inner grounds, then it could well be objected that this is not really any more indeterminate than any assertion about anything: it specifies that there is something that *grounds* things, and in that respect it determines this something.

But the above provides us the crucial new line of response: The extended passage from UE endorses the metaphysical assertion that there are non-sensible “grounds,” or something “super-sensible which underlies” the known features of things. But the assertion is *indeterminate specifically with respect to the interest that threatens to entangle us in dogmatic metaphysics: reason’s interest in the unconditioned*. Here that interest threatens to deceive us into asserting that there must be unconditioned ground more specifically by asserting that the pure (unschematized) category of substance must completely determine the structure of reality in itself. So we can read Kant as endorsing a metaphysics of the thing in itself, while also doing justice to his aim of rejecting pre-critical metaphysics generally: he rejects as dogmatic both rationalist metaphysical assertions of the existence of the unconditioned and empiricist denials of the same.

#### ***4. Natural Laws and Non-Sensible Relatively Inner Grounds***

Here is an objection: It is not really possible or coherent to even conceive of non-sensible inner grounds without necessarily conceiving of these as something absolutely inner, or at least as some kind of unconditioned ground. To conceive grounds (the objection goes) as possible “composite” (UE 8:210) is to conceive them as possibly spatial and so *sensible*. To conceive grounds by analogy with the sense in which God is sometimes conceived as transcending time and space would be to conceive them by analogy with a form of unconditioned ground. So (the objection concludes) to really assert that there is a *non-sensible* inner ground would be to assert that there is something unconditioned. And we must still choose between

reading Kant as making that assertion, with rationalism, or else reading him as entirely rejecting metaphysics.

I think that the objection stems from a failure to appreciate the strictness of Kant's epistemic limits. Contra Langton, Kant's bounds do not allow that "we can in principle have experience of whatever affects us" (1998, 189). We have seen that Kant's bounds of sensibility or experience encompass only of what can possibly be presented in sensible intuition, in accordance with the *a priori* forms of space and time. This does allow Kant to conceive of grounds that are *non-sensible* but only *relatively* inner. The best way to appreciate this is to focus on two points concerning the laws of nature: First, on Kant's view, to know laws of nature governing distinct natural kinds would be to know relatively but not absolutely intrinsic grounds of things. Second, it would be to know something that is non-sensible—something that cannot be known within Kant's surprisingly restrictive bounds of sensibility.

Start with the simpler first point about relatively inner grounds. One way of asking about the parts of something would be to ask what parts you observe when you divide it—or would observe if you could only divide it. Another question would be: what are the law-governed natural kinds of things of which something is composed, and in virtue of which it behaves as it does? Knowledge of lots of ways of dividing something would still leave you ignorant of which sets of parts are basic instances of underlying law-governed kinds. Consider yet again our water soluble salt. Why is it water soluble? Consider the example in more contemporary terms: perhaps we could explain in terms of laws governing the interactions of constituent natural kinds—perhaps these are electrons, protons and neutrons, for example. To have knowledge of such natural laws and kinds would be to have knowledge of an intrinsic basis of salt's water solubility, or an intrinsic constitution of salt in virtue of which it is water soluble. This would be something relatively inner, something graspable in terms that are independent *relative to the specific relation between salt*

*and water*. But this would still be to know things in terms of their potential relations: to know electrons in terms of their power to attract protons, repel other electrons, etc. So long as we stop somewhere with knowledge of such natural laws and kinds, we stop without knowledge of an absolutely intrinsic basis, which is such as to be graspable independent of *absolutely all such relations*. So we would still be in the same position as where we

...name a cause after the concept that we have of its effect (though only with regard to its relation to the latter), without thereby meaning to determine its internal constitution intrinsically... (KU 5: 457)

Knowledge of the underlying natural laws and kinds would be knowledge of the relatively inner grounds, but not knowledge of any absolutely inner grounds.

