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Transcendental Idealism and Ontological Agnosticism

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Abstract

Since the initial reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* transcendental idealism has been perceived and criticized as a form of subjective idealism regarding space, time, and the objects within them, despite Kant's protestations to the contrary. In recent years, some commentators have attempted to counter this interpretation by presenting transcendental idealism as a primarily epistemological doctrine rather than a metaphysical one. Others have insisted on the metaphysical character of transcendental idealism. Within these debates, Kant's rejection of *ontology* (of the kind exemplified by Wolff and Baumgarten) has received comparatively little treatment, although it is often acknowledged. The present essay seeks to contribute to the secondary literature on Kant by offering an analysis of this claim and elaborating its consequences for transcendental idealism. This will take the form of a critical examination of transcendental idealism's supposed *ontological agnosticism*—that is, its disavowal of any ontological claims. The overall conclusion is that Kant's rejection of ontology is deeply problematic, and to such an extent that it may be necessary to reconsider the possibilities of defending transcendental idealism as a purely epistemological, non-ontological doctrine.

Since the initial reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, transcendental idealism has been perceived and criticized as a form of subjective idealism regarding space, time, and the objects within them, despite Kant's protestations to the contrary. In recent years, some commentators (e.g. Collins 1999; Beiser 2002; Allison 2004) have attempted to counter this interpretation by presenting transcendental idealism as a primarily epistemological doctrine rather than a metaphysical one. They have been opposed by contemporaries (e.g. Guyer 1987; Langton 1998; Westphal 2004) who, in one way or another, insist on the metaphysical character of transcendental idealism. Within these debates, however, Kant's rejection

of *ontology* (of the kind exemplified by Wolff and Baumgarten) has received comparatively little treatment, although it is often acknowledged. The present essay seeks to contribute to the secondary literature on Kant by offering an analysis of this claim and elaborating its consequences for transcendental idealism. This will take the form of a critical examination of transcendental idealism's supposed *ontological agnosticism*—i.e. its disavowal of any ontological claims. I find this approach valuable because I think that an assessment of Kant's rejection of ontology is particularly relevant to the question of how transcendental idealism should be interpreted. However, I should stress that, although I will provide an ontologically agnostic interpretation of transcendental idealism, my primary aim here is not to defend an interpretation of transcendental idealism but rather to demonstrate the problems that arise when transcendental idealism is interpreted as a non-ontological doctrine in light of Kant's rejection of ontology.

In the first section I present this ontologically agnostic interpretation of transcendental idealism, emphasizing the manner in which the distinction between appearances and things in themselves informs Kant's understanding of how transcendental idealism differs from any ontological position. An important part of this interpretation is that it allows appearances to be understood non-ontologically, so that transcendental idealism can also be clearly distinguished from subjective idealism. Next I show how the foregoing ontologically agnostic interpretation presupposes the actual (as opposed to the merely thinkable) existence of things in themselves, which generates the problem of how that presupposition can be justified. The problem of how things in themselves can be known to exist given the strictures of transcendental idealism—which I will hereafter call 'the problem of the thing in itself'—is indeed an old and much-discussed issue, but here it is subordinated to, and treated within the context of, a different problem: the viability of Kant's rejection of ontology. Thus I will here consider various options for resolving the problem of the thing in itself but only ones that could do so in a way that secures the ontological agnosticism of transcendental idealism (and specifically the non-ontological status of appearances) as just set out. I argue that all of these options are inadequate to the task and that the outstanding problem of the thing in itself seriously threatens the legitimacy of transcendental idealism as a non-ontological doctrine. Because of its non-ontological interpretation of the appearance/thing in itself distinction, one might think that Henry Allison's two-aspect view has the resources to differently interpret and defend the ontological agnosticism of transcendental idealism. However, I will argue that it does not, because it simply

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regenerates the same problems under a different guise. Finally, I consider two possible ways of understanding the ontological agnosticism of transcendental idealism that would not presuppose the actual existence of things in themselves and argue that neither of them are adequate to the task. The overall conclusion of the essay, then, is that Kant's rejection of ontology is deeply problematic, and to such an extent that it may be necessary to reconsider the possibilities of defending transcendental idealism as a purely epistemological, non-ontological doctrine.

1. Transcendental Idealism and Ontology

In Kant's lecture courses on metaphysics we find clear and succinct expressions of his conception of ontology. There, ontology is defined as 'the science … which is concerned with the more general properties of all things' (Kant 2002: 295; *TP1*[1] 2.309) and 'the science of the properties of all things in general' (Kant 1997: 140; *LM*[2] 29.784), and it is said that 'Ontology thus deals with things in general, it abstracts from everything particular' (Kant 1997: 307; 28.541) and 'Ontology … contains the summation of all our pure concepts that we can have *a priori* of things' (Kant 1997: 308; 28.541–2). Similarly, Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*, which Kant often used as the textbook for his metaphysics courses, defines ontology as 'the science of the general predicates of a thing' (Baumgarten 2009: 89), while the second chapter of Wolff's *Rational Thoughts on God, the World and the Soul of Human Beings, Also All Things in General*, in which Wolff sets out the basic principles of his ontology, is titled 'On the First Principles of Our Cognition and of All Things in General' (Wolff 2009: 9).[3] In each of these characterizations of ontology we are given that discipline's distinctive object of concern: *things*. More specifically: that which pertains to things in the most general fashion, and thus 'things in general'. This already enables us to make sense of Kant's famous claim to have displaced ontology by 'humbling' the categories in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. No longer describing the general character of things and allowing cognitive access to them (i.e. no longer functioning as *ontological* concepts), the categories become mere functions of synthesis in the human understanding's comprehension of the intuitional manifold, and so the Transcendental Analytic's 'principles are merely principles of the exposition of appearances, and the proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine … must give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding' (Kant 1998: 345; *CPR*[4] A247/B303). On this interpretation, then, the crux of Kant's rejection of ontology is not so much a rejection of the notion that

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we can have cognitive access to a certain kind of thing—for example, something like a Platonic essence or Leibnizian monad—although that is of course an important facet of his critique of rationalism. Instead, it would be more precise to say that Kant's rejection of ontology is a rejection of the notion that the *a priori* conditions of cognition afford access to *things as such*.[5]

