

# Kant on Objects and Things

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## Abstract

I show that Kant's phrase *Ding an sich* denotes, not a type of thing, but a type of object: namely, an object which is per se a thing. My interpretation is based on the assumption that Kant follows the traditional use of the terms *objectum* and *res*.

Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon is a distinction between types of object: a "distinction of all objects in general into phenomena and noumena."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it is a distinction between two ways in which an act of intellection can have an object: either mediately, via a faculty of sense, or immediately, via the intellect alone:

Concepts can be logically compared without concerning oneself as to where their objects belong: whether as noumena for the intellect [*Verstand*]<sup>2</sup> or as phenomena for sensibility. If, however, we want to go with these concepts to their objects, then transcendental reflection is first necessary, [as to] for which cognitive power they are to be objects, whether for pure intellect or for sensibility. (*KrV* A269/B325)

Since the same thing may be the object of different faculties, such a distinction between types of object may not correspond to any distinction between types of thing.

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<sup>1</sup>Title of the third part of the *Analytic of Principles*, *KrV* A235/B294.

<sup>2</sup>*Verstand* is the standard German equivalent for  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma = \acute{\iota}aql = intellectus$ . Since I will be tracing Kant's terminology to Greek, Arabic, and Latin sources, it is convenient to translate *Verstand* as "intellect."

In what follows I will, accordingly, show that, when Kant says that a noumenon would be a *Ding an sich*, this phrase does not denote a type of thing, but rather a type of object. This is plausible because what *an sich* actually means is “per se” (and so “in itself” only insofar as “in itself” can also mean “per se” — other senses of “in itself” correspond rather to *in sich*). I will argue that a *Ding an sich* is an object of representation that is, per se, a thing: that is, an entity that is object to an act of representation precisely qua having its specific thingness (*realitas*).

Any object of representation must be *determinate* in two ways. It must, on the one hand, be the end or aim (*terminus*) of some act of representation; and it must, on the other hand, be delimited by a limit (*terminus*). *Realitas*, as I will show, involves determination in the second sense. A *Ding an sich* is thus object of an act which aims at its object precisely by way of its object’s limited (definite) character. We will see that such an act is, by definition, an act of intellectual intuition.<sup>3</sup>

In a final section, I will explain how the answer to the question, whether the object of our cognition is per se a thing, depends on the way in which our cognitive faculty is considered, and, on that basis, I will also explain why, in two special cases, Kant surprisingly says that our objects are *Dinge an sich*.

My approach will be to sketch the origins and traditional usage of the terms *objectum* and *res*, providing evidence along the way that Kant was aware of that usage. Given Kant’s general attitude towards terminological tradition,<sup>4</sup> it will then not be surprising to see that he can be best interpreted as following it.

## 1 What is an object?

The Latin *objectum* is a non-standard calque of Aristotle’s term *ἀντικείμενον*: the term whose regular equivalent is *oppositum*. Now *-jectum* and *-positum* are in general alternate translations of *-κείμενον*, so that for example one sometimes finds *suppositum* in place of *subjectum*. But in this case, as in

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<sup>3</sup>[see *ND* Ak. 1:392,17–21 “Ratio igitur ex indeterminatis efficit determinata. Et quoniam omnis veritas determinatione prædicati in subiecto efficitur, ratio determinans veritatis non modo criterium, sed et fons est, a quo si discesseris, possibilia quidem quam plurima, nihil omnino veri reperiretur”; “Quippe ambigua vox est sufficientis, ut idem abunde commonstrat, quia quantum sufficiat, non statim apparet; determinare autem cum sit ita ponere, ut omne oppositum excludatur, denotat id, quod certo sufficit ad rem ita, non aliter, concipiendam.” (393,19–22); *KrV* B420]

<sup>4</sup>In this context, see especially A256–7/B312.

others, the less frequent Latin translation came to be used for a specific, unusual sense of the Greek word, namely that occurring in the following passage from the *De anima*:

But if we must say about each of [the potencies of the soul], what it is — such as, what is the intellectual [potency], or the sensitive, or the nutritive — then even prior to this we ought to say what it is to intelligize and what [it is] to sense: for acts and operations are logically prior to potencies. But, if that is so, and if we ought to consider the ἀντικείμενα even before these, then we must first, for the same reason, determine concerning those, such as food and the sensible and the intelligible. (Aristotle, *DeAn.* 2.4.415<sup>a</sup>16–20)

*Objectum* is not to be found in the extant medieval translations here (they use *oppositum* = *khālif* as usual), but, nevertheless, it is clear that this passage is the origin of the term. The ἀντικείμενον of the act, as discussed here, is not its opposite, but rather, as we would say, its *object*.

The most important thing to notice about this is that “object” properly speaking is, like “opposite,” a relative term. If I call something an object, I must be prepared to say *of what act*.