But now to the more difficult second point: Why should such knowledge of natural laws and kinds be beyond our reach? Why should knowledge of a merely relatively inner aspect of things be non-sensible, beyond the bounds of sensibility? Note that it would be a mistake to worry that such a view would be unsympathetic insofar as it conflicts with intuitions that we can know the laws of nature. Kant's epistemology does not aim to accord with intuitions about what we can know: he aims to *disallow* knowledge even and especially where we are specifically supposed to find it almost irresistibly intuitive to follow rationalism on "the natural course taken by every human reason" (A584/B612). Further, some may worry that Kant *defines* his bounds so that scientific claims (like claims about laws) fall within, and only rationalist claims about unconditioned grounds fall without. But it would surely beg the question to *argue* against rationalists on the basis of a definition of "bounds of sensibility" stipulated to exclude precisely rationalist claims. Kant rather needs his principled arguments concerning the limits imposed by the *a priori* forms of our sensibility. Granted, I have noted that these bounds *allow* us knowledge of "laws in accordance with which this alteration is determined (moving forces)" (B66-7). But

what is generally overlooked is that Kant takes these knowable laws to exemplify a special kind of case, an exception to the general rule. Generally speaking, we cannot have knowledge of laws of nature governing interactions between distinct natural kinds.

Why not? I have argued the case at length elsewhere (anonymized). But the basic problem is this: To know such a law would be to know that *particular* natural kinds of things *necessitate* certain outcomes. On the one hand, given Kant's epistemic limits, the *necessitation* here rules out empirical knowledge. On the other hand, the *particularity* of the natural kinds rules out *a priori* knowledge (in contrast to knowledge of the conditions of the possibility of experience *in general*). So laws of nature governing distinct particular natural kinds are non-sensible: we can have no access to corresponding intuition from sensibility, whether empirical or *a priori*.

With respect to the point about *a priori* knowledge, our *a priori* intuition of time makes possible synthetic *a priori* knowledge of the law of causality: "all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect" (B232). But this tells us nothing about what *particular* kinds of things cause what particular other kinds of things.<sup>27</sup> The law of causality and the principles of the understanding are *a priori* laws of "nature in general," from which we cannot deduce "particular laws" governing particular kinds of things (B165)—whether salt, electrons, etc.

The other point is just that Kant takes the laws of nature to involve necessitation. I think that the idea is this: Kant's account of reason recognizes the intuition that explaining requires identifying some underlying ground or condition on which something really depends. Insofar as laws of nature explain regularities,

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<sup>27</sup> While it is a matter of debate whether Kant aims to prove in the "Second Analogy" that there must be determinate causal laws governing specific kinds of things, that argument certainly does not purport to establish knowledge of any particular laws.

laws cannot be regularities; they must be something on which the regularities depend, or something which governs those regularities. And if a law governs a natural kind, then this is to say that *absolutely any possible* instance of that kind *must necessarily* conform. Thus Kant says, in talking specifically about causal laws:

The concept of cause ...requires that something A be of such a kind that something else B follows from it **necessarily** and **in accordance with an absolutely universal rule**... the effect does not merely come along with the cause, but is posited **through** it and follows **from** it. (A91/B124)

This approach allows that laws might be contingent in the sense that there could have been different necessitating laws and kinds.<sup>28</sup>

Friedman gives a different reading of the necessity here (1992a), but all readings must agree that Kant associates laws with necessity in *some* sense supposed to exclude empirical knowledge. Friedman stresses the continuation of the above passage:

Appearances may well offer cases from which a rule is possible in accordance with which something usually happens, but never a rule in accordance with which the succession is **necessary**... (A91/B124; Friedman 1992a, 161-2)

And Friedman stresses a *Reflexion*: “empirically one can discover rules, but not laws ... for to the latter belongs necessity.”<sup>29</sup>

The general problem concerning knowledge of particular laws is set up clearly in the opening of the 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (MAdN). First, “the concept of laws ... carries with it the concept of the necessity of all determinations of a thing” (MAdN 4:469). And this necessity rules out empirical knowledge: for a claim about how *absolutely all* things of a given kind *necessarily* behave, there can be no corresponding *empirical* intuition from sensibility. For

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<sup>28</sup> Here I agree with Langton (1998, 118) and Watkins (2005, 334).

<sup>29</sup> Reflexion 5414 (Ak 18:176), cited by Friedman (1992a, 175).

knowledge of natural laws, then, it would be “required that the *intuition* corresponding to the concept be given *a priori*” (MAdN 4:470). Thus the problem is: how can there be a connection between *a priori* intuition—which of us can only be intuition of space and time in general—and any *particular* natural kind?