Furthermore, if the *a priori* conditions of cognition do not afford access to things as such, then Kant must have some way of explaining how that to which these conditions *do* afford access—i.e. appearances—are *not* things and thus do not entail a commitment to any ontology. Appearances must in some sense be ontologically *insignificant*. They must have some sort of *non-ontological* status. It is here that the appearance/thing in itself distinction becomes crucial. My contention is that transcendental idealism can only guarantee that appearances have non-ontological status by emphasizing their *epistemic* significance and distinguishing them from things in themselves, which, as *things*,[6] have ontological status. That is, appearances (regardless of whether these be understood 'substantively' or 'adverbially'[7]) are just *how things appear*, which means they are not things in their own right but rather just a part of *how things are known*, whereas things in themselves are simply *things as such* (and 'in themselves' just signifies their independence from the subjective conditions of cognition[8]). In other words, the appearance/thing in itself distinction is a distinction between *things as they are known* and *things as they are*. Hence it could be said that the significance of Kant's arguments for transcendental idealism in this respect is that their affirmation of knowledge of appearances and denial of knowledge of things in themselves differentiates transcendental idealism (a theory of knowledge) from any ontology (a theory of things in general). More specifically, Kant's restriction of the objective validity of the categories, space, and time to appearances separates our cognitive relation to objects from the being of things, so that corresponding to this divorce of epistemology from ontology is the distinction between an *object*[9] (that which is *known*) and a *thing*[10] (that which *is*). Thus while the intuitional manifold of sensibility alone provides human cognition with content, it only presents the way in which we are affected rather than things as they are in themselves since sensations are received in a spatiotemporal form that is the contribution of the constitution of human sensibility instead of that which affects us. Accordingly, when the understanding constitutes objects of knowledge by categorially determining the intuitional manifold, it is synthesizing how things appear under the subjective conditions of intuition instead

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of representing things as they are. Hence Kant (1998: 511; CPR A492/B520) claims that 'Space itself, … together with time, and, with both, all appearances, are *not things*, but rather nothing but representations'.[11]

In short, whereas Kant understands ontology to be concerned with the possibility of things, the distinguishing feature of his transcendental idealism is its more modest concern with the possibility of *cognitive experience*. Thus even concepts like existence or actuality, which would otherwise seem to be the most obviously ontologically significant, are recast in terms of cognitive experience, as the second Postulate of Empirical Thinking in General makes clear: 'That which is connected with the material conditions of experience (of sensation) is *actual*' (Kant 1998: 321; *CPR* A218/B266). Accordingly, for Kant, claims made about the 'actuality' of 'objects' are *ultimately* claims about cognitive experience (whose conditions of possibility, let us not forget, are 'at the same time conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*': Kant 1998: 283; A158/B197) rather than ontological claims, even if they superficially look like the latter. The same goes for the rest of the categories, which Kant has critically appropriated from ontology in exactly this manner. Therefore, on this interpretation, transcendental idealism, as a doctrine exclusively about how things are known (i.e. as they appear), and justified by arguments which refuse such knowledge any traction on things in themselves, is free from any ontological commitments since its denial of knowledge of things in themselves amounts to an agnosticism about how things are. In other words, appearances have a *purely epistemic, non-ontological status*[12] since they reflect transcendental idealism's disavowal of any claims concerning things as they are. This is what constitutes transcendental idealism's *ontological agnosticism*. Importantly, this is also what allows transcendental idealism to be distinguished from something like Berkeley's subjective idealism, for the fact that transcendental idealism restricts *knowledge* to appearances does not mean that it restricts *all things* to appearances:[13]

> it would be an absurdity for us, with respect to any object, to hope to cognize more than belongs to a possible experience of it, or for us, with respect to any thing that we assume not to be an object of possible experience, to claim even the least cognition for determining it according to its nature as it is in itself … But … it would be an even greater absurdity for us not to allow any things in themselves at all, or for us to want to pass off our experience for the only possible way of cognizing things … and so to want to

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> take principles of the possibility of experience for universal conditions on things in themselves. (Kant 2004: 102; *P* 4: 350–1)
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> Since we cannot make the special conditions of sensibility into conditions of the possibility of things, but only of their appearances, we can well say that space comprehends all things that may appear to us externally, but not all things in themselves, whether they be intuited or not, or by whatever subject they may be intuited. (Kant 1998: 160; *CPR*, A27/B43)[14]

2. Ontological Agnosticism and the Problem of the Thing in itself

It is only in light of the foregoing interpretation of the appearance/thing in itself distinction, I submit, that transcendental idealism can explain the non-ontological status of appearances and justify Kant's rejection of ontology. However, the primary contention of this section is that this achievement is in vain. For this ontologically agnostic interpretation of transcendental idealism requires things in themselves to be the bearers of being so that appearances are not, and now there is a much more serious problem: the non-ontological status of appearances depends on the *actual existence* of things in themselves. This is because one cannot claim that appearances are *just* how things appear without presupposing that there is *more* to things than how they appear. If that presupposition is not justified, the additional possibilities are left open that appearances are all that there is or that appearances are just not the appearances of any other things (which may or may not exist), in which cases appearances cannot be contrasted with things in themselves in a way that secures the non-ontological status of the former.

It is true that the notion that there is nothing more to things than their perceptual appearance is central to Berkeleyan idealism and, as we saw in the preceding section, transcendental idealism distinguishes itself from Berkeleyan idealism insofar as the latter mistakes a condition of cognitive experience for a condition of things in general and dogmatically denies the existence of things beyond perception.[15] However, this point by itself just reproaches Berkeley for hastily dismissing the *possible* existence of things in themselves, for the denial that the conditions of cognitive experience are conditions of things in general is equally consistent with the possible *nonexistence* of things in themselves (or their possible separate existence from appearances). In other words, the problem here is that, although Kant's distinction between the conditions of cognitive experience and the conditions of things in general may distinguish him from Berkeley, for whom the objects of sense-experience definitely have ontological status, it is not enough to validate the claim that Kantian

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appearances definitely *do not* have ontological status. Kant could not, for instance, flatly claim, and without reference to things in themselves, that in transcendental idealism appearances have non-ontological status because they are only considered in terms of their epistemic function, for in this respect that would merely mark a nominal difference between Kantian appearances and Berkeleyan ideas (and let us not forget that the latter have an epistemic function too). For if it happened to be the case that things in themselves did not exist, then something like Berkeley's ontology would be true (though unverifiable), and Kantian appearances would be things in general. Only the actual existence of things in themselves could rule this out, and only appearances being how these things appear, I contend, could justify the claim that appearances have non-ontological status.[16]

Clearly, then, Kant's conception of the 'negative' noumenon as a limiting concept will not suffice to secure the non-ontological status of appearances either.[17] This is because this concept is only necessary to remind us that we are not justified in assuming our sensibility extends to all things there are, so that we cannot deny the possibility of things beyond human sensibility or faculties of intuition different from our own.[18] That is to say, it is simply a reflection of the difference between transcendental idealism's conditions of possible experience and ontology's conditions of things in general:[19]

> The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a *boundary concept*, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use. But it is nevertheless not invented arbitrarily, but is rather connected with the limitation of sensibility, yet without being able to posit anything positive outside of the domain of the latter. (Kant 1998: 350; *CPR* A255/B310–11[20])

Therefore, since the necessity of thinking noumena is not intended to affirm the existence or nonexistence of things beyond human sensibility, it does not conflict with the (unknowable) possibility of either. For the same reason, it cannot guarantee that appearances have no ontological status.

