

Does transcendental idealism make a distinction philosophy essay



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In this essay I shall focus upon the enduring argument between Kantian scholars over whether within the “ Transcendental Aesthetic” of the Critic of Pure Reason Kant’s argument for transcendental idealism makes a distinction between one-world with two aspects or two-worlds and to what extent this is a successful distinction. I shall attempt to answer this question partly with reference to the Critique in an effort to bring to light what I believe could plausibly be Kant’s own views on the distinction and in part with reference to the many problems critics of Kant’s transcendental idealism can not solve with a two-world interpretation. My interpretation of the Aesthetic will focus on a one-world reading strongly based on the work of H. E. Allison to explain the world of appearances and things in themselves as simply two ‘ points of view’. I will justify this position first by outlining a prevalent two-world view and explain why this is simply an inadequate interpretation of Kant’s work, we will see how a one-world view is able to provide the solution to many of the key problems facing a traditional two-world reading and finally I will address possible criticisms of this new interpretation.

In the “ Aesthetic” Kant puts forward an argument for transcendental idealism, the key premise of this argument is that we have a priori intuitions of space and time. These intuitions immediately bring us in to representational contact with particular things (A19/B33) and as these are a priori intuitions they are not the result of being “ affected” by anything such as sensation (A20/B34). From the fact that we have a priori intuitions of space and time Kant draws two conclusions: firstly that spatial properties do not attach to things themselves and that spatial properties do not represent

objects in relation to one another and secondly that “ Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense” (A26/B42) that is to say entities appear spatial only in so far as we are unable to see perceive them in any other way.

My commitment to this one-world view which will be explicated throughout this essay does not deny the existence of things in themselves but attempts to remove any apparent distance between what a two world interpretation separates as the world of appearances and a completely separate world of entities in themselves. A focus on two points of view or perhaps a shift in perception will show that things in themselves are not distinct entities from the appearances we know through our own observation of the world.

However, even on this one world interpretation I hold that we can only perceive things in themselves through sensible and intellectual conditions and I maintain that these same things in themselves can never be known independent of these conditions.

When looking to the text scholars such as Bennett (1966) and Guyer (1987) can convincingly put forward evidence for a two world reading from the Critique. I take the two-world interpretation to be holding that the distinction between things as they appear and things in themselves is a metaphysical distinction between two exclusive classes of things; those which are mind-dependent and mind-independent. Things in themselves continually exist indifferent to being perceived whilst appearances depend on being perceived and in some sense exist in the mind of the perceiver. Furthermore on a two-world interpretation the fact that we can only experience appearances

reduces the objects of experience to mental representations and entails a <https://assignbuster.com/does-transcendental-idealism-make-a-distinction-philosophy-essay/>

kind of phenomenalism. Despite the disconnection between appearances and things in themselves the noumenon world is necessary as it underlies the sensory input from which we construct appearances. Apparent support from this view can even be found in the first Critique where Kant describes a type of phenomenalism: “ By transcendental idealism I mean the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves [. . .]” (A369). This passage does seem to express the idea that external objects are mind-dependent and even that they exist only as things dependent on being perceived. Furthermore, Kant even talks of “ two-worlds” (A249) when explicitly talking about the “ phaenomena and noumena”.

Importantly however these passages which most strongly represent a two-world interpretation which you might expect to be clarified and developed in the B edition of the Critique are in fact omitted and the passages above do not appear in the B Deduction, instead the B edition contains some of the most concrete support for a one-world interpretation. Kant talks of the “ distinction, which our Critique has shown to be necessary, between things as objects of experience and those same things as things in themselves.”

(Bxxvii) This really brings out the way in which we can hold on to a one-world interpretation and see the distinction as a difference between two points of view of the same things. Ultimately however an analysis purely of the text is likely to be inconclusive just due to the complexity of the transcendental aesthetic, selective quoting in either editions could possibly support either interpretation this is why throughout the following paragraphs I will aim to show that a one-world, two-aspect interpretation provides the most

intelligible way to understand the multiple complexities of the transcendental aesthetic.

The two-aspects view as advanced by Allison (1983) attempts to interpret Kant's transcendental idealism in a way that will enable it to be defended against at least some of these many popular criticisms. Rather than distinguish between two classes of objects Allison holds that Kant distinguishes between two aspects of the same class of mind independent object, one aspect that does appear to us (the phenomena) and another aspect doesn't (the noumena). An important move in reconciling the difficulties above the problems facing a two-world view is that Allison denies that transcendental idealism is at its core a metaphysical theory instead Allison's two-aspect theory interprets transcendental idealism as wholly epistemological, that is to say that Kant is interested in the epistemological conditions of our knowledge of objects (Allison 1983: p. 7, pp. 10-13). Allison distinguishes between two viewpoints on the object of experience: firstly the human cognitive perspective, from which entities are viewed in accordance with human cognitive faculties (the a priori forms of outer sensibility); and secondly the viewpoint of an intuitive intellect from which objects could be known in themselves independent of any epistemic conditions. As such this distinction from what is knowable from the human perspective emphasises how we consider things epistemologically and in effect transcendental idealism has been "deontologized" (Allison 1996, p. 18). Furthermore based on Kant's original premise for transcendental idealism; that we know a priori that phenomena are spatial, a great strength of the one-world interpretation is that it necessarily follows for Allison that when these entities are

considered in themselves they are not spatial. This one-world, two-aspect interpretation is thus built on a valid argument from Kant for transcendental idealism.