All this makes very mysterious how Kant could allow any exceptional case in which any knowledge of particular laws is possible after all. The key here is supposed to be that *everything* showing up in outer sense must fall under a particular *empirical* concept: matter. It all must be corporeal (MAdN 4:470), and more specifically must be matter in motion (MAdN 4:476). Here there is supposed to be a particular empirical concept of (matter) *that nonetheless enjoys a special connection to the a priori forms of all sensible intuition, space and time*. Of course, Kant also famously argues that a special connection the pure forms of sensible intuition makes knowledge of necessary and universal truths of mathematics. And this is supposed to somehow make possible the application of mathematics to the empirical concept of matter to derive laws of matter.

But, again, what is important here is the general limit—not the question of whether or not MAdN can really succeed in establishing an exception to it. Regardless, this limit remains: we can *in principle* never achieve knowledge of natural laws governing *specifically distinct kinds*. For there are no prospects for arguing that the concept of one such kind, specifically as distinct from others, must apply to everything that shows up in outer sense, thus insuring a correspondence to *a priori* intuition and the applicability of mathematics to distinguish laws of nature from observed regularities. So we can have no knowledge of such laws:

Specifically distinct natures, besides what they have in common as belonging to nature in general, can still be causes in infinitely many ways; and each of these ways must ... have its rule, which is a law, and hence brings necessity with it, although given the constitution and the

limits of our faculties of cognition we have no insight at all into this necessity (KU 5:183)<sup>30</sup>

When it comes to laws governing specifically distinct kinds, we cannot have knowledge because we can have “no insight at all” into their “necessity” given the very “limits of our faculties.” We only have hope of knowledge where we can find a way to reduce to one, single pervasive kind—like matter—and even where we succeed at this task we still always lack knowledge of any laws governing irreducibly distinct kinds.<sup>31</sup>

Given the inapplicability of *a priori* intuition, we can pursue knowledge of natural laws governing specifically distinct kinds only in *empirical* inquiry.<sup>32</sup> And Kant holds that we can make progress toward knowledge of natural laws involving necessity and strict universality—but only by approximating without reaching this goal. Reason’s principles are supposed to guide and so make possible this progress: “this use of reason is only regulative, bringing unity into particular cognitions as far as possible and thereby *approximating the rule to universality*” (A647/B675; my emphasis).

In investigating why salt dissolves in water, for example, we assume for the sake of inquiry that there is an underlying system of natural laws and kinds, and that knowledge of this would reveal an inner constitution of salt explaining its reaction with water. Kant claims that we must assume in inquiry that this system and internal constitution is there to be found:

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<sup>30</sup> On this limit see especially Friedman 1992a, on this passage specifically at p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> MAdN takes chemistry to be a case in which we can achieve no knowledge of laws. Kant can, as Friedman argues (1992b), allow the possibility of future knowledge of laws in chemistry. But he can allow this only if chemistry turns out more like Kant understands physics to be—with one basic universally dispersed kind corresponding to *a priori* intuitions of space and time (see also Nayak and Sotnak 1995). And this would still leave us without any knowledge of natural laws governing irreducibly distinct kinds.

<sup>32</sup> Thus Kant sometimes calls these laws not only “particular laws” but also “empirical laws” (P 4:320; KU 5:181-6).

Could Linnaeus have hoped to outline a system of nature if he had had to worry that if he found a stone that he called granite, this might differ in its internal constitution from every other stone which nevertheless looked just like it... [?] (KU 20:216).

In pursuit of such a system of kinds and laws, we might then succeed in finding a way of distinguishing underlying kinds of constituents for which different kinds react in observable, regular ways. We can *think of* these as natural laws and kinds, or *assume them to be so specifically for the purposes of further inquiry*. We think in this way in considering whether such laws *would* explain the phenomena under investigation, and other phenomena. And in searching for counter examples demonstrating that we have not yet found laws of nature. This last case is a way in which we can run up against the kind of external friction—via empirical intuition from sensibility—that would prove we do *not* have our grips on true natural laws and kinds. Success at explaining ever more phenomena, and a lack of counter-examples, is at least reason to think that we are making progress toward knowledge of natural laws and kinds. But we cannot in any case run up against any sort of external friction that would verify that we *do* have our grips on laws of nature, as specifically opposed to only making progress. *Empirical* intuition from sensibility cannot provide this—it cannot correspond to claims about how absolutely everything of a particular kind must behave. With *a priori* intuition, and the mathematics it makes possible, we cannot know this to apply to distinct *particular* kinds so as to distinguish between success and approximation. So at no point can we reach knowledge of particular laws governing specifically distinct kinds.<sup>33</sup>