In short, it seems as though the non-ontological status of appearances can only be secured if ontological status is located *elsewhere*. However, as transcendental idealism's earliest critics famously protested,[21] it is exactly this location of an 'elsewhere' in things in themselves that Kant deprives himself of the right to identify in virtue of his restriction of the objective validity of the categories to appearances. For example, claiming things in themselves actually exist uses the category of existence beyond its domain of legitimate application, while inferring their existence

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as causes of appearances does the same with the category of causality as well (and Kant does both[22]). In the A-edition Fourth Paralogism Kant himself casts suspicion on the latter inference by conceding the point to scepticism,[23] and Hume had already argued that the confinement of knowable objects to sense-experience leaves one with little room to manœuvre in this dilemma.[24] Is there, then, a way for transcendental idealism to establish the existence of things in themselves in a manner that secures its ontological agnosticism without generating problems of this magnitude? In the remainder of this section I will argue that there is not.

At many points Kant seems to insist that the actual existence of things in themselves is already established since it is entailed by the very notion of appearances. The basic argument is apparently that our sensory representations, as 'appearances', *presuppose* things in themselves as their thinkable, if not directly cognizable, ground, because 'otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears' (Kant 1998: 115; *CPR* Bxxvi–xxvii). The *Prolegomena* contains passages along these lines, such as the following: 'appearances actually do relate to something distinct from them (and so entirely heterogeneous), in that appearances always presuppose a thing in itself, and so provide notice of such a thing, whether or not it can be cognized more closely' (Kant 2004: 106; *P* 4: 355) and

> if 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, but only with its appearance, i.e., with the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. Therefore the understanding, just by the fact that it accepts appearances, also admits to the existence of things in themselves, and to that extent we can say that the representation of such beings as underlie the appearances, hence of mere intelligible beings, is not merely permitted but is also inevitable. (Kant 2004: 66; 4: 314–15)

However, it is rather obvious that Kant cannot claim that things in themselves exist on the dual basis of our acquaintance with appearances and an analysis of the meaning of the word 'appearance' without begging the question. For if things in themselves are indeed logically implied by the concept of appearance, then Kant must first explain why 'appearance' is the appropriate term for the sensory representations given in sensibility. To do that, he must already know that these sensory

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representations are the appearances of things in themselves, but that is precisely what was supposed to be concluded by these means. If it is not already established that sensibility gives appearances of things in themselves, why call these representations 'appearances' if this term logically implies things in themselves as their ground? If there is no such logical implication, then we are back to square one. Lorne Falkenstein (1995: 325) apparently endorses this kind of argument when, distinguishing Kant's idealism from Berkeley's, he claims that for Kant 'the very notion of an appearance carries with it the thought of something of which it appears, so that things in themselves can at least be thought (indeed, known to actually exist), though nothing more can be known of them'.[25]

However, it is perhaps Kant's own interpretation of the consequences of his arguments for transcendental idealism that is the origin of such problematic reasoning insofar as he presents an unwarranted assumption of the existence of things in themselves in the guise of a restriction of knowledge to 'things as they appear' (i.e. appearances). In other words, Kant's articulations of the results of his arguments for transcendental idealism *insinuate* the actual existence of things in themselves by concluding that we can only know 'things as they appear' rather than 'things as they are in themselves' (much as the interpretation of transcendental idealism given in the preceding section does). This gives the misleading impression that the notion of 'appearance' sanctioned by these arguments legitimizes the affirmation of existent things in themselves as the necessary correlate of appearances. For example: 'We have therefore wanted to say that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us' (Kant 1998: 168; *CPR* A42/B59) and

> Sensibility and its field, namely that of appearances, are themselves limited by the understanding, in that they do not pertain to things in themselves, but only to the way in which, on account of our subjective constitution, things appear to us. This was the result of the entire Transcendental Aesthetic, and it also follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word 'appearance' must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our

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> sensibility (on which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something, i.e., an object independent of sensibility. (Kant 1998: 348; A251–2)[26]

Unfortunately, this simply does not follow from Kant's arguments for transcendental idealism. In such passages there seems to be an equivocation between two possible meanings of 'appearance': (1) sensory representation caused by, or somehow related to, a thing in itself and (2) sensory representation full-stop. Kant's prioritization of the first sense of 'appearance' here to affirm the existence of things in themselves is unjustified. This is because, strictly speaking, the arguments for transcendental idealism only conclude that space, time, and the categories are objectively valid with respect to sensory representations ('appearance' in the second sense)—such that objects of knowledge are constituted by the human cognitive apparatus—and invalid with respect to things that exist independently of these representations (things in themselves)—such that those things *may* exist though we can know nothing more about them. In other words, they conclude that we cannot know anything beyond sense-experience, and thus we cannot know things in themselves. They do not license the conclusion that sensory representations must be the appearances of things in themselves ('appearance' in the first sense). Thus they cannot legitimize 'appearance' as the appropriate term for these representations *if* the concept of appearance logically implies things in themselves. In short, while sensory representations being the appearances of things in themselves may be logically *consistent* with the arguments for transcendental idealism, it is not *established* by them, and the latter is what is needed.[27] (For the same reason, the arguments for transcendental idealism cannot be taken as the grounds for Kant's rejection of ontology as it is interpreted above, for if they do not establish that appearances are just how things appear then they do not establish that appearances have no ontological status.)

On the other hand, if Kant's argument about appearances presupposing things in themselves is about ontological dependence rather than logical implication, then it would seem to be a *non-sequitur*. That is, if it is argued that appearances cannot exist on their own because they are sensory representations, and so must have things in themselves as their ground, then the possibility that the transcendental subject instead functions as that ground would have to be eliminated first (which would require ruling out the possibility of unconscious subjective sources of appearances[28]). Rae Langton avoids this difficulty by contending that for Kant objects of sensibility are not mere sensory

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representations but in fact the transcendentally real relational properties of things in themselves,[29] while the latter are metaphysical substances which also possess intrinsic properties.[30] Accordingly, given that outer sense represents nothing but external relations, and external relations allegedly presuppose relata to bear them[31] but do not supervene on their intrinsic properties,[32] it is possible for Kant to legitimately claim *that* there are things in themselves while denying knowledge of *what* they are (i.e. their intrinsic properties).[33] Furthermore, this relation of ontological dependence would explain why Kant thinks appearances presuppose the existence of things in themselves.[34] However, Langton's methodology provides grounds for doubting whether her solution to the problem of the thing in itself is of any help to *transcendental idealism* in the end.[35] Moreover, even if the argument Langton proposes for the existence of things in themselves works, it does not establish the non-ontological status of appearances (and to be fair, that was never her concern): as relational properties of substance, the appearances of Langton's Kant are explicitly ontological.