Naturally humans cannot take the latter viewpoint of an “intuitive intellect” and see the objects in themselves independent of cognitive conditions as whenever we think of an object we can’t help but think in spatiotemporal terms. This distinctive interpretation is perfectly compatible with Kant’s original definitions of the concepts of the phenomenal and noumenon worlds where we can not but help experience the phenomenal world whilst the noumenon world that underlies this is impossible to experience due to our a priori intuitions. Instead, to understand things in themselves humans can only try to abstract from our experience of these properties. So to talk of things in themselves in the transcendental sense is just to talk of things independent of these cognitive conditions.

One problem a two-world interpretation has is accounting for Kant’s commitment to empirical realism and his attempt in the first Critique to demonstrate how knowledge of a genuinely objective empirical reality, ordered in time and space and governed by causal laws, is both possible and necessary for human experience. Even though a two-world interpretation can account for empirical realism and the world of the phenomena can satisfy ordinary criteria for objectivity the two-world theorist must concede that the noumenon world has an ontological primacy. This is to say that the phenomena are just appearances despite according with causal laws and the noumenon world is in fact the underlying real world of entities and of this world we can have no knowledge and as such leads to scepticism of the <https://assignbuster.com/does-transcendental-idealism-make-a-distinction-philosophy-essay/>

world we experience. As this one-world interpretation refutes the idea that phenomena and noumenon are ontologically distinct there is no question of ontological primacy as there is for a two-world interpretation as everyday spatiotemporal entities just are things in themselves but considered from the perspective of our cognitive conditions. Therefore we needn't experience the world under a "veil of perception", we can describe these objects as either things in themselves when referring to them independently of these conditions or as spatiotemporal objects when considering them under the aspect to which they are knowable by us. Importantly this one-world view absolutely qualifies the reality of these empirical objects (Walker, 2007, p3).

Kant expressed serious scepticism about things in themselves but also insisted that they are not spatial, however he also insists that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves but also that "The things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be" (A42/B59) from this perspective it seems have to see how we can have any knowledge of how things in themselves actually are, furthermore it is difficult to see how can we even know that things in themselves exist at all. A common objection to Kant's transcendental idealism when taking it to be a two-world theory is that Kant does not adequately argue the case for the fact that things in themselves are not spatiotemporal. It seems difficult to see how Kant can support the claim that we know that things in themselves are not spatiotemporal without violating the key idea that we can not have knowledge of things in themselves. Kant's contemporary Reinhold suggested exactly this point; that things in themselves may even be spatial however

this is no something we can establish as we can not access the noumenon due to our a priori cognitions.

Problems for the metaphysical implications of Kant's thought if taken on a two-world, metaphysical reading include such things as the notion of identity; Kant says clearly that the identity and individuality of entities in the phenomenal world of appearances are constituted by their spatial and temporal positions and is also adamant that things in themselves are not spatial or temporal. On this view it seems like it would be impossible to match the identity of perceived things with things in themselves. However as we have seen, Kant's justification for things in themselves being non spatial and temporal is scarce, not least because we cannot have any knowledge of things in themselves. This problem of identity has traditionally been a problem for transcendental idealism in general however the one-world interpretation I have been outlining does present a possible solution. Allias has pointed out that on a one-world interpretation the notion of things in themselves are simply a secondary aspect of things that we do have knowledge, the interpretation does not distinguish between two separate kinds of thing but one kind of thing so there is no problem of identity between two-worlds; " the notion of things in themselves is not the notion of a separate kind of thing of which we do not have knowledge, but simply the idea that the things of which we have knowledge have a nature in themselves, that is entirely mind-independent" (2004, p. 677).

Similarly, Allison offers the solution that if Kant's idealism is purely epistemological some identity between the noumena and phenomena can remain. The two world view has held that we can have absolutely no
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knowledge of things in themselves and naturally Kant does hold this view however this is just to say that if every common object such as trees or rocks has a noumena counter object in the noumenon world we can not know these ordinary objects as they are things in themselves, that is to say, to know them independent of the conditions of human cognition we can however abstract from our experience and know that there is a relation between the noumena and phenomena simply because they are two aspects of the same world, not two separate worlds.

A common criticism levied against the one-world epistemological view I have argued for is that it only avoids the criticisms that the two-world theory is subject to by attributing to Kant a limited and conservative reading of his idealism (Langton 1998, p. 9). In reply I think it is important to state that although the Critique has been subjected to increasingly complex interpretations the one-world, two-aspect theory I have outlined in fact best represents the totality of Kant's thought as it makes compatible a much greater amount of this thought than the two-world interpretation. As we have seen the one-world view allows for Kant's empirical realism and plausible identity relations between the phenomena and noumena. It is precisely the complexity of the Critique however that makes it increasingly difficult to find any interpretation that fully incorporates and makes sense of the entirety of Kant's thought, the one-world view I have outlined above I believe currently best fits this description and is also supported by many passages in the Critique[1].

Throughout this essay I have attempted to demonstrate how moving away from a metaphysical and towards an epistemological distinction where the <https://assignbuster.com/does-transcendental-idealism-make-a-distinction-philosophy-essay/>

noumena/phenomena divide is a distinction between ways of considering the same objects either transcendental or empirical helps Kant's work survive many of the previous criticisms aimed at it. Furthermore I believe Allison's interpretation promises to lift us from the typical sceptical reading that denies we can accurately represent objects and as such is perfectly compatible with Kant's empirical realism coupled with the fact that the problems caused by a two-world view make the position increasingly untenable when interpreting Kant's transcendental idealism I hope I have gone some way to towards justifying a one-world interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism and diffusing a few of its objections.