Kant expresses this view of the progress of inquiry by referring to

...a certain order of nature in its particular rules [*Regeln*], which can only be known to it [our understanding – JK] empirically and which from its point of view are contingent. These rules, without which there

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<sup>33</sup> I much influenced here by accounts of the progress of empirical scientific inquiry in Ginsborg (1990) and Hanna (1998) and Longuenesse (2005).

would be no progress from the general analogy of a possible experience in general to the particular, it must think as laws [*Gesetze*] (i.e., as necessary), because otherwise they would not constitute an order of nature, even though it does not and never can cognize their necessity. (KU 5:184-5)

Interpreters like Buchdahl and Kitcher take this passage to show that Kant at least sometimes suggests a different account of what it is to be a law of nature, on which we can have empirical knowledge of laws.<sup>34</sup> But the passage specifically rules out such knowledge: Our guiding principles allow us to single out and “think as laws” the empirically-known *rules* or regularities, for the purposes of making “progress.” But particular natural *laws* involve precisely the sort of necessity which precludes knowledge: we “never can cognize their necessity.”

On my own interpretation, Kant’s limitation of knowledge of laws is the key to a surprising combination of philosophical advantages: Kant combines much of the epistemic modesty about our knowledge of natural necessity, typical of those who prefer regularity accounts of laws, with the accommodation of the intuitions about explanation and dependence typical of necessitation accounts.<sup>35</sup> But the important points for our purposes here are: natural laws governing particular and specifically distinct kinds would be, if there are any, non-sensible; and, knowledge of such laws and kinds would provide knowledge of the relatively inner constitutions of things, but not knowledge of anything absolutely inner.

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<sup>34</sup> Buchdahl intersperses interpretation and quotation of this passage on empirical or particular natural laws as follows: “these laws, being only ‘empirically known,’ are ‘as regards the understanding, contingent’” (1965: 200). Kitcher cites the same passage and comments: “such laws of nature must be apprehended, and apprehended as laws, on the basis of experience” (1986: 208).

<sup>35</sup> For such contemporary attacks on regularity accounts, see for example: “The fact that *every F* is *G* fails to explain why *any F* is *G* (Dretske 1977, 262). And see Armstrong’s appeal to explanation (1983: pp. 40-1 and 66ff) to counter regularity accounts.

### ***5. Arguments for, and Benefits of, Unknowable Things in Themselves***

The objection and reply make possible further clarification of the above interpretation above of Kant's position on unknowable things in themselves. Kant's assertion that there are things in themselves means that there are non-sensible inner grounds of things, or that the regress of dependence from observable features toward the inner in things proceeds beyond the bounds of sense. Can we even conceive of inner grounds without conceiving them as absolutely inner? Sure. We can, for example, conceive of the "inner constitution" (KU 20:216) of something, which we would know in knowing the underlying law-governed natural kinds of which it is composed. We desire to know such non-sensible inner grounds because reason demands that we seek ever more complete explanation by seeking underlying conditions in any regress. But the bounds of sense leave us unavoidably ignorant of the non-sensible inner grounds of things. For example, we know that there are underlying natural laws and kinds, but we cannot know what they are.

And we can further clarify, in these terms, the sense in which Kant's anti-dogmatism leaves open the possibility that the regress toward the inner in things never reaches any kind of unconditioned ground. For example, imagine knowing the laws of nature and which natural kinds figure in them. A rationalist would note further why-questions: Why are there laws? Why these laws, and not others? Kant's view leaves open the possibility that reality is such that these questions, while perfectly sensible, have no answers. Perhaps that there are laws, and what they are, is all just brute contingency—an unsupported turtle. If so, even an ideally powerful mind would find reality incomplete in its rational intelligibility. Or here is another possibility: perhaps rather there is some further ground of the laws, knowledge of which would allow explanation of why there are laws and what they are, but this ground itself is such as to raise further why questions, with further answers, raising

further questions, and so on infinitely, without reaching any unconditioned ground—turtles all the way down.