Any act of any potency can be said to have an object. When the potency is in act, there is a *similitude* between this object and the subject of the potency (the subject in which the potency inheres). Here, for example, is Thomas’s comment on the above passage in Aristotle:

Acts have their species from objects: for if they are acts of passive powers, their objects are active; but if they are acts of active powers, their objects are as ends. But the species of operations are considered according to either of these. For heating and cooling are distinguished according as the principle of the one is heat, but of the other cold; and they also terminate in similar ends. For an agent acts towards this, that it induce its similitude in another. (Thomas Aquinas, *QQ. de an.*, 13 c., ll. 166–176)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Perhaps the choice of Thomas as an authority here seems unmotivated. But, while Kant is in many respects, if anything, a Scotist, the Leibnizian theory of representation, as Kant received, it is directly based on Thomistic angelology: see Thomas Aquinas, *De ver.*, 8.11 ad 3; *ST*, 1.51.2 ad 2. [see also *SCG* 2.25.10: *potentiae activae obiectum et effectus est ens factum*]

Here the object of an active heating potency, for example, is the thing heated, whereas the object of a passive potency of being heated is the agent cause that heats.

The object, however, takes on special importance in the act of a cognitive faculty<sup>6</sup> (or an appetitive one — but our concern here will be mostly with cognition). To see why, consider first an ordinary case of action and passion: for example, heating. To begin with, there is, in some actually cold subject, a potential to be hot, and, in some actually hot subject, a potential to heat. Hence there is a potential similitude, but actual contrariety, between the agent and the patient. After the potencies have passed into act, however, the subject of the passive power is similar in act to the hot thing to which it was previously contrary.<sup>7</sup> This is an instance of what, for Aristotle, is the ordinary case of motion: namely, an alteration from contrary to contrary. The patient is that which undergoes the alteration; the agent contains the principle from which the alteration can be derived — an abstract definition of agent and patient which holds even for Leibniz, that is, even where there is no question of direct causation of the passion by the action.

With the act of a cognitive faculty — that is, a representation — the situation is more complicated. Here the subject starts out potentially similar to many different things, but not actually contrary to any of them, just contradictorily opposed: it is equally *not* similar to any given one. After the action or passion of representation, on the other hand, the subject will be similar to just one, the represented object. The act of a cognitive faculty therefore involves *direction* towards its object, i.e. selection of one actual object out of the many that were equally potential. In this respect, an act of representation is like a type of motion which for Aristotle is unusual and anomalous: locomotion, motion in place. The principle that cognitive acts are specified by their objects is analogous to the principle that local motions are specified by their termini.<sup>8</sup> When Aristotle says that the object

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<sup>6</sup>I use “faculty” and “potency” interchangeably as translations of  $\delta\upsilon\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma = potentia$ , as Kant seems to do, even though Baumgarten reserves *facultas* = *Vermögen* for active potencies (Baumgarten, *Metaph.*, §216).

<sup>7</sup>See Aristotle, *DeAn.* 2.5.417<sup>a</sup>20: “for the dissimilar suffers [ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\chi\epsilon\iota = patitur$ ]; having suffered, however, it is similar”, and Thomas’s comment: “that which suffers [*patitur*], from the beginning, until it suffers, is contrary to the agent, but in the end, when it has suffered, it is similar; for the agent, in acting, assimilates the patient to itself” (*In De an.*, 2.10, ll. 33–6).

<sup>8</sup>See Aristotle, *EN* 10.4.1174<sup>a</sup>29–b<sup>5</sup> and Thomas’s comment: “For it is manifest that every translation [*latio*], that is, local motion, is motion from somewhere and to somewhere

is logically prior to the act, he is relying on the fact that the motions of living things — intellection, sensation, locomotion, and, presumably, also nutrition — are of this special, anomalous type.

## 2 Object as matter (*materia circa quam*)

This difference between the acts of ordinary active or passive potencies, on the one hand, and the acts of a faculty of cognition, on the other, is equivalent to a difference in the way the acts in question have matter.

By “matter,” Aristotelians normally mean that which, together with substantial form, constitutes a material substance. Regarding the composite as falling under some species of some genus, we can say that the form specifies, whereas the matter is generic. In that sense, every genus of material substances has a matter peculiar to it, and matter simpliciter (prime matter) corresponds to a highest genus, material substances in general. Matter so understood is *materia ex qua*: matter *out of which* something comes to be. The generation of a substance is a process in which the generic matter, which, as such, contains only the passive potency to be specified by any specific substantial form, passes into some specific act.

In the case of an alteration, however, where we are talking about the change of *accident*, no *materia ex qua* is involved: an ordinary accident like heat is not composed of substantial form and prime matter, and neither is a cognitive act. Still, in alteration, as in generation, there is a passage from potency into act, and hence there is something that plays a role analogous to that of matter in the case of generation. The subject (ultimately, the substance) *in which* the new accident comes to be is in a state of potentially having that accident before the alteration begins. This subject can therefore be regarded as a kind of matter: “matter in which,” *materia in qua*.

In ordinary passion, the *materia in qua*, taken together with its actual beginning quality, is all we need to specify the motion. Regarding some actually cold water *as* cold, for example, the alteration to come *must* be heating, and the *materia in qua*, for these purposes, may be regarded specifically as water that is potentially hot. A cognitive faculty, on the other hand, before some given act of representation (say, a representation of cinnabar), is in a state contradictorily opposed to that act (a state of *not* representing cinnabar),

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[*unde et quo*], that is from terminus to terminus. And so it is necessary that [local motion] be diversified in species according to the diversity of termini” (Thomas Aquinas, *In EN*, 10.5, ll. 90–94).

but not contrary to it (the act of representing cinnabar has no contrary, just as cinnabar itself does not). To specify the motion, in this case, we need to add to the potency of the subject (the potential to represent) also the potency of the object (the potential, e.g. of cinnabar, to be represented). The specific act of representation arises from the generic faculty only when both of these two potencies pass into act. Hence, in addition to the subject, the object can also be regarded as matter of the act: the “matter about which,” *materia circa quam*.

