

BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF EXPERIENCE: TRANS-PHENOMENAL CAUSALITY OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL OBJECT VIS-À-VIS APPEARANCES

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ABSTRACT

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason has generated a number of controversies. One of them is the charge of inconsistency regarding Kant's claim on the limited use of the categories. Kant holds that the categories of thought can only be used legitimately within the sphere of experience. They cannot be used beyond the world of nature because the categories are the preconditions required for experience to be possible. Nonetheless, Kant is accused of violating this limited application of the categories when he argues that the thing in itself or transcendental object is the cause of appearance. In other words, Kant applies the category of cause to a transcendental object which is not given in the realm of experience and this is where the contradiction lays. I show that this accusation is predicated upon a misinterpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism. When the transcendental idealism is seen as positing two world of objects, then the problem of trans-phenomenal causality arises. I argue that this problem is a pseudo-problem because Kant's transcendental idealism does not posit two worlds with different sets of object. On the contrary, Kant talks of an object which can be considered from two perspectives. It is this two aspect approach that I favour since it represents Kant's position and also eliminates the problem of trans-phenomenal causality. Furthermore, the need to distinguish between the using the categories to "think" and also to "cognize" is fundamental. Through this distinction, one sees that the category of cause can be used to think but not to cognize the transcendental object, and this is consistent with Kant's use of the categories.

Keywords: Causality, categories, appearances, experiences, transcendental idealism

INTRODUCTION

In the transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant establishes the argument that the categories of understanding have legitimate use only within the realm of experience. This is because they are the preconditions necessary for experience (Kant, 1787, A 248/B 305). Accordingly, one cannot use the categories beyond the world of experience. However, there are a number of passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth *CPR*) where Kant appears to have used some of the categories beyond the realm of experience. The categories of cause and effect is that which is notable. In this regard, Kant (1787) writes: "[...] nothing prevents us from attributing to this transcendental object, besides the property through which it appears, also a causality that is not appearance although its effect is nonetheless encountered in appearance" (A 539/B 567). From this citation, Kant is attributing causality to the transcendental object which is not an appearance, i.e., it is not given in space and time. Yet the effect of this object is encountered in appearance. Here the mechanism of cause and effect is operational between phenomena and noumena. A number of scholars (for example

F.H Jacobi, Peter F. Strawson) consider this to be an obvious contradiction. The problematic here is that Kant fundamentally contradicts himself by engaging in a trans-phenomenal use of the category of cause regarding the transcendental object. This challenge against Kant is what I prefer to call “the problematic of the categorial misapplication.” The question that I will be preoccupied with in this essay is whether the accusation put forward against Kant is sustainable. I shall defend the view that Kant did not violate the epistemic limited use of the category of causality. His use of the category of causality vis-à-vis the transcendental object does not transgress the view that the categories have their legitimate use only within the sphere of experience.

Immanuel Kant’s Historical Indebtedness to David Hume

One of Kant’s most famous references to Hume is in the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* where he writes: “I freely admit that the remembrance of *David Hume* was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy” (Kant, 1783, AA 4: 260). Hume woke Kant through his critique of the prevailing philosophy of the time. This was mainly a critique of rationalist metaphysics that engaged in philosophical speculation regarding God, the soul, and freedom and also claiming knowledge of these.¹ Hume rejected such claims outrightly. In reacting to this situation, Kant affirms that in the history of metaphysics no event has been so important as Hume’s “attack” on metaphysics (1783 AA 4: 258). Being an empiricist, Hume did not see how one could attain knowledge of God by relying on the metaphysical concept of causality. Through his analysis of causality, Hume showed that it is a principle with a spatio-temporal usefulness. This implies that one cannot employ this principle beyond the sensible world. For Hume, the causal principle is a matter of fact that enables us to detect, empirically, what causes and effects are (1748, 137). Nonetheless, Hume notices that metaphysicians of the time have relied on the causal principle to build elaborate systems into a supersensible world and also prove the existence of God. In this way, an extended use of the causal principle comes into the discourse and Hume disagrees with such a use. In the *CPR*, Kant reignites this debate, siding with Hume that there can be no transcendental use of the concept of cause.