Some may worry about how Kant combines transcendental idealism with empirical realism; this is a separate topic requiring separate discussion, but it is worth noting why I do not think my proposal here makes that problem any more difficult than it already was. Granted, if anyone thinks that endorsing “transcendental idealism” just means by definition a rejection of metaphysics, then this is not compatible with my interpretation of Kant on things in themselves. But *that* approach to “transcendental idealism” raises the worry about anodyne readings, and stands in tension with all of the passages seeming to endorse the metaphysical assertion that there are non-sensible grounds. I have argued that, at least when it comes to the topic of things in themselves, we can get the interpretive advantages of such a non-metaphysical reading—we can do justice to Kant’s revolution, and the indeterminacy of his claims about things in themselves—with a metaphysical interpretation entirely free of such worries.

With respect to empirical realism, Kant allows that we can know, given the “sensation of red” for example, that there is a “property of cinnabar” in virtue of which it “excites this sensation in me” (P 4:290); we can know *that* there is such a property, but we cannot know what that property is—nor whether it provides or has an *absolutely* intrinsic basis. And we can know the relative positions of things with such properties in space and time, and spatio-temporal features of things, such as shape. And my interpretation allows our inquiry into nature to progress in this way to such knowledge of ever smaller and more hidden things, which affect us only indirectly through increasingly powerful instruments of investigation. All of this is supposed to be “appearance,” in some sense in need of interpretation. But nothing in what I have said here precludes taking all this as knowledge of public features of objects persisting when unperceived.

Nor does the account here imply that natural science, and especially the Newtonian physics of such great concern to Kant, is undercut by our ignorance of things in themselves. For we have seen that Kant seeks to establish the natural kind *matter* as a special kind of case. With respect to matter specifically there is no unknown inner constitution: we can know the forces in virtue of which matter does what it does: here we can know the laws. And, on Kant's account, matter *is* the stuff constituted by these forces.<sup>36</sup> Nor can there be in matter as such anything *absolutely* inner to remain unknown:

The inner determinations of a *substantia phaenomenon* in space ... are nothing but relations, and it is itself entirely a sum total of mere relations. (A265/B321)

Matter is *substantia phaenomenon* ... nothing absolutely but only comparatively internal, which itself in turn consists of outer relations. (A277/B333)

Here we can continually proceed to yet more comparatively inner grounds, explaining the features of wholes by uncovering the features of ever smaller parts, as discussed by Warren (2001, 53).<sup>37</sup> This explains as well why Kant so emphatically says, in the critique of Leibniz from which these last passages are drawn, that appearances are not things in themselves (e.g. A264/B320). Leibniz is supposed to imagine absolutely inner properties that are within our cognitive reach, as if they were parts of matter far too small for us ever to see them—this is to imagine something that could only be a thing in itself, as also appearance.

It is a mistake, however, to generalize from the case of matter specifically, and to conclude that Kant allows us knowledge of all inner grounds that are comparatively

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<sup>36</sup> In Friedman's terms, "attractive and repulsive forces constitute the very nature or essence of matter"

<sup>37</sup> Kant does hold open the possibility that *outside* matter there is some further external ground or reason for the features of matter: "...the transcendental object however, which might be the ground of this appearance that we call matter, is a mere something, about which we would not understand what it is even if someone could tell us" (A277/B333). But Kant asserts no knowledge here.

but not absolutely inner, or even just of all natural laws and kinds. Take Kant's example of granite. Can we explain why some granite falls to the ground? Yes, here scientific inquiry can reach a kind of stopping point in knowing the laws of the motion of all matter. But this has nothing to do with knowledge of any inner constitution distinguishing *granite* specifically—it is knowledge of *matter* as such. And Kant *also* asserts that things—now considered not as *uniformly material* but rather specifically *as distinct*—have unknown inner constitutions, in virtue of which (at least in part) they have their specifically differing features. Kant asserts that there are laws governing specifically distinct natural kinds: “[s]pecifically distinct natures ... can still be causes in infinitely many ways; and each of these ways must ... have its rule, which is a law.” Here Kant does take empirical inquiry to be limited—it cannot achieve but can only approximate its goal of knowledge necessitation laws governing specifically distinct kinds. But note that this limit is not the upshot of any particular interpretation of Kant on things in themselves; it is anyway explicitly part of Kant's view of laws and necessity: “given the constitution and the limits of our faculties of cognition we have no insight at all into this necessity” (KU 5:183). And this limit does not restrict the prospects of the Newtonian science of matter, with which Kant is so heavily concerned. Nor is it a limit of “science”—at least not in the sense that Kant reserves this term for cases, like Newtonian physics, in which knowledge of laws is supposed to be possible.<sup>38</sup>