These three senses of “matter” all have their instances in Aristotle, and their terminological systematization can be traced back at least as far as Thomas. Augustine having defined “virtue” as “a good quality of mind,” Thomas remarks that “good quality” denotes the formal cause of virtue, whereas “mind” denotes its material cause:

A virtue has no *materia ex qua*, as neither has any other accident, but it has a *materia circa quam*, and a *materia in qua*, that is, a subject. But the *materia circa quam* is the object of the virtue, which could not be posited in the aforesaid definition, because the virtue is determined to a species by the object; but here a definition is being assigned to all virtue in common. Whence the subject is posited in place of the material cause, in [Augustine’s] saying that [virtue] is “a good quality of the mind.” (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1-2.55.4 c.)

Augustine’s definition applies just as well to cognitive virtue, e.g. to a specific science, as to ethical virtue. Thomas’s discussion implies, then, that a science has a double material cause. Qua science in general, its matter is the *materia in qua*, “the mind” (*mens*) as subject in which the cognitive faculties inhere. Qua specific science, however, its matter is *materia circa quam* — what we, following Aristotle,<sup>9</sup> might call its *subject matter*, although from the present point of view “object matter” seems more appropriate. Scotus follows exactly this line of thought. Having discussed the formal cause of the science of metaphysics, he adds:

On the material cause, it is to be noted that we are not speaking of the *materia ex qua* of the science, since accidents do not have such matter . . . nor of the *materia in qua* (that is the soul, and

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<sup>9</sup>*EN* 1.1.1094<sup>b</sup>12, 1.7.1098<sup>a</sup>28.

this according to its intellectual potency), but we are speaking of the matter about which the science is [*materia circa quam est scientia*], which by some is called the subject of the science, but is more properly called the object, as that about which a virtue is properly called the object of the virtue, not the subject. (Duns Scotus, *In Metaph.* 1 Prologus n. 32, 14,16–23)

It is implicit in Thomas, then, and explicit in Scotus, that a specific cognitive virtue has two types of matter: generic *materia in qua* and specific *materia circa quam*. The above discussion of representation shows why: the cognitive virtue is defined by its act, and an act of cognition — that is, a representation — must have these two kinds of material cause for the reasons discussed.

We can be certain that this terminology reached Kant, if only because, albeit rarely and late, he uses it himself.<sup>10</sup> Nor is it difficult to see how it reached him. Wolff, first of all, transmits the terminology unchanged:

Matter [of the ordinary type] is often called *materia ex qua*, to differentiate it from the subject, which is called *materia in qua*, and the object, which is called *materia circa quam*. (Wolff, *Ontologia*, §949)

The same terminology is found in Baumgarten (Baumgarten, *Metaph.*, §344), though with an important addition we will discuss below. Meanwhile, however, there is another channel of transmission, which, though not as clear or complete, is in some ways more important. Descartes, in the *Third Meditation*, introduces a distinction between a representation's degree of formal reality, on the one hand, and its degree of objective reality, on the other. Leaving aside, for the time being, the important point that reality is a matter of degree, note for present purposes that a representation has formal reality qua mode inhering in a cognitive subject, but objective reality qua referring to some object:

[It] is the very nature of an idea, that of itself it requires no formal reality besides that which it borrows from my thought, of which it is a mode; insofar, however, as this idea contains this or that objective reality rather than another, it must assuredly have this from some cause. (Descartes *Med.* 3, AT 7:41,17–23)

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<sup>10</sup>*Opus Postumum*, Ak. 22:311,26–312,2.

So, once again, the form (formal cause) of a representation is implicitly contrasted with matter in two different senses: generically, to the mind as subject of cognitive faculties (“my thought”), and, specifically, to the object.

It has often been recognized that this formal–objective distinction in Descartes derives from a late Scholastic distinction between formal and objective concepts, which Descartes would have known from Suarez. But Suarez, in turn, explains that distinction using the terminology of *materia circa quam*. He gives three different explanations of the contrast with “material” which is implied by the term “formal” here:

The act itself, or (what is the same) the word [*verbum*], by which the intellect conceives some thing or common *ratio*, is called the formal concept. . . it is called formal, either [a] because it is the ultimate form of the mind, or [b] because it represents the cognized thing [*rem cognitam*] formally to the mind, or again [c] because it is an intrinsic and formal determination [*terminus*] of mental conception, in which it differs from the objective concept. (Suarez, *Disputationes* 2.1.1)

In (a) the formality of the concept contrasts to the materiality of the mental faculty whose act it is, i.e. to *materia in qua*. In (b), the concept is said to represent the form of a thing, rather than the matter, i.e. the contrast is to the *materia ex qua* of the represented thing. In (c), finally, as Suarez immediately goes on to say, the contrast is to the *materia circa quam*:

That thing or *ratio* which is properly and immediately cognized or represented by the formal concept is called the objective concept . . . and this is rightly called objective, because it is not a concept as an intrinsic form determining [*terminans*] conception, but rather as object and the matter with which formal conception deals [*materia circa quam versatur formalis conceptio*], and towards which the gaze of the mind directly tends. (Ibid.)