Transcendental Deduction and Transcendental Use of the Causal Category

As already noted, Kant in the transcendental deduction of categories shows that the categories are preconditions for the possibility of experience (1787, A 94/B 127). They are the enabling factors that facilitate our rational encounter with the world. For this reason, that Kant (1787) argues: “Without that original reference of these concepts to possible experience wherein all objects of cognition occur, their reference to any object whatever would be quite incomprehensible” (A 94/B 127). Elsewhere, Kant (1787) further observes: “[...] the categories cannot be used for cognizing things except insofar as these things are taken as objects of possible experience.” (B 148). We can now understand why Kant argues: “Without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind. [...] Only from their union can cognition arise” (1787, A 52/B 76). This shows that the categories alone are not enough to produce knowledge. They must be combined with intuition, otherwise they remain empty.

Bearing in mind that what we can know according to Kant are appearances, he finds it necessary to ask or investigate into the cause of appearances. Concerning this question Kant (1787) writes:

¹ These were the main concerns of traditional metaphysics.

And inasmuch as the understanding warns sensibility not to claim to deal with things in themselves but solely with appearances, it does think an object in itself. But the understanding thinks it only as transcendental object. This object is the cause of appearance (hence is not itself appearance) and can be thought neither as magnitude nor as reality nor as substance, etc. (because these concepts always require sensible forms wherein they determine an object) (A 289/B 345).

Here Kant identifies the transcendental object as the cause of appearance. That is, without this cause, appearance would not be possible in the first place. Kant's suggestion regarding the transcendental object as the cause of appearance raises more questions than it answers regarding the use of the causal category.

This problematic was first pointed out by F.H Jacobi who made the following paradoxical remark concerning the thing in itself in Kant's *Critique*: "[W]ithout presupposing the thing-in-itself, which somehow causally affects us, 'arouses sensations in us', one cannot 'enter the system', but *with* the presupposition it's impossible 'to remain in it' for within Kant's system it's not possible to give justifiable sense to trans-phenomenal causality." (*Qtd* in Schulting and Verburgt, 2011, V). Jacobi's point is that we have to assume the thing in itself as the cause of appearance otherwise we cannot make any sense of Kant's critical philosophy. Similarly, Martin Gottfried (1961) asserts: "It can be said that nearly all the categories are applied by Kant to things in themselves, in particular the categories of unity, plurality, causality, community, possibility, actuality, and necessity" (198).

The criticism that Kant uses the category of causality beyond the sphere of appearance to be predicated on a particular reading of his transcendental idealism.² This reading is known as the "two-world" approach, which is opposed to the "two-aspect" approach. I shall now expatiate on both approaches.

Between the Two-World Approach and Two-Aspect Approach

Paul Guyer is one of the most famous contemporary Kantian scholars to adopt the two-world reading of Kant's transcendental idealism. He observes that traditionally speaking, Kant has been understood to have created two separate realms of entities (1987, 334). Guyer relies on the transcendental aesthetic to defend the two-world view. His main argument is that it is in the transcendental aesthetic that Kant argues for space and time as conditions for objects to be given to us via sensibility. So if the thing in itself does not belong to space and time as transcendental aesthetic demonstrates, then it must belong to a different world, a non spatio-temporal world. To use Daniel Robinson's words, what Guyer defends may be called a "dual ontology" (2012, 86). It is a dual ontology simply because the property of existence is attributed to two distinct entities in two different worlds. Said differently, Kant is accused of creating two worlds, a supersensible and sensible world. The transcendental object or thing in itself, which is posited in the former world is said to cause appearances in the latter world. And as we have seen, this is an extended use of the category which the two world approach presents. In the two aspect approach, however, this problem does not occur. I now turn to explicate this second approach.