Although Kant's arguments for his conclusions about things in themselves are beyond my scope here, it is worth mentioning why I take my reading of the conclusions to fit Kant's account of the arguments for them. Kant divides his first *Critique* arguments for this conclusion into two kinds: direct and indirect (Bxvi-xxii

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<sup>38</sup> E.g. “chemistry can be nothing more than a systematic art or experimental doctrine, but never a proper science, because its principles are merely empirical” (MAdN 4:471).

and A506/B534). The direct argument makes the case that we have access to kinds of knowledge—e.g. synthetic *a priori* knowledge of mathematics and its applicability to the objects we know about—that we could only have if the objects of our knowledge were “appearances” subject to the *a priori* forms of our sensible intuition, space and time. And, as noted above, from this notion of “appearance” it is supposed to follow directly that there are unknowable things in itself that appear.

The *indirect* argument considers the hypothesis that everything real is such that we can know it, within the bounds of sensibility fixed by the *a priori* forms of our sensible intuition, space and time. Kant argues that we cannot even *conceive* of the unconditioned in a manner consistent with this hypothesis. Since reason legitimately requires us to conceive of the unconditioned, we must reject the hypothesis, and hold that there are things in themselves beyond the reach of our knowledge. In Kant’s terms:

That which necessarily drives us to go beyond the boundaries of experience and all appearances is the *unconditioned*, which reason necessarily and with every right demands in things themselves for everything that is conditioned.

Precisely because we must conceive and cannot know the unconditioned, we must conceive of it as “present in things insofar as we are not acquainted with them, as things in themselves.” Otherwise, “the unconditioned cannot be thought at all without contradiction” (Bxx).

Again, these arguments—of course—require more discussion. But note that neither argument turns on an assertion of knowledge that there must be, for some regress of dependence, an unconditioned endpoint. Contrast the case Langton sees in Kant for the existence of substance. Further, neither case attempts to argue that reality must conform to pure concepts or reason’s ideas—both arguments turn on consideration of the *a priori* forms of our sensible intuition, space and time. Contrast the case Langton sees in Kant, proceeding—as Ameriks notes—via consideration of

receptivity but without Kant's stress on the *a priori* forms of sensibility.<sup>39</sup> For these reasons, I take my interpretation to better fit Kant's explanation of his arguments than does Langton's.

Furthermore, although I have not tried to justify here the worry that there is something wrong with anodyne accounts, on which there is no sense in we are supposed to seek or desire knowledge of unknowable things in themselves, the indirect argument would play an important role in such a justification. For the argument directly connects Kant's position on things in themselves with reason's demanding—"with every right"—that we seek knowledge "beyond the boundaries of experience." And that is why I take my interpretation to better fit the arguments than a non-metaphysical reading.

We have seen enough to appreciate as well a philosophical benefit for which Kant aims in his position of unknowable things in themselves: it is supposed to protect us against our tendency to forms of dogmatic metaphysics, redirecting our theoretical inquiry toward projects at which we can make progress. Kant argues that rationalist assertions of the existence of unconditioned grounds are one kind of dogmatic metaphysical position—one way of illegitimately overstepping our limits. But without a case for the existence of unknowable things in themselves, we are tempted by the sort of position in which "empiricism itself becomes dogmatic" (A471/B499)—tempted to conclude that the conditions of the possibility of our experience articulate as well the features of reality itself. Kant's metaphysics is supposed to promise the advantage of curbing the temptation to what he sees as excessive or dogmatic metaphysical speculation in either direction.

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<sup>39</sup> They are not "short arguments," in Ameriks' (1990) terms; Ameriks criticizes Langton on this score (2005, chapter 5).