The phrase, and the concomitant explanation of “formal,” don’t occur explicitly in the *Third Meditation* itself,<sup>11</sup> but both are found in the *Second Replies*:

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<sup>11</sup>“Material” is, however, used to refer to *materia circa quam* in the distinction between *falsitas formalis* and *falsitas materialis* (AT VII:43,26–30).

Although faith is commonly said to be about the obscure, this is to be understood only of the thing, or, that is, of the matter about which it deals [*de re, sive de materia circa quam versatur*] — not, however, that the formal *ratio* according to which we assent to things of faith is obscure; rather, on the contrary, the formal *ratio* consists in some internal light by which, supernaturally illuminated by God, we have faith that those [things] which are proposed as to be believed have been revealed by him. (AT 7:148,3–10)

Descartes's position then, is that there are two *things*, compared to each of which the intrinsic character of an idea may be called “formal”: on the one hand, the *res cogitans*, or *materia in qua*, of which the idea is an ultimate form (act); and, on the other hand, the *res cognita*, or *materia circa quam*, which is the idea's object. An idea's degree of formal reality is derived from that of the *res cogitans*, whereas its degree of objective reality is derived from that of the *res cognita*.

Now consider Kant's discussion of the universal criterion of truth. “It is clear,” he says,

that, since, in the case of [such a universal criterion], one abstracts from all content of the cognition (reference to its object) . . . a sufficient and at the same time universal criterion [*Kennzeichen*] of truth cannot possibly be given. Since we have already, above, called the content of a cognition its matter, one would have to say: no universal criterion of the truth of a cognition according to its matter can be demanded. . . .

But with respect to the cognition according to mere form (setting aside all content), it is, by the same token, clear that a logic, insofar as it produces the universal and necessary rules of the intellect, must present criteria [*Kriterien*] of truth in these very rules. (*KrV* A58–9/B83–4)

The matter of a representation, as opposed to its form, is here its content: that is, its object, that which it determines (aims at as *terminus*). “Matter” here, in other words, is *materia circa quam*, and Kant's point is the same one we saw in Thomas and Scotus above: the *materia circa quam* is what *specifies* the act, and hence cannot contribute to a *general* definition of its virtuousness. We can say in general what it is that makes a representation

virtuous, i.e. true, but only when we regard it as form, namely as the ultimate form (act) of a faculty of the mind. General logic is formal logic: “formal” in that (unlike transcendental logic) it concerns only the formal reality, and not at all the objective reality, of intellectual representations.

This fact about Kant’s use of “form” and “matter” is important in its own right: any attempt to understand, for example, the formality of logic, or of the pure forms of sense, using the implicit contrast with a *materia ex qua*, must inevitably end in confusion. Nevertheless, the main benefit will only accrue when we see how Kant uses this terminology to express disagreement with his predecessors, including Descartes and Baumgarten, on the relation between the form that determines the mind towards a specific object and the form that determines the specific nature of the *res cognita*: that is, between the objective reality of the representation and the formal reality of its object. To that end, let us now look more closely into the definition of *realitas*.

### 3 What is a thing?

Certain ancient uses of the Greek word *πρᾶγμα* are reflected in later philosophical uses of the Latin *res*,<sup>12</sup> but, for the most part, and in particular in the sense relevant here, the origin of the term lies rather in Arabic. In fact, to a great extent its origin lies in a single discussion in Avicenna, concerning the relationship between the terms “being” (*mawjūd*) and “thing” (*šay*). Are they synonyms? Is one of greater extent than the other?<sup>13</sup> Avicenna answers that, although all and only beings are things, nevertheless “being” and “thing” differ in meaning:

We say: the intention of “being” and the intention of “thing” are [separately] conceived [*mutasawwarān = imaginantur*] in the soul and are two [different] intentions. . . . For everything has a true nature [*ḥaqīqa = certitudinem*] which is that by which it is what it is. . . . It is manifest that every thing has a proper true nature, which is its quiddity, and it is known that the true nature of every thing, which is proper to it, is other than “being,”

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<sup>12</sup>See especially Aristotle, *Periherm.* 1.16<sup>a</sup>7.

<sup>13</sup>In explanation of why this question first arises in Arabic, it may be worth pointing out that the Arabic *šay*, unlike *πρᾶγμα* or, for that matter, *Ding*, has a quasi-pronominal use approximating that of the English word “thing.” In particular, the Arabic sentence *Kul šay huwa šay* sounds fully as tautologous as its English equivalent, “Everything is a thing.” This is not the case in Greek, Latin, or German.

which is synonymous with “what is affirmed.” . . . What is meant by “thing,” then, is this intention [i.e., that which has quiddity]. (Avicenna, *ŠIl.* 1.5, pp. 31,2–3, 10–11, 32,2)

This explanation is explicitly followed by Thomas:

Thus is imposed the name “thing” [*res*], which differs in this from “being”, according to Avicenna in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*: that “being” is taken from the act of being, whereas the name “thing” expresses the quiddity or essence of the being. (Thomas Aquinas, *De ver.* 1.1 c.)

It appears unchanged in Kant’s metaphysics lectures: “That a thing [*Ding*] is simply that which it is [*das, . . . was es ist* — i.e., *quod quid est*]: that is its reality [*Realität*]” (Kant, *Metaph.* an.-Korff, as quoted in Erdmann, ‘Mittheilungen’, 82).