Even though Langton as well as Kenneth Westphal endorse metaphysical conceptions of appearances, their respective treatments of the problem of the thing in itself have one thing in common that could be used to argue for the existence of things in themselves in order to justify a non-ontological interpretation of appearances. That is an attempt to defend Kant's affirmation of the existence of things in themselves and their correlation with appearances on the basis of an interpretation of the legitimate use of certain unschematized categories.[36] This involves emphasizing the cognitive indeterminacy of the affirmation of the mere existence of things in themselves, in contrast with the cognitive determinacy that the schematized categories provide[37] or knowledge of things as they are in themselves would afford.[38] It is then apparently concluded that since affirming the existence of things in themselves—whether as the bearers of intrinsic properties (Langton) or the sources of sensory affection (Westphal)—does not involve the determinacy of empirical cognition or knowledge of intrinsic properties, it is permitted within use of the unschematized categories.[39] However, I am not quite convinced that this conclusion follows, for the 'indeterminacy' at issue here seems equivocal, and neglect of the category of existence may be to blame.[40] That is, while affirming *that* there are things in themselves without specifying *what* they are would be making a largely indeterminate claim about things, it is still *more* determinate than legitimate use of the unschematized categories would allow since it is still a claim about *actually existent* things instead of merely thinkable ones. In other

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words, it may not have the specificity that empirical cognition or ascription of determinate intrinsic properties has, but it is still a positive existence claim about some particular things, even if nothing more is said about them. This is clearly more than merely thinking the possible existence of things in themselves, or their possible characteristics via the logical content of certain categories. In short, I think it is determinate enough to be closer to what Westphal (2004: 52) calls the 'transphenomenal "application" of concepts Kant proscribes' (i.e. 'the purported subsumption of unsensed particulars under nonschematized concepts in determinate, theoretically cognitive judgments') than one of the 'legitimate ways of identifying particulars' other than empirical cognition. On the other hand, Westphal proposes a sophisticated account of transcendental and 'epistemic' reflection as one of these 'other legitimate ways of identifying particulars' and argues that Kant can legitimately speak of noumenal causes of sensory affection since such 'causes' are postulated at the transcendental level of discourse about the conditions of cognition (as opposed to the empirical level of cognition itself).[41] Nevertheless, I am not yet convinced that this is fully consistent with legitimate use of the unschematized category of existence or, even if it is, whether it can eliminate the possibility of unconscious subjective sources of sensory representations.[42]

Finally, perhaps it could be argued that Kant's practical philosophy resolves the theoretical philosophy's difficulties with things in themselves, and that it could be mobilized to guarantee the non-ontological status of appearances as the appearances of things in themselves. Now whether Kant's conception of noumena in the practical philosophy should be interpreted ontologically is certainly debatable, but for the sake of the argument let us assume it should be. Suppose we are justified in holding that things in themselves (or at least some of them) are free noumenal souls. I think this would still fall short of establishing that appearances are the appearances of things in themselves, because the latter requires establishing that *every* appearance we cognize empirically is the appearance of a thing in itself (or multiple things in themselves, as the case may be). In this case, that would mean guaranteeing that every appearance is the appearance of a noumenal soul, such that appearances always correspond to such souls (though the reverse correspondence need not hold). What resources, though, does Kantianism possess that could ever assure this correspondence? How could transcendental idealism ever be justified in holding that *every* appearance—i.e. not just human actions but inanimate, non-human objects and events as well—is grounded in a noumenal soul? I do not see how it

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could, and for that reason I do not think the practical philosophy can secure the non-ontological status of appearances either. The same difficulties would arise, I think, if we considered the possibility that any kind of 'subject in itself' is the ground of appearances.[43]

To summarize thus far, the actual existence of things in themselves, with appearances interpreted as how these things appear, could secure the non-ontological status of appearances and substantiate Kant's rejection of ontology. Transcendental idealism, though, does not have the resources to establish the actual existence of things in themselves. Furthermore, to the extent that transcendental idealism deprives itself of the resources to do this by restricting the objective validity of the category of existence to appearances, the ontologically agnostic version of transcendental idealism outlined above culminates in self-refutation: appearances have non-ontological status only if transcendental idealism presupposes an ontological claim (concerning the actual existence of things in themselves) whose legitimacy should have been foreclosed by the very rejection of ontology that transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism was supposed to have exemplified in the first place. If this is correct, then it seems as though transcendental idealism must grant the possibility that appearances have ontological status and relinquish the ontological agnosticism described above if it is to avoid self-refutation.

3. The Problem of Allison's Two-Aspect View

Nevertheless, since the foregoing interpretation and problematization of transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism depend on an ontological conception of things in themselves, it is worth considering whether Henry Allison's two-aspect view of transcendental idealism, which proposes a non-ontological conception of appearances *and* things in themselves, has the resources to provide a less problematic account of transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism. Indeed, Allison (2004: p. xv) contends that Kant's anthropocentric reformulation of the standards of objective knowledge entails that 'transcendental idealism is grounded in a reflection on the *a priori* conditions of human cognition … rather than, as in other forms of idealism (for example, Berkeley's), on the ontological status of what is known'. At first glance, at least, it seems as though the two-aspect view could distinguish transcendental idealism from subjective idealism, secure the non-ontological status of appearances, and substantiate Kant's rejection of ontology without risking self-refutation. I will argue here, however, that this is not the case.

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For Allison, the crucial mistake of previous interpretations of transcendental idealism is to take the distinction between appearances and things in themselves as an ontological distinction between two kinds or classes of entities:

> According to this view, … the transcendental distinction between appearances and things in themselves is construed as holding between two types of object: appearances or 'mere representations', understood as the contents of particular minds, and things in themselves, understood as a set of transcendentally real but unknowable things, which somehow underlie or 'ground' these appearances. Such a dualistic picture is easy to criticize, since it combines a phenomenalism regarding the object of human cognition with the postulation of a set of extra-mental entities, which, in terms of that very theory, are unknowable. (Allison 1996: 3)

As an alternative, Allison (2004: 16) proposes that 'appearances and things in themselves be understood as holding between two ways of *considering things* (as they appear and as they are in themselves)'. That is, this non-ontological reading of the appearance/thing in itself distinction consists in construing the latter as two 'ways of considering' one class of things rather than indicators of the respective natures of two classes of things. Naturally, considering things 'as they appear' means considering them 'as they are in relation to the subjective conditions of human cognition', while considering the same things 'as they are in themselves' means considering them 'independently of these conditions' (Allison 1996: 3).