And there is a further benefit that Kant takes to follow from his position on unknowable things in themselves, concerning freedom of the will. There is of course much controversy here, but I think that these two points should be relatively uncontroversial: First, Kant holds that to have the sort of free will required for moral responsibility would require a will with the capacity to “begin a series of occurrences entirely from itself” (A534/B562). It would be a “wretched subterfuge” to require instead only an internal psychological cause of one’s action, allowing that this might itself have further prior external causes—that would provide only “freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself” (*KpV* 5:96-7). Second, Kant argues that we cannot even in principle have theoretical knowledge of whether or not we have a will that is free in this sense.<sup>40</sup> So there can be no scientific or philosophical disproof, and the beliefs Kant takes as necessary for moral life must remain safe in this respect:

[T]he doctrine of morality asserts its place and the doctrine of nature its own, which, however, would not have occurred if criticism had not first taught us of our unavoidable ignorance in respect of the things in themselves... (Bxxix)

Langton’s reading faces a severe difficulty here. Langton reads Kant as arguing that things have absolutely inner properties that are inert; our lack of knowledge is supposed to follow from inertness. But, as Ameriks has noted, something that is inert clearly cannot “begin a series of occurrences entirely from itself”!<sup>41</sup>

On the interpretation here, by contrast, Kant’s ignorance claim can do just the job he assigns it. More specifically, my reading fits and extends the approaches to Kant on free will proposed by Wood (1984) and Watkins (2005). The basic idea is

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<sup>40</sup> Granted, there are respects in which Kant’s position continues to develop in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

<sup>41</sup> In Ameriks’ terms: freedom “must be an actual relational capacity... a capacity of the subject really to affect something other than it” (2003, 149).

that our ignorance of things in themselves leaves open this possibility: An individual agent might have a distinct nature, complete with psychological laws governing her behavior. For example, imagine environmental and psychological conditions amounting to a morally important choice in the face of temptation. For all we can know there is a law that Mary, in just these circumstances, will successfully resist temptation. Further, we cannot know why there are the laws that there are, or even if there is any reason for them at all. So, for all we can know, there is something about Mary—her will, in itself, or her “intelligible character”—in virtue of which her psychological laws are as they are. *Given* the psychological laws, then, determinism would be true: from the laws and the circumstances, the resulting behavior would follow necessarily. But since Mary herself, and nothing further, would be the ground of those laws, she might still be something that can “begin a series of occurrences entirely from itself.” In this way, empirical causality “could nevertheless be an effect of a causality that is not empirical, but rather intelligible.”<sup>42</sup> And it would also be the case that she could have done otherwise—for the laws of Mary’s psychology might have been different than they are, and they might have been different in virtue of Mary herself.

The account here of Kant on things in themselves advances this approach in two respects: First, it recognizes Kant’s thorough rejection of rationalism—his insistence on leaving open whether, beyond the bounds of sensibility, there might be unsupported turtles or turtles all the way down. We can thus explain why he need not rule out a non-sensible will that is itself is an unsupported turtle: Mary’s will could be contingent, without being contingent on some further external ground, and ultimately on the necessary being of the rationalists—allowing Mary only the freedom of a turnspit. Second, the account here makes clear how Kant defend the

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<sup>42</sup> (A544/B572; cf. Wood 1984, 86).

logical possibility of freedom while leaving *all* of the elements of the above story about Mary beyond the reach of our knowledge. On my account, Kant has principled reasons for denying us knowledge of any laws governing things as specifically distinct; so we clearly cannot know whether or not individual agents have natures that figure in any laws, let alone what the further grounds of those laws (if any) might be. So Kant is free to argue that he need not establish even that there are such laws in order to show that, no matter how science or philosophy might advance, there must always remain a logical possibility that we enjoy freedom of the will: “I need nothing more than that freedom should not contradict itself” (Bxxix).<sup>43</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

I have here proposed a general solution to the problem concerning Kant’s claims about things in themselves. The assertion that there are things in themselves is the metaphysical claim that there are non-sensible inner grounds of things. This is to say that the regress from observable features toward the inner in things proceeds farther than we can follow, given the bounds of sensibility and its *a priori* forms. Desire: We desire to know these inner grounds, or things as they are in themselves, because reason demands that we follow any regress of dependence. Ignorance: although we can know that there are non-sensible inner grounds, the bounds of sensibility prevent us from knowing what they are. We cannot, in this sense, know things as they are in themselves. Anti-dogmatism: because we cannot know how the regress proceeds once it passes the bounds of sensibility, we cannot know whether it ever