Some of the famous defenders of the two-aspect view include Henry Allison, H.J Paton, Otfried Höffe and Daniel N. Robinson. For these thinkers, there is no multiplication of objects as the two-world interpretation suggests. In other words, what we have is a kind of "ontological monism" rather than dualism. In arguing for a two-aspect view, Robinson (2012)

² The basic thesis of the transcendental idealism is that only appearances are knowable by us since they can be subsumed under the forms of intuition which are space and time. But what a thing in itself is, is not something we have epistemic access to Kant, *CPR* (1787), 401 (A 388).

invites his readers to distinguish between “epistemic enabling conditions and ontologically distinct kind of things” (86). In making this distinction, Robinson (2012) writes:

Objects as experienced are possible owing to the conditions that enable all sensibility. These same objects can be considered abstractly, devoid of sensible features. Although one may comprehend an object either as sensible or as an entity independent of the very conditions by which it is, in fact, sensible, it is the same object. These two aspects are distinct in the epistemic and not the ontological respect (86).

Robinson’s argument is that when I consider an object that is given, there are conditions that enable this object to be empirically given; for example, the senses, space and time. However, I can consider this same object without the enabling conditions that made them to be sensibly given. Accordingly, the thing that accounts for the difference between the two aspects is the epistemic conditions; the epistemic condition of the one is different from the other. I find Robinson’s emphasis on the need to distinguish between the epistemic and ontological aspect to be sustainable. This is because from Kant’s epistemological sojourn in the *CPR*, it is apparent that he establishes the conditions necessary for knowledge and the thing in itself is a product of the lack of these conditions. No wonder Otfried Höffe, in contrast to the two-world view, embraces the two-aspect interpretation. In his opinion:

A proper understanding of Kant’s full epistemological programme reveals that this second interpretation [two-world] is a misunderstanding. Kant is principally interested, formally and epistemologically, in two kinds of perspective insofar as ‘the object is to be taken in a twofold sense’ (B xxvii); he is not materially or ontically interested in two classes of object, as Descartes was, for example, when he radically distinguished between material bodies and immaterial mind (2010, 45).

To sum the forgoing discussion, it is clear that while on the one hand, the two-world theorists are of the view that for Kant, the thing in itself is an object which exists in the noumenal world has its counterpart in the phenomenal world. On the other hand, the two-aspect theorists argue that the thing in itself does not have a separate existence but is a correlate of appearances. What follows is a critique of the two world approach.

The two-world interpretation of Kant does not appear to be tenable. To begin with, there is a fundamental confusion between division of objects and division of worlds. It is self-evident that Kant does talk about two worlds –the phenomenal world and noumenal world (1787, A256/ B 311). However, it is a different question whether Kant suggests that there are two different epistemological objects in these worlds. The defenders of the two-world view do not realize this subtle difference.

Secondly, Kant could not have posited two worlds that accommodate two different objects because of the skeptical implication that such a view carries. The skepticism here is that we cannot know the external world, since the real world is the supersensible realm where true objects of knowledge reside. Kant rejects such a view, describing it “the scandal of philosophy.”³ It is in the refutation of idealism and also in the fourth paralogism of the *CPR* where Kant argues for the knowledge of the existence of things outside of us. There is no other epistemological object in another world, as the two-world reading wants us to believe.

Thirdly, Kant could not have suggested that the thing in itself exists in a different world altogether. The justification for this is that in the conceptual framework of Kantian thought, for something to exist means that it is capable of been an object of experience and subject to

³ Footnote on *CPR*. P. 36.

space and time as the *a priori* forms of intuition (Kant, 1787, A 373). This is one of the primary arguments of the transcendental aesthetic.