It could be said that Allison's two-aspect view is something of a generalization of Kant's account of transcendental reflection in On the Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena, for things in themselves so conceived, much like noumena in the negative sense, only function conceptually 'at the metalevel of philosophical reflection' (Allison 1996: 3) rather than ontologically. Because of this, Allison argues that the two-aspect view does not entail any inconsistency for transcendental idealism. Considering things independently of the subjective conditions of human cognition is not knowledge of them, nor does it require positing some additional class of things beyond what we know to exist via such subjective conditions. Consequently, 'the temptation to worry about the *existence* of things in themselves disappears once it is recognized that Kant is not primarily concerned with a separate class of entities,

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which, unlike appearances, would supposedly "be there" even if there were no finite cognizers' (Allison 2004: 51).[44]

However, unlike negative noumena, the two-aspect view does more than simply countenance the mere possibility of modes of intuition different from human sensibility or the possible existence of things beyond human sensibility. This is because Allison's claim that the appearance/thing in itself distinction demarcates two ways of considering things rather than two classes of things concentrates the concepts of 'appearance' and 'thing in itself' on *one* class of things—i.e. those that are considered under the two aspects. The crucial question, though, is this: given an object known via the subjective conditions of human cognition, what are Allison's grounds for considering *this very same object* independently of those conditions? If such an object cannot be reduced to 'mere representations',[45] surely it makes sense to consider it independently of sensibility only if there is something of that object that actually *is* independent of sensibility. Otherwise, what is it that is being considered 'in itself'? To his credit, Allison is keenly aware of this question, but unfortunately his answer to it is inadequate. As he candidly summarizes the matter:

> we can agree with Kant that it would be absurd to suggest that there can be an appearance without something that appears. … however, this does not license the conclusion that what appears is also something in itself distinct from what it appears to be. Why could not its appearance, suitably qualified to include ideal conditions, a multiplicity of perspectives and the like, be all that there is to it, so that there remains nothing left over to be considered 'as it is in itself'? (Allison 2004: 55)

To this question Allison offers the following response:

> The short answer is that such a position amounts to a Berkeleian-style idealism or phenomenalism … Indeed, if Kant's idealism is understood in this way (as it usually is), the problem of the thing in itself becomes intractable; for … one is then reduced either to a highly questionable causal inference or an obvious non sequitur. (Ibid.)

Now, this much is clear: there must be something more to things than how they appear for the two-aspect view to even get off the ground. For example, it is said that under the two-aspect view of transcendental idealism 'we know real, mind independent objects (although not

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considered as they are in themselves)' and so 'the position is not phenomenalistic' (Allison 1996: 3), and that like the transcendental realist 'Kant likewise assumes' that 'things exist independently of their relation to the condition of human sensibility' (Allison 2004: 24–5). Without these things that exist independently of the subjective conditions of cognition Allison has no basis to secure the non-ontological status of appearances, for it is now evident that the latter are only without ontological status if they are actually these 'subject-independent things'[46] considered in a certain way. In other words, 'appearance' and 'thing in itself' can be interpreted 'adverbially' as two aspects only if there is something 'substantive' to consider under those two aspects.[47] This brings to light the fact that the two-aspect view implicitly presupposes an ontological thesis concerning the actual existence of these subject-independent things, for without such things there is nothing to consider 'as it is in itself'. Whereas transcendental idealism as presented in the first section attempts to secure the non-ontological status of appearances by emphasizing the ontological status of things in themselves, Allison attempts to secure the non-ontological status of appearances and things in themselves by tacitly shifting the burden of ontological status onto these subject-independent things. Consequently, these subject-independent things are just Allison's proxies for the things in themselves of other interpretations of transcendental idealism, including the one presented above.

The real problem, however, is that Allison simply *assumes* the actual existence of these subject-independent things instead of arguing for it. He claims objects of knowledge exist independently from the subjective conditions of cognition but fails to explain how this is justified.[48] Therefore, by assuming the actual existence of subject-independent things and restricting their knowability to 'how they appear', Allison simply regenerates the problem of the thing in itself (even though he has changed the meaning of the term 'thing in itself'), which plagued the very metaphysical interpretations of transcendental idealism his two-aspect view was supposed to correct and replace. Furthermore, as a non-ontological interpretation of transcendental idealism, the two-aspect view suffers from a problem of self-refutation very similar to the one discussed at the end of my second section: appearances and things in themselves have non-ontological status only if the two-aspect view presupposes an ontological thesis (concerning the actual existence of subject-independent things) that should have been eliminated by the two-aspect view's non-ontological conception of things in themselves. In other words, Allison's version of transcendental idealism is dependent upon that which it claims to overcome, because it has to presuppose an

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ontological thesis in order to misunderstand itself as an 'alternative to ontology' (cf. Allison 2004: 98). In sum, whether things in themselves are conceived non-ontologically *à la* Allison or ontologically as above, there is in both cases an unjustified ontological thesis concerning things that exist independently from the subjective conditions of cognition that is used to explain the non-ontological status of appearances.

4. Ontological Agnosticism without Things in Themselves

In light of the difficulties with transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism discussed so far, it is worth considering the possibility that there is no need for the actual existence of things in themselves (or Allison's subject-independent things) to explain the non-ontological status of appearances or to justify Kant's rejection of ontology. For a start, perhaps one could simply appeal to the infinite divisibility of appearances without having to refer to anything beyond them. The argument could be formulated as follows. Since space and time are infinitely divisible, and appearances are infinitely divisible since they are in space and time, appearances have no simple parts from which they could be composed. Hence as purely external relations they are ultimately 'nothing' at all: there is nothing ontologically substantial about them, and thus there is nothing in them that could constitute their 'being'.[49] This proposal has the benefit of being agnostic about the existence of things in themselves: they may exist, in which case they may or may not be the causes of appearances, and appearances may or may not be like the relational properties of substances Langton seizes on (though we could never know); or they may not exist, in which case some sort of ontological nihilism might be true (though unverifiable), for 'all that there is' (excepting, perhaps, transcendental subjectivity) would ultimately be nothing, with the notion of 'something' rendered illusory if convenient, much like perceived composites are in mereological nihilism. It is probably true that even the mere possibility of some kind of ontological nihilism being true would have been hard for Kant to accept,[50] but that does not mean it should not be accepted. Perhaps this would also require revision of the division of the concept of nothing in Kant (1998: 382–3; CPR A290–2/B346–9) as well as the second Antinomy. Nevertheless, these grounds for establishing the non-ontological status of appearances are clearly *not* epistemic grounds but much more like metaphysical ones. In this case, then, the non-ontological status of appearances would not be a consequence of their purely epistemic status, and Kant's rejection of ontology would be no closer to validation. Furthermore, the argument depends on Kant's premise that whatever is in

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space and time must be infinitely divisible since space and time are infinitely divisible—a supposition that, as I think Falkenstein (1995) has convincingly argued, is undermined by its failure to exclude the extensionless physical monads of Kant's own pre-Critical *Physical Monadology*.[51]

There remains another, perhaps more obvious possibility for explaining the ontological agnosticism of transcendental idealism without reference to actually existent things in themselves. At the beginning of my second section I pointed out that taking transcendental idealism as a doctrine regarding the conditions of cognitive experience rather than the conditions of things in general does not by itself entail a commitment to the existence or nonexistence of things in themselves since it is equally compatible with both, and that if things in themselves did not exist appearances would be things in general (though unverifiably so). Accordingly, at the end of that section I suggested that transcendental idealism might have to accept the possibility that appearances have ontological status if it is to avoid self-refutation. In the remainder of this section, however, I would like to consider the possibility that the ontological agnosticism of transcendental idealism could actually be conceived along these lines.