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<sup>43</sup> Wood finds it “possibly suspicious” that Kant endorses both Humean laws, reducible to or supervenient on observable events in the world, and yet also Aristotelian “causal efficacy as a property of substances or agents” in an intelligible world (1984, 88). I hold rather that Kant consistently takes the Aristotelian side concerning what it is to be a law of nature. But I see in Kant a principled account of how our science can succeed in discovering *some* of these laws of nature, within the bounds of sense, while yet leaving us ignorant in the sense relevant to freedom: We can have knowledge of laws only where a natural kind, like matter, enjoys a special connection to the *a priori* forms of our sensible intuition.

reaches any unconditioned endpoint or (more specifically) anything absolutely inner. So Kant's metaphysical assertion is indeterminate, specifically with respect to the interest that is supposed to threaten to entangle us in dogmatic metaphysics—reason's interest in the unconditioned. And Kant rejects as dogmatic at once both rationalist metaphysical assertions of the existence of the unconditioned and empiricist denials of the same.

I should emphasize again that each of the interpretive approaches discussed here retains avenues of response. With respect to the non-metaphysical reading (NM), I have noted the worry that it cannot account for any sense in which we are supposed to desire knowledge of things in themselves, so that “we are missing out on something in not knowing things as they are in themselves” (Langton 1998, 10). I have noted many passages which encourage this worry, in which Kant seems to assert that there are non-sensible grounds, denying us any *further* knowledge of them. And I have noted how Kant's indirect argument connects his position on things in themselves to reason's demand that we seek grounds or underlying conditioned, even “beyond the boundaries of experience” (Bxx). Still, proponents of NM might wish to argue that those bothered by these worries are simply mistaken. Or they might wish to argue that passages difficult for their reading represent occasions in which Kant strays from his own best philosophical insights.

The same is true of proponents of existing intrinsic nature readings, about which I have had more to say here. They may wish to argue that it is simply a mistake to worry that Kant cannot really be endorsing and modifying a rationalist metaphysics of substance. Perhaps some would argue that passages suggesting such a break with rationalist metaphysics are cases in which Kant mistakenly overstates his break with the past.

My own sense is that one kind of the motivation for these ways of entrenching stems from recent philosophical debates—debates between those who seek to reject

metaphysics and those we seek to revive all of the classic metaphysical problems, including problems concerning substance. Perhaps it is natural that both sides in recent debates should find it charitable to read Kant as having the good sense to take their favored side—even if this means also holding that Kant sometimes departs from his such good sense, and thus attributing some contradictions or incoherence to Kant. But I have argued here that we need not attribute contradiction or incoherence—not, at least, in making sense of Kant’s position on things in themselves. There is a way of reading Kant’s most basic position here as consistent and coherent. In the face of such a possibility, I cannot see why we should prefer to read him as anticipating *our* more recent debates, trying to take one stand or another in those debates, and yet also failing to do so in an entirely consistent and coherent way. It seems to me better to recognize that Kant has an unusual position of his own—a metaphysics nonetheless designed to curb what he sees as excessive or dogmatic metaphysical speculation. Insofar as this attempt strikes me as philosophically interesting, I take this to be a case in which viewing history through the lens of our current debates can hide philosophical possibilities from us, or can obscure from our view the full extent of the underlying terrain on which philosophical battles are still fought today.

In any case, there should no longer be any question of trying to justify non-metaphysical readings of Kant by arguing that any metaphysical interpretations must have the drawbacks of a phenomenalist reading, or else portray Kant as the sort of rationalist metaphysician he himself finds dogmatic. Nor should there be any question of trying to argue that, in order to avoid an “anodyne” non-metaphysical reading, we should read Kant as endorsing a version of rationalist accounts of substance and the absolutely inner. For I have shown that there is an alternative which can combine the

advantages of both sides in this debate, while sidestepping the most prominent worries about each.<sup>44</sup>

***End***

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<sup>44</sup> For help with this paper and its ancestors I thank Yuval Avnur, Andrew Chignell, Troy Cross, Michael Della Rocca, Paul Hurley, Shelly Kagan, Amy Kind, Peter Kung, Dustin Locke, Robert Pippin, Peter Ross, Matt N. Smith, Peter Thielke, Ken Winkler, and participants at works in progress meetings at Yale and the Claremont Colleges.

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