Furthermore, in defense of the two-aspect reading, Kant (1787) argues that although objects of experience are appearances, we can nevertheless think these “same objects also as things in themselves” (B xxvii). The point Kant is making is that when an object is given to us, we receive it is an appearance. But we have the ability to *think* of this *same object* as a thing in itself. In other words, the thing in itself is a mental abstraction of appearances. In a similar vein, Kant (1787) further argues that in our consideration of an object, “we do also distinguish this object as appearance from the same object as object in itself” (B 69). In another passage of the *Critique*, Kant (1787) writes: “For if the senses present something to us merely as it appears, then surely this something must also in itself be a thing, and an object of a nonsensible intuition, i.e., an object of understanding” (A 250). Apart from that, I do want to call our attention to Kant’s last major work, the *Opus Postumum*. In this work, Kant (1804) argues:

“We must, with respect to the intuition of an object in space or in time, at all times make the distinction between the representation of the thing in itself and that of the same thing as appearance- although we can attribute to the former no predicates, but, as = x, can regard it only as a correlate for the pure understanding” (AA 22:33).

The forgoing textual references from Kant make one thing clear. It shows that Kant keeps on talking about the sameness of object. There is no multiplicity of object between the thing in itself and the way it appears. This supports the Kantian thesis that the same object can be considered both as an appearance and a thing in itself.

To substantiate the claim that Kant rejects the creation of objects in the noumenal world, let us pay attention to this textual references. Kant (1787) writes: “The critique of this pure understanding, therefore, does not permit one to create a new realm of objects apart from those that it may encounter as appearances and to stray into intelligible worlds-not even into the concept of them” (A 289/B 345). This quotation is a clear assertion in favor of the claim that Kant does not create a separate realm of object as has been wrongly attributed to him. So Kant basically talks about one object and one world.

As we engage in this discourse over Kant’s creation of a thing in itself in another world, let us also not forget the influence of Hume on Kant. In earlier part of this paper, I presented Hume’s importance to Kant. Hume had rejected any kind of philosophy that attempts to establish the existence of things beyond the experiential world as superstitious and illusory. Kant appreciated the insight contained in this view expressed by Hume. Little wonder Kant identified this as one of the fundamental errors of traditional metaphysics; an error Hume first pointed out. Thus it would be counterintuitive for Kant commit the error he primarily hopes to correct. In the subsequent discussion, I consider the objections raised against the two-aspect approach.

Some commentators have considered the two-aspect reading as problematic. Famous among these objections is what Shea Musgrave (2012) identifies as “The Exclusionary Properties Objection” and “The Identity Objection” (127). With respect to the exclusionary objection, Musgrave argues that the two-aspect theory attributes contradictory properties to the same thing (Musgrave, 2012, 127). In other words, how can the same object be spatio-temporal (as an appearance) and also be non spatio-temporal (as a thing in itself) at the same time?

A corollary to the exclusionary objection is the identity objection. This objection is basically a reversal of the exclusionary objection. The problem this objection raises is that there is an identity between the appearance and thing in itself. That is, the same thing is both and

appearance and a thing in itself. But how can this be? In the exclusionary objection we see that the problem is how can the same thing possess two mutually exclusive properties? In what follows, I offer my response to these two objections.

My point of departure would be to consider Aristotle's formulation of the principle on non-contradiction. In book four of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes: "It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect" (Aristotle IV 3 1005b19–20.) The ground for referring to this principle is that the exclusionary objection against the two-aspect theory is predicated on the principle of contradiction. This principle will help us expose the error contained in the exclusionary objection. As we have seen, this objection claims that it is logically contradictory for the same thing to have two properties that are mutually exclusive. Actually, there is no contradiction in considering an object as an appearance and also as a thing in itself. In Aristotle's formulation of the principle of non-contradiction, two key words that should be kept in mind are "same" and "respect." When we say the same object is spatio-temporal as an appearance and non spatio-temporal as a thing in itself, we are not making this claim in the *same respect*. In other words, the respect in which the thing is an appearance is totally different from the respect in which it is a thing in itself. On the supposition that one says the object is both an appearance and thing in itself in the same respect, then the problem of contradiction becomes an issue. Consequently, we can logically and legitimately consider the same object as spatial and non-spatial since this is done from different perspectives. An important point has to be added here. The respect in which we talk of an object as an appearance and also as a thing in itself is basically in respect of the epistemic conditions that enable knowledge to be possible and not in an ontological level. As one will recall, this is precisely the point that Robinson, a defender of the two-aspect, makes.