Let us assume that the transcendental idealist concedes the point that the non-ontological status of appearances cannot be guaranteed but maintains that the merely possible existence of things in themselves is enough to ground genuine ontological agnosticism. In this case, the transcendental idealist would have to admit that we *might* have cognitive access to things in general, but no more than s/he affirms that we *might not*: maybe appearances are all that there is, and thus things in general, and maybe appearances are just how things are known. Transcendental idealism may not be able to establish that appearances are not things in general, but it is equally unable to establish that they are. Now, perhaps it could be said that it is precisely this *uncertainty about things in general*—i.e. this uncertainty as to whether they are appearances or things in themselves (or even both or neither)—that constitutes transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism.

Let us see whether this revised version of transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism can withstand scrutiny. Under this revision, transcendental idealism abandons any commitments to the existence or nonexistence of things in themselves as well as the ontological or non-ontological status of appearances. Presumably, everything else (e.g. the Transcendental Aesthetic's subjectivization of space and time as *a priori* forms of intuition, the Transcendental Analytic's account of synthetic

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objectivity, the Transcendental Dialectic's critique of rationalist metaphysics, etc.) would remain intact, so let us return our attention to the status of appearances. Transcendental idealism (with or without the above revision) is committed to the existence of appearances insofar as it holds that *there are* appearances. More exactly, it is committed to the existence of sensations that are synthesized as intensive magnitudes,[52] spatio-temporal forms that are synthesized as extensive magnitudes,[53] permanent perceptions that are synthesized as substances, sequential perceptions that are synthesized as causes and effects, and simultaneous perceptions that are synthesized as mutually interacting substances.[54] In light of this fact, let us re-examine the basis for transcendental idealism's revised ontological agnosticism, its uncertainty about things in general. As we saw just above, this agnosticism and uncertainty result from transcendental idealism's inability to determine whether or not appearances are things in general. Transcendental idealism is unable to make this determination because it does not have the resources to establish that appearances are just how things are known (in which case appearances would have non-ontological status, as in the first section above), just as it does not have the resources to establish that appearances *are* things in general (in which case appearances would have ontological status, as in subjective idealism). It does not have the resources to do the former because of the problem of the thing in itself, and it does not have the resources to do the latter because it cannot rule out the possibility that there are things in themselves. Indeed, it could be said that the reasons it does not have the resources to do either stem from the same source: because the category of existence—which, to be exact, is the category of 'existence-nonexistence'[55]—is only objectively valid with respect to appearances, transcendental idealism cannot say whether there are or are not things beyond appearances.

The fact that transcendental idealism cannot *deny* the existence of things in themselves is most important for this revised ontological agnosticism, though, because this is what permits the transcendental idealist to refrain from conceding that appearances actually are things in general, despite not being able to deny that they actually are. Again, s/he avoids conceding that appearances are things in general because s/he cannot eliminate the *possibility* that things in themselves exist. S/he cannot find any reason for the existence of things in themselves to be *impossible*. Furthermore, since the category of existence is only objectively valid with respect to appearances, I presume that the transcendental idealist could make these claims about the possible existence of things in themselves only by using the unschematized category of existence (and perhaps the other unschematized categories of modality as well).

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If this is the case, then the kind of possibility at issue here should be *logical* possibility, for ontological possibility would entail illegitimate use of the categories and cognitive possibility would concern appearances. Therefore, we could say: the transcendental idealist cannot deny the existence of things in themselves because there is *no contradiction* in the notion that things in themselves exist.[56] By the same token, s/he does not have to concede that appearances are things in general because there is no contradiction in the notion that appearances have non-ontological status as how things in themselves appear. In short, the ultimate basis of this revised version of ontological agnosticism is that the transcendental idealist can refrain from conceding that appearances are things in general because there remains *the logical possibility that things in general could be other than appearances* (i.e. things in themselves).

Now we have a fuller understanding of this revised version of transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism. Despite transcendental idealism's commitment to the existence of appearances, it is the lingering logical possibility, the mere non-contradictoriness of the notion that things in general are other than appearances, and in such a way that appearances are just how these things are known, that grounds transcendental idealism's uncertainty about things in general and vindicates Kant's rejection of ontology. However, insofar as this clarifies transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism, it also makes more explicit the *general criterion* of ontological agnosticism that is being employed in this particular case. This criterion, I think, would be something to the effect that a philosophical doctrine is ontologically agnostic if it cannot eliminate the merely logical possibility that there are things whose existence would entail the non-ontological status of some item or items that are integral to that philosophical doctrine.[57] If this criterion were to be employed beyond the particular case of transcendental idealism, then any philosophical doctrine that cannot eliminate this logical possibility would be as ontologically agnostic as transcendental idealism (so interpreted). Moreover, a general criterion of ontological agnosticism must presuppose a *conception of ontology*—or a 'general criterion of ontology', if you will—for it cannot explain how ontology can be avoided (or displaced) without a conception of what ontology is. This is indeed the case here, but the problem is that the conception of ontology presupposed by this criterion of ontological agnosticism is *not* the conception of ontology that the present essay has been working with so far, i.e. *Kant's* conception of ontology. That is, this criterion of ontological agnosticism does not presuppose that simply any philosophical doctrine regarding things in general is an ontology. Instead, it adds the additional condition that only a philosophical doctrine regarding

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things in general *that can eliminate the logical possibility mentioned in this criterion* is an ontology. To be precise, according to this presupposed conception of ontology, only a philosophical doctrine regarding things in general that can eliminate the merely logical possibility that there are things whose existence would entail the non-ontological status of what that philosophical doctrine regards as things in general is an ontology. More simply: if ontological agnosticism is grounded in the *inability* to eliminate the logical possibility mentioned in the criterion for ontological agnosticism, then an ontology must be grounded in the *ability* to eliminate that logical possibility.[58]

I think this is an unreasonably austere requirement to place on any would-be ontology and an excessively high price to pay to bear the name of ontology, not to mention the fact that it is hardly uncontroversial to suppose that a merely logical possibility has this kind of 'meta-ontological' authority.[59] In other words, this criterion of ontology is so austere—which is by itself contentious—because it presupposes a contentious meta-ontological premise. Perhaps it could be argued that this is reason enough to reject this conception of ontology and the criterion of ontological agnosticism that presupposes it. However, the most important problem here is that the criterion of ontological agnosticism under consideration is incapable of supporting Kant's rejection of ontology, *precisely because it presupposes a conception of ontology that is different from Kant's*. Consequently, I do not think this revised version of transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism employs a defensible criterion of ontological agnosticism or that it can vindicate Kant's rejection of ontology.[60]

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In light of my first three sections I conclude that transcendental idealism cannot meet the criterion of ontological agnosticism discussed there, and in light of my final section I conclude that it does not have the resources to formulate a defensible alternative criterion. If these conclusions are valid, then Kant's rejection of ontology is deeply problematic. If that is the case, then perhaps epistemology cannot be prised apart from ontology and metaphysics as cleanly as some Kantians hope, and it may be necessary to reconsider the possibilities of defending transcendental idealism as a purely epistemological doctrine, especially if metaphysical or partly metaphysical interpretations of transcendental idealism do not generate problems of this magnitude.