Given this understanding of “thing,” to be a thing is necessarily to be determinate in the sense of being limited by a *terminus*. A being is a thing because, though it has something generic in common with other beings, it is specifically different than them. A full explanation of *realitas* must therefore refer not only to *quidditas* (*māhīya* = τὸ τί ἐστί), but also to *qualitas* (*kayfīya* = ποιότης) and *quantitas* (*kammīya* = ποσότης). Without going into too much detail, or claiming to offer definitions: a quality is, roughly, a respect in which different things can be similar, whereas quantity is that respect in which similar things can differ from one another. Limitation, then, must be either qualitative (discriminating, within a generically self-different manifold of things, between the similar ones inside the limit and the dissimilar ones outside) or quantitative (discriminating, within a generically self-similar manifold of things, between the less different ones inside the limit and the more different ones outside). We say what (*quid*) a thing is — that is, determine it, in the sense of limiting it — by saying what kind and how much (*quale et quantum*); quality and quantity, therefore, between them, comprise the predicates of things as such.<sup>14</sup>

It is far from clear, however, which of these two types of predicate are involved in the determination of a thing, and how the two are related. Aristotle, in difficult but influential passages, appears to give inconsistent accounts in this respect. He says, on the one hand, that the differentiae of substances

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<sup>14</sup>See Thomas Aquinas, *In Metaph.* 5.9.8; Kant, *KrV* A263/B319.

are always qualities.<sup>15</sup> This implies that, generically speaking, things form a self-different (extended) manifold, and that specification involves recognition of similarities within that diversity. But he also compares the essences of substances to numbers:

If substances are in some way numbers, they are so in this way, and not, as some say, [because they are] units. For the definition is a certain number, for it is divisible, and into indivisibles (for accounts [λόγοι = *al-kalim* = *rationes*] are not infinite), and a number is also such ... [and] neither the definition nor the essence [τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι = *mā huwa bil-ānīyah* = *quod quid erat esse*] will still be [the same] if anything is subtracted or added. (Aristotle, *Metaph.* 8.3.1043<sup>b</sup>32–1044<sup>a</sup>2)<sup>16</sup>

The Aristotelian tradition takes this last statement quite seriously. Here is Thomas again:

The differentia is that which constitutes the species. But anything is constituted in species, according as it is determined to a certain special grade among beings, because the species of things are like numbers, since they differ by addition and subtraction of unities, as is said in *Metaphysics* 8. (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.50.2 ad 1)

What might appear to be a vague analogy between numbers and definitions is here taken literally to mean that difference between species is difference in finite amount or *grade* of something or other, of which some beings have more and some have less. This implies that, generically speaking, things are self-similar (homogeneous), and that specification involves recognition of differences within that uniformity. So does the determination of things involve qualitative difference, or quantitative, or both?

A simple answer which accepts one of the two alternatives and rejects the other is to be found in Baumgarten:

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<sup>15</sup>*Metaph.* 5.14.1020<sup>a</sup>33–<sup>b</sup>1, <sup>b</sup>14–15; *Top.* 4.2.122<sup>b</sup>16–17, 4.6.128<sup>a</sup>26–7, 7.6.144<sup>a</sup>21–2. See also Porphyry, *Isag.*, c. “De differentia,” CAG 4.1:11,7–8: *διαφορά ἐστὶ τὸ κατὰ πλείονων καὶ διαφορόντων τῶ εἶδει ἐν τῶ ποῖον τί ἐστὶ κατηγορούμενον* = *differentia est, quod de pluribus et differentibus specie in eo quod quale sit praedicatur*.

<sup>16</sup>See also *Cat.* 6.4<sup>b</sup>20, 22–3.

To be a real being is a quality applicable [*conueniens*] to every being. And since in every being there is a certain number of realities, every being has a certain grade of reality. And since a grade of reality, than which a greater is possible, is called a *limit* (terminus, end), [a being] having a limit will be *finite* ... [whereas a being] not having a limit will be *infinite*... The being, therefore, having the maximum grade of reality, that is, the most real being [*ens realissimum*] is infinite; all the rest are finite. (Baumgarten, *Metaph.*, §248)

To say that all things have a quality of thingness in common is to say that, regarded as things, they are all absolutely similar. It then follows that species are analogous to numbers, i.e. are quantitative determinations. But this simple answer is distinctively Leibnizian, and based on the above discussion, we can already see why: according to Leibniz, absolute self-difference, i.e. extension, is an absurdity we think we understand only because of the confusion of our representations. Here as elsewhere, however, Kant defends a version of older, Scholastic views: in this case, he wants to show, against both Leibniz and Hume, that we have a coherent concept of continuous extended substance. Hence his answer, like that of his medieval predecessors, must be more complicated.

#### 4 Kant on empirical reality (the thingness of phenomena)

I hope to show that Kant means by “thing,” and consequently by “reality,” just what Avicenna, Thomas, Scotus, and Baumgarten do. As we have just seen, however, that doctrine involves both quality and quantity. To explain how it appears in Kant, we must pay attention to the distinctions he makes between different senses in which the objects of experience are (a) quanta and (b) qualia.