This answer to the exclusionary objection also applies to the identity objection. The identity objection is based on a false assumption that there is a collapse between appearances and things in themselves in the same object. The principle of non-contradiction helps us see that there is indeed no collapse since the same thing can be logically seen from different perspectives

Articulating Kant's Use of Cause Vis-À-Vis the Transcendental Object and Appearance

Since it has been argued that Kant does not posit a two world view, how are we to understand his talk about the transcendental object as the cause of appearance? In Kant's opinion, we can use the categories to *think* of things in themselves. But this does not indicate an attempt to gain knowledge of what things are in themselves. No wonder, Kant (1787) writes: "[...] we must be able at least to *think*, even if not [speculatively] *cognize*, the same objects also as things in themselves" (B xxvi). Here Kant emphasizes the difference between thinking and cognizing. That I am able to think of the thing in itself does not imply knowledge of it. Therefore, when Kant uses the category of cause vis-à-vis the transcendental object, he is using in an abstraction of thought and not in the framework of knowledge or scientific conception of it.

Kant's use of the word cause appears to have raised more problems for him when it comes to the interpretation of his thought. For this reason, some authors suggest that to avoid such confusion, perhaps the term "ground" would have been a better substitute rather than the word "cause". For example, Petri Räsänen suggests that it is not as if the thing in itself brings about appearance, but it only serves to ground it (2005, 15). Here we see a linguistic distinction between ground and cause. The suggestion is that it is philosophically economical to use "ground" rather than cause. Remarkably, Kant (1804) in *Opus Postumum* adopts the

word ground rather than cause in describing the relation between the thing in itself as the cause of appearance. In that work, he writes:

All sense-objects are things in appearance (objecta phaenomena) to which a noumenon corresponds as the ground of their coordination; but no particular intuition (no noumenon aspectabile) corresponds to the latter, for that would be a contradiction with respect to the subjective element of the principle (AA 22:33).

This citation reveals a change in use of term from cause to ground. Commenting on this change in term, Räsänen (2005) is of the view that the term ground is “devoid of any empirical and causal understanding of the relation between a ground and its consequent” (12) In the discussion that follows, I will engage in a further analysis of the linguistic usage of ground and cause.

With respect to the relation between the thing in itself and appearance, I suggest we pay attention to the difference between a logical ground and real ground. On this distinction Kant writes: “Every *ground* is either logical, by means of which the consequence that is identical to it is posited as a predicate according to the rule of identity, or *real*, by means of which the consequence that is not identical to it is not posited according to the rule of identity.” (*Qtd.* in Watkins, 2005, 162).

The basic idea here is that the very moment we talk of appearances; we have logically implied the thing in itself. So there is a sort of identity between the given thing and the way it is in itself. Little wonder Kant (1787) affirms: “This transcendental object cannot be separated at all from the sensible data, for then there remains nothing through which it would be thought” (A 251). That is, I think of the transcendental object through what is given in sensible intuition. If I am unable think of this object, then I cannot have any access to appearance. This explains why Kant argues that if something is an appearance, it must necessarily be an appearance of something, the transcendental object x. It is in this sense that we can understand Kant’s claim that the transcendental object is the cause of appearance.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have investigated the claim that Kant contradicts one of the fundamental theses of the *Critique* by using the category of cause beyond the realm of experience. In carrying out this investigation, I showed that this objection is based on an interpretation of Kant’s transcendental idealism which leads to the creation of two entities in two different worlds. Such a model of transcendental idealism gives room to the question of how something non spatio-temporal can be the cause of something spatio-temporal? It also leads one the claim that Kant uses the category of cause in a trans-phenomenal manner. I have argued that this reading is faulty for it is precisely such a conceptual framework that Kant argues against. The two-aspect approach is the approach that I adopted in this work. In the two-aspect reading, one sees that there are no two different objects. The same object is seen from the two complementary perspectives and this affords one with the plausible interpretation of how Kant uses cause in relation to the transcendental object.

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