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Notes

1 *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*.
2 *Lectures on Metaphysics*.
3 Cf. Wolff (1963: 45–6).
4 *Critique of Pure Reason*.
5 As Béatrice Longuenesse (1998: 10) points out: 'By assigning to logic the task of laying out the "mere form of thought", Kant dissolved the link which the *Schulphilosophen* saw between logic and ontology. The various ways in which we combine our concepts in judgments and syllogisms are not the more or less adequate expression of ways in which essential and accidental marks are combined in things, but merely the implication of the rules proper to our discursive activity.' Similarly, Kenneth Westphal (2004: 47) notes that 'The illegitimate transcendental use of pure concepts Kant proscribes is the rationalist attempt to interpret pure concepts as determinations of being *per se*.'
6 Cf. Kant (1996: 29; 1998: 115; *CPR* Bxxvii), where 'thing in general' (or, as Pluhar translates *Ding überhaupt*, 'thing as such') is equated with 'thing in itself'.
7 Cf. Longuenesse (1998: 20–1, n. 9) and Beiser (2002: 69–70).
8 Cf. Falkenstein (1995: 426, n. 7).
9 That is, *Objekt*.
10 That is, *Ding*. Cf. Caygill (1995: 304).
11 Basically the same statement is made in the *Prolegomena* at Kant (2004: 126; P, 4: 374).
12 Hereafter I will use the term 'non-ontological status' (or 'no ontological status', etc.) as shorthand for 'purely epistemic, non-ontological status'.
13 Cf. Groff (2007: 36 and 40).
14 Cf. Kant (1998: 164; *CPR* A35/B51–2).
15 Frederick Beiser (2002: 93) explains this point well: 'Kant denies this principle [that essence is perception], holding that it goes beyond the limits of experience. There are two respects in which Berkeley's principle transcends these limits: first, it assumes that what is true of objects of experience (appearances) is true of objects in general; and, second, it assumes that objects of experience are only representations, when, for all we know, they could be aspects of things-in-themselves.'
16 This account of the difference between Kant and Berkeley seems to be corroborated by the fact that Kant, eschewing total agnosticism about things in themselves, affirmed their actual existence in the *Prolegomena* to further distinguish himself from Berkeley. In Note II to the First Part, Kant distances himself from the idealist who asserts 'that there are none other than thinking beings' and 'representations in thinking beings, to which in fact no object existing outside these beings corresponds' (Kant 2004: 40; *P* 4: 288–9) with the following declaration: 'I say in opposition: 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, that is, with the representations that they produce in us because they affect our senses. Accordingly, I by all means avow that there are bodies outside us, that is, things which, though completely unknown to us as to what they may be in themselves, we know through the representations which their influence on our sensibility provides for us, and to which we give the name of a body—which word therefore merely signifies the appearance of this object that is unknown to us but is nonetheless real' (ibid.; 4: 289).
17 See Kant (1998: 360–1; *CPR* B307–9) for the distinction between the positive and negative sense of 'noumenon'.

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18 Cf. Kant 1998: 350; A254–5/310.

19 It is presumably because the transcendental idealist conception of sensibility is not supposed to pertain to things in general that Kant (1998: 361; *CPR* B307) says 'the doctrine of sensibility is at the same time the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense'.

20 Cf. Kant 1998: 351; A256/B311–12.

21 See e.g. Pistorius (2007: 100–2), Jacobi (2007: 175), and Fichte (1982: 54–5).

22 See n. 16 above and the passage from Kant (2004: 66; P 4: 314–15) below.

23 'if one regards outer appearances as representations that are effected in us by their objects, as things in themselves found outside us, then it is hard to see how their existence could be cognized in any way other than by an inference from effect to cause, in which case it must always remain doubtful whether the cause is in us or outside us' (Kant 1998: 427; *CPR* A372).

24 'Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it' (Hume 1975: 155).

25 Similarly: 'Indeed, a reference to things in themselves is analytically contained in the very concept of an appearance, and a reference to a subject of all my thought is invoked by the thesis of the necessary unity of apperception, so that both things in themselves and a subject in itself can not merely be thought, but affirmed to exist, though nothing more can be known of them' (Falkenstein 1995: 357).

26 Also see the passage from Kant (1998: 160; *CPR* A27/B43) quoted above, as well as 1998: 276; A146–7/B186 and 347; A249–50.

27 Cf. Pistorius (2007: 100–2).

28 The passage from the A-edition Fourth Paralogism quoted at n. 23 above represents scepticism about this kind of argument as well, for there Kant says we could not infer the existence of transcendentally real things as the causes of our sensory representations since 'it must always remain doubtful whether *the cause is in us or outside us*' (Kant 1998: 427; *CPR* A372; emphasis added). Also cf. Hume (1975: 152–3): 'By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them (if that be possible) and could not arise either from the energy of the mind itself, or from the suggestion of some invisible and unknown spirit, or from some other cause still more unknown to us?'

29 Langton (1998: 19–20).

30 Ibid., pp. 61–2.

31 Ibid., pp. 64–5, 102, and 157. This excludes the viability of some sort of ontological nihilism—a possibility that Langton does not really consider, but one that I will, briefly in my last section.

32 Ibid., pp. 5, 109, and 126–7. The issue of supervenience is dealt with throughout ibid., pp. 68–139.

33 Ibid., pp. 13 and 22.

34 Ibid., pp. 21–2 and 65.

35 E.g.: 'Kant believes … as Strawson has remarked, that our ignorance of things as they are in themselves follows from the fact that we must be affected by things if we are to achieve knowledge of them. If this is correct, then our ignorance of things as they are in themselves is not supposed to be a special consequence of the arguments about space, or time, or the categories: it is supposed to be a general consequence of the fact that human knowledge is receptive' (ibid., p. 2); 'If humility is supposed to follow from receptivity, then it should be possible to explore this question without exploring

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in detail the arguments about space, time, and the categories, for which Kant is (perhaps justly) most famous. The arguments from the Aesthetic and the Analytic are accordingly given little detailed attention in the following discussion, since, notwithstanding their importance, they are separable from the conclusion about our ignorance' (ibid., p. 3). See Falkenstein (2001) for a critique of this approach and Langton (2001) for a response.

36 Langton is most concerned with the category of substance in her interpretation of things in themselves as absolute subjects of predicates and Westphal with causality in his defence of noumenal affection.

37 'Kant's denial that categories have "significance" when used transphenomenally must be understood as the denial that they have full, cognitively determinate, empirical significance by which they can refer to given particular objects' (Westphal 2004: 46).

38 'He may be implying that reason requires us to infer their existence, and thus to "think" them: but that is not to know them, for knowledge would require knowing what they are like in themselves' (Langton 1998: 41).