To give an initial sense of the difficulty, recall first that Kant assigns reality, negation, and limit to the category of quality. He agrees with Baumgarten, then, that we represent the object of our cognition as a thing insofar as we represent it as a limited quale. He also agrees — this is the content of the Anticipations of Perception — that the limitation of quality by which a thing is characterized is always limitation of it to a certain degree or grade. But *of what* is it a degree or grade? For Baumgarten, the answer is straightforward: all things as such are characterized by one and the same quality,

the quality of thingness as such, and the limited quality which characterizes any thing in particular is therefore simply a *degree of reality*. For Kant, on the other hand, it is no answer (is merely analytic) to say that this quality is reality: the question remains, what quality is that? A priori, the answer is not known: “of all *quality*, however (the real in appearances), we can know nothing further a priori than their intensive *quantity*, namely that they have a grade” (A176/B218). The answer must be learned a posteriori, and it is not a single answer for every object of sense, i.e. for every extended substance: “Matter fills a space, not through its mere *existence* but rather through a *particular moving force*” (*MAdN*, Ak. 4:497).<sup>17</sup> This complicates the account of the generic and specific in things. In some respect, the generic in things is, as for Baumgarten, their similar qualitative nature, while their specifying differentiae are intensive quantities. In some other respect, however, the generic is extension, and the specific is some particular quality (particular species of moving force).

A doctrine like this is already found in Thomas. He does hold, as we have seen, that reality as such is, or is analogous to, a quality common to all beings, while the limitation to a specific reality is by means of quantity, or something analogous to quantity. Here the generic quality plays the role of matter, in the sense of *materia ex qua*, while the quantitative differentia plays the role of form. In the case of beings actually composed of form and *materia ex qua*, Thomas makes this identification explicit:

But in material things, there is that which determines to a special grade, that is, the form, and another which is determined, that is, the matter; thus, the genus is taken from the former, and the differentia from the latter. (Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, loc. cit.)

In the analogy Thomas drew between essences and numbers, the important operation was therefore not addition, but subtraction: the essence of a thing is what limits the quality of reality, which it shares with all other such things, to a certain definite quantitative grade. This is the same conception which we saw above in Baumgarten.

But what of Aristotle’s statements that the differentiae of substances are qualities? These are difficult. Aristotle himself sometimes rejects putative

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<sup>17</sup>As Theorem 1 of the *Metaphysical Principles of Dynamics*, this commences the part of the metaphysics of nature corresponding to the category of quality. It is therefore Kant’s most general a posteriori answer to the question: what is reality?

differentiae on the grounds that they are qualities, and therefore accidents.<sup>18</sup> Presumably there are two different senses of “quality” at work here, and it isn’t difficult to see what the difference might be. From Avicenna on, all Aristotelians enforce a strict distinction in ontological status between substance and accident, such that any kind (species or genus) of being which is anywhere an accident could never enter into the essence of a substance. Insofar as the category of quality is a highest genus of beings, then, it is a genus all of whose members are accidents, and none of whose members are essential determinations of substances. Aristotle’s rejection of “qualities” as differentia can be understood as referring to the members of this genus of accidents, whereas the “qualities” which are differentiae of substances are not accidents, and hence not members of that genus.

We may distinguish two different ways of explaining this equivocation, however. One approach, typified by Scotus, is to say that the same logical definition or *ratio* which applies to the category (genus) of quality can also be interpreted in a more abstract, “transcendental” sense, in which sense it applies also to substantial differentiae:

It is to be understood, however, that, just as “act” is double [in sense] — first, that which makes being simpliciter in actu, and second that which presupposes being in actu and only makes being in actu *such* —, so too “form” is double and “quality” is double. . . . The differentia is taken from the first act, that is from the specific form, which is essential quality, and thus is predicated essentially in quale. . . .

To the second [objection above] I say that [the differentia] is a quality, according to what is said in *Metaphysics* 5, but not as quality is one of the most general [genera]; rather, equivocally, as form, quality, and act are the same transcendentals. (Duns Scotus, *In Isag.*, 28.6, 176,14–177,2 and 28.8, 177,8–10)<sup>19</sup>

On this approach, despite the equivocation, “quality” in a way means the same thing (has the same purely logical definition) in both cases, and so — this is the important point for our purposes — it turns out that the differen-

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<sup>18</sup>See e.g. *Top.* 4.1.120<sup>b</sup>27–8; *AnPo.* 1.22.83<sup>a</sup>24–30.

<sup>19</sup>This approach is based both on Thomas’s discussion of transcendental unity and plurality and on Avicenna’s discussion of the meaning of “form” (see Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1.30.3 c.; Avicenna, *ŠT* 1.2, 18,9–11).

tiae of substances are indeed *qualitative* in the abstract sense we introduced above. This puts Scotus in direct confrontation with Baumgarten.

Thomas takes a different approach. What is most properly called a “quality,” on his understanding, is what would correctly be given in answer to a *quale* question about a substance, whatever that turns out to be. The accidents called “qualities” are then the ones we tend to give to such questions *instead of* the proper, essential differentiae:

[Aristotle] says first, therefore, that one mode of quality is according as the differentia of substance is called quality . . . And it is so called because of this, that a differentia is predicated *in quale quid*. As, if it is asked, what kind of [*quale*] animal is a human?, we respond that it is bipedal; and what kind of animal is a horse?, we respond that it is quadrupedal; and what kind of a figure is a circle? we respond that it is *agonion*, that is, without an angle; *as if* the differentia of the substance were itself [such an accidental] quality. . . .