39 'This is what helps to provide a means of deflecting that famous charge of inconsistency: that Kant has no right to say anything at all about the substances that are things in themselves. When Kant says that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves, he means that we cannot make use of the pure concept of a substance in a manner that will enable us to determine a thing "through distinctive and intrinsic predicates". It is compatible with this that one can use the pure concept in a manner which will allow one to assert the existence of substances, and to assert that they must have intrinsic properties: for this use falls short of a use that attempts to determine a thing by ascribing to it particular distinctive and intrinsic predicates' (ibid., p. 50); cf. ibid., p. 65; 'Proscribing the use of pure concepts, with their transcendental significance, for rationalist metaphysics is altogether compatible with a different use of pure categories in transcendental reflection on the passivity of our sensible forms of intuition, in order to recognize, e.g., that in general, something distinct from us ("outside us in the transcendental sense"; A373, 4: 234.21–3) must stimulate our sensibility if we are to have any intuitions of particulars' (Westphal 2004: 49).

40 In my view, far too much time has been spent in the secondary literature attempting to reconcile the unschematized categories of causality and substance with Kant's claims about things in themselves to the exclusion of the category of existence, for the bedrock of the problem is whether Kant is entitled to the claim that there are things in themselves at all.

41 Cf. Westphal (2004: 41 and 51–4).

42 Westphal (2004) constructs an impressive internal critique of transcendental idealism, especially ibid., pp. 68–126. But there, the main reason for rejecting the possibility of a subjective source of the transcendental affinity of the sensory manifold seems to be Kant's desire to avoid subjective idealism rather than a problem with subjective idealism *per se* (see ibid., pp. 112–13). Or, if there is a problem with subjective idealism, it is one that is only rectified by the 'realism *sans phrase*' Westphal proposes as a replacement for transcendental idealism. If this is so, Westphal's arguments would be of little help to *transcendental idealism* in eliminating the possibility of unconscious subjective sources of appearances. On the other hand, perhaps Westphal could argue on Kant's behalf that speculation on such subjective sources is irrelevant for a transcendental philosophy focused on the conditions of human cognition (see ibid., pp. 250–65). However, I do not think it would be irrelevant to the determination of the conditions of human cognition if noumenal affection is not (see ibid., pp. 36–67), nor is it irrelevant to the question of the nature of appearances.

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43 Cf. Kant (1998: 420–1; *CPR* A358).

44 Cf. Allison (1996: 3–4).

45 Cf. Beiser (2002: 608, n. 7) for what I think is a decisive critique of Allison's exegesis of the passage at Kant (1998: 511; *CPR* A490–1/B518–19), which Allison uses to support his claim that appearances cannot be equated with 'mere representations'.

46 From here on I will use this term as shorthand for 'things that exist independently of the subjective conditions of cognition' in Allison's interpretation of transcendental idealism.

47 Cf. Allison (1996: 16), where it is claimed that the 'transcendental object = x', now distinguished from the thing in itself on pain of circularity, is proffered as that unified thing which is considered both as appearance and thing in itself. Allison introduces this in response to the issue of the 'sameness' of the things considered under the two aspects, but he unfortunately does not address the problem of their independence from the subjective conditions of cognition.

48 Robert Hanna comes very close but stops short of this conclusion when he says of the two-aspect view: 'It tells us only that there is one and only one class of otherwise unspecified objects, or perhaps of exclusively phenomenal objects, each of which is *taken or believed by us* to be things-in-themselves and also *taken or believed by us* to be phenomenal; but it neither explains why we perversely persist in ascribing contradictory intrinsic properties to the same objects, nor does it justify our beliefs in the objective correctness of those ascriptions' (Hanna 2006: 423).

49 Falkenstein reconstructs what he calls Kant's 'decomposition argument' regarding the non-substantive character of space and time well: 'Space and time are infinitely divisible. Consequently, they cannot be composed of simple parts. Consequently, were we to abstract from all relations of composition in our concepts of them, nothing would remain to be thought. There would be no simple component parts of space or time left over to be identified as the items originally set in spatiotemporal relations to one another. But this is the same as to say that space and time consist entirely of relations, and a relation is not a substance; it cannot exist on its own, any more than a property can. Were there no other things given as standing in spatiotemporal relations to one another, there would be no spatiotemporal relations, and space and time would not exist. Hence, space and time could not be substantival entities, existing as things in themselves in their own right' (Falkenstein 1995: 293). Cf. ibid., pp. 295–6.

50 For Kant's view that spatiotemporal relations presuppose relata see Langton (1998) and Falkenstein (1995: 203–4, 278, 293, and 409, n. 28). Also see Kant (1998: 166–7; *CPR* A39/B56) for the claim that absolute space and time would be self-contradictory as 'two eternal and infinite self-subsisting non-entities'. (Here the target is of course Newton, but an ontological nihilist would presumably question the notion of 'self-subsistence' to remove the contradiction.)

51 'According to this view, matter is not composed of spatially extended parts but of extensionless physical monads, which fill space only by the exercise of a repulsive force, so that, while the sphere of the monad's activity may be divided to infinity, the monad itself may not be so divided. Kant never came to terms with this earlier position. The attempt of *Anfangsgrunde*, 2 … to refute it begs the question against it, and the Antithesis of the Second Antinomy does not even presume to offer an argument; it *assumes* that the only way for a part of a composite to fill space is by the plurality of its parts and simply ignores the possibility that it might do so by means of a repulsive force' (Falkenstein 1995: 300–1). See ibid., p. 297, for another problem with Kant's conception of infinite divisibility.

52 See the Anticipations of Perception.

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53 See the Axioms of Intuition.
54 See the Analogies of Experience.
55 See Kant (1998: 212; CPR A80/B106).
56 Cf. Kant (1998: 350; A254/B310).
57 The general criterion for the ontological agnosticism presented in my first section would be something like a concern with how things appear or how things are known as opposed to how things are, or a concern with the possibility of cognitive experience rather than the possibility of things.
58 Perhaps one could disassociate this criterion of ontological agnosticism from the conception of ontology I argue it presupposes by reformulating this criterion in more 'optional' terms. That is, one could say that this criterion *allows* any philosophical doctrine that meets it to claim ontological agnosticism, but it does not *require* that any philosophical doctrine that meets it (i.e. any philosophical doctrine that cannot eliminate the logical possibility mentioned in the criterion) *cannot* be an ontology. The problem with this, however, is that it weakens the criterion too much, so that it cannot sharply separate what counts as ontological agnosticism from what does not. For the same reason, it would also significantly weaken the force of Kant's rejection of ontology (if, that is, it were able to support that rejection in the first place—see below).
59 It would have meta-ontological authority because failure or success in eliminating it decides what counts as an ontology. (Indeed, any criterion of ontology is by definition meta-ontological.)
60 Those familiar with Meillassoux (2008) may identify this revised version of transcendental idealism with what Quentin Meillassoux calls 'strong correlationism' (ibid., pp. 50–81). However, whereas Meillassoux seeks to undermine strong correlationism's anti-absolutism and uncover an implicit absolutism therein (the absolutization of contingency), the task of the present essay is just to critically examine transcendental idealism's ontological agnosticism and the grounds for Kant's rejection of ontology. Meillassoux's criticism of strong correlationism shares another similarity with the present section's critique of transcendental idealism's revised ontological agnosticism, though, in that both criticisms seize on the consequences of the criticized position's management of the possibility of things being otherwise.

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