This mode of quality, however [i.e., “quality” as substantial differentia], Aristotle has omitted in the *Categories*, because it is not contained under the predicament of quality, with which he was there dealing. Here, however, he is dealing with the signification of this word, “quality.” (Thomas Aquinas, *In Metaph.* 5.16, nn. 987–88; my emphasis)<sup>20</sup>

The true differentia of our own species, for example, is a non-sensible part of our essence (perhaps in this case we know that it is *rational*). Such essential differentiae are, in general, unknown to us, however; instead we will tend to supply a sensible quality:

For even in sensible things, the essential differentiae themselves are unknown, and are thus signified by accidental differentiae which arise from the essential differentiae, as a cause is signified by its effect, as [for example] bipedal is posited as the differentia of human. (*De ent.*, c. 5, ll. 76–81)

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<sup>20</sup>The list of examples is Aristotle’s, but the key to Thomas’s interpretation is that he takes the ablative absolute *quasi differentia secundum substantiam qualitate existente* (reflecting the original *ὡς τῆς διαφορᾶς τῆς κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν ποιότητος οὐσης*) to mean “*as if* the differentia of the substance were itself a quality” (*ac si ipsa differentia substantiae qualitas sit*).

Note, moreover, that not just any members of the genus of quality are given as differentiae in the above examples: rather, in every case the quality in question is a *figure* ( $\sigma\chi\eta\mu\alpha$ : see Aristotle, *Cat.* 8.10<sup>a</sup>11).

Thomas can explain why figure plays this role. Materiality, regarded as a mode of being, is characterized by the incomplete unity of form: forms in matter are always, in principle, possibly common to many individuals. There is, therefore, always a distinction per accidens between an individual material substance and what it is, i.e. its quiddity:

The quiddities of things are not other than the things except per accidens, as, for example, the quiddity of a white human and a human are not the same, because the quiddity of a white human contains in itself nothing but what pertains to the species of human, but that which I say, “a white human,” has in itself something other than that which belongs to the human species. But this happens in all [things] which have form in matter, because in them there is something other than the principle of the species. For the nature of the species is individuated by the matter: thus the principle of individuation and the accidents of the individual are other than the essence of the species. (Thomas Aquinas, *In De an.* 3.2, ll. 69–79)

But the accidents of the individual are not all on the same level, since “the sensible qualities, such as white and black, hot and cold, are founded in quantities” (Ibid., n. 8) — since, that is, these qualities are qualities of extended things, and can exist only in a three-dimensional extension. This, Thomas continues, is the basis for the possibility of mathematics:

There are, therefore, some forms that require matter under a determinate disposition of sensible qualities; and such are all natural forms, and natural [things] therefore involve [*concernunt*] sensible matter. But there are some forms which do not need matter under a determinate disposition of sensible qualities, though they do require matter existing under quantity: such as triangle, and square, and such: and these are called mathematical, and they abstract from sensible matter, but not from intelligible matter, insofar as, in the intellect, continuous quantity remains, abstracted from sensible quality. (Ibid., n. 9)

So, in other words: although, as far as the specific form is concerned, the genus is a quality (reality) and the differentia is like a quantity (formed by addition and subtraction), with respect to the sensible *individual* it is the reverse. Materiality, which is generic to sensible substances qua individual, implies continuous three-dimensional quantity, and it is specified by a quality: namely, by figure. “For figure is something belonging to magnitude, because it consists in the contermination of magnitude” (Ibid., 2.25, ll. 179–81).

If Kant wants to defend the concept of a continuous extended substance, he must adopt some version of this doctrine. Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, the Scholastic doctrine appears in Kant importantly changed, in a way that reveals, finally, just what Kant means by “thing.”

Quality is the second of Kant’s categories, whereas quantity is the first. Qua merely intelligible, in other words, the object of our cognition is determined first as a quantum and then only secondly as quale. This indeed follows from the very nature of discursive intellection, as Kant understands it. Whereas an intuitive intellect would be one principle from which what is manifold first derives (emanates) and to which it then returns (reverts), the manifold object of a discursive intellect is represented via a principle of unity from which that object’s manifoldness is *not* derived. The manifold first comes before such an intellect, then, as simply — that is, homogeneously — self-different. The category of quantity, however, regarded purely formally (purely as a characterization of the subject whose concept it is), is just the power of a discursive intellect to represent its object as the identical in such a homogeneous manifold: “the category of the synthesis of the homogeneous in an intuition in general” (*KrV* B162). Hence it is the first power of such an intellect, and also the first predicate of its object: first in order of predication, i.e., least determinate, most generic.

*Quantity* is the same posited several times. *Pure* quantity is that in which it is not asked at all, *what* is posited, but rather it is something in general — as in arithmetic. Quantity in *concreto* is that in which that which is posited is determinate, that is: in which a certain *quality* is given for the unit. (Refl.. 3764, Ak. 17:286,18–22)

Here again, as in Thomas, the determining quality is figure:

Now, of all intuition, none is given a priori except the mere form of appearances, space and time; and a concept of these, as quanta,

can be demonstrated [*darstellen*] a priori in intuition, i.e. constructed, either together with their quality (their figure), or also, through number, [as] their mere quantity (the mere synthesis of the homogeneous manifold). (*KrV* A720/B748)

As for the contrary view, Kant in the Amphiboly derives it from the error he finds fundamental in Leibniz, namely the attempt to use the categories transcendently:

With respect to things in general, too, unlimited reality was seen as the matter of all possibility, and the limitation thereof (negation) as the form whereby one thing differs from another according to transcendental concepts. . . . And so, too, in fact, would it have to be, if the pure intellect could be immediately referred to objects, and if space and time were determinations of things per se. (A266–7/B322–3)

So far, then, Kant holds, in opposition to both Thomas and Baumgarten, that quantity is generic, and that it is specified by quality. Kant complicates this view in two ways, however.

The first complication arises from the fact that our category of quantity has even a possible object only insofar as there is “an intuition on hand” to show “*how* a thing can be the same as many together, i.e. can be a quantum” (B288; my emphasis). A pure quantum is therefore, for us, more than just an object of discursive intellection (and therefore of *some* faculty of sensible intuition) in general. It is already object of our species (*Art*) of sensibility, which as “an entirely particular subjective condition” (A268/B323–4) must have its specific differentia, namely a specific quality:

If, however, [space and time] are only sensible intuitions in which we determine all objects barely [*lediglich*] as appearance, then the form of intuition (as a subjective quality [*Beschaffenheit*]<sup>21</sup> of sensibility) precedes all matter (the sensations). (*KrV* A267/B323)

But if our intellect determines a possible object only with the aid of this specific faculty of sense, then, given that faculties are relative to objects, the

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<sup>21</sup>For the equivalence of *Beschaffenheit* and *qualitas*, see Baumgarten, *Metaph.*, §69 n. 3; Kant, Refl. 5645, Ak. 18:287,14.

object of our cognition derives a specific nature from the specific quality of our sensibility, not only, obviously, qua object of sensibility, but also qua object of intellection. The general object of *our* concept of quantity, therefore, is not just the simply self-different per se, but rather the the simply self-different regarded as everywhere the same by virtue of its uniformity with respect to a certain specific quality. *Continuity* is the quality specific to the object of *our* sensibility by which it is homogeneously manifold and everywhere the same, i.e. a whole divisible into parts of the same nature as the whole. The same holds, moreover, for our concept of quality: a single generic quality specific to our form of (external) sense underlies all our specific qualitative determinations. In this case the generic quality is *direction*: the quality specific to the object of our external sense with respect to which the object of *our* concept of quality is everywhere uniformly self-different, i.e. is a whole everywhere possibly divisible, according to its own internal nature, into parts of different natures from the whole and from each other.

These qualities of continuity and direction are not directly relevant to the issues between Kant and his predecessors, because neither is analogous to the generic quality of reality as understood by Thomas or Baumgarten. That quality of reality, recall, was supposed to be a matter of degree: a generic quality which could be quantitatively specified. But continuity, of course, is not a matter of degree, and neither is direction, understood absolutely: it is *relative* direction, that is, angle, that we measure in “degrees.” But although neither continuity nor direction is quantitatively determinable, direction, unlike continuity, not only allows but requires qualitative specification: such is its very function, as outlined above. Every individual object of our category of quality must therefore lie in some completely determinate direction. So the conclusion from all of this, which should not be surprising, is that objects of *our* (schematized) categories can be regarded as possibly different (external to us and/or to one another) insofar as they lie in possibly different determinate directions.

The second complication arises from the fact that a discursive intelligence only ever has an *actual* object of cognition insofar as that object is empirically given to it, i.e. affects it in some particular way, i.e. causes some determinate series of sensations. But this means also that even a possible object of our cognition must have a particular, determinate potency so to affect us. Hence there is yet another generic quality common to all different possible objects of our categories: all such objects are similar in that such a potency belongs to them. We know only a posteriori what the generic quality in question is

— namely, moving force. But we do know something a priori about the way this generic qualitative nature is specified: namely, that it is quantitatively determined by degree and qualitatively determined by direction.

Kant can therefore make the same distinction Thomas does between the mathematical specification of sensible things according to figure and their physical specification according to grade of reality. But rather than basing it, as Thomas does, on the distinction between form and *materia ex qua*, he bases it on the distinction between form and *materia circa quam*, and in the opposite way. The objects of our cognition, insofar as they conform to principles inherent in us — insofar, that is, as they are objects of our pure faculties alone — are figured continuous extensions lying in different directions. Insofar, however, as they empirically cognizable — insofar, that is, as they contain principles of their own according to which we are affected — they are centers of particular degrees of attractive and repulsive moving force. This empirical character, taken generically, is what Kant, in the Anticipations of Perception, calls “reality,” because it corresponds most closely to what is called “reality” by his predecessors: a generic qualitative nature whose specification yields the determinate essences of substances. But this generic quality is not *known* generically, in the sense that we could derive a list of all possible things from it by progressive limitation. Kant discusses that view, and dismisses it as transcendental illusion, in the Ideal of Pure Reason. What we know, rather, and that only a posteriori, is specific qualities of reality (particular types of moving force). Empirically given objects are *things* insofar as they possess some such quality of reality to a determinate (i.e., definite) degree.

## 5 When is an object not, per se, a thing?

We have seen that, although any being can be thought of either as an object or as a thing, those are, in principle, two distinct thoughts. To consider a being as object is to consider it as “determinate” in the sense that it is an aim (*terminus*) towards which an act of representation can be directed: the *materia circa quam* by virtue of which the act has not only formal but also objective reality. To consider it as thing, on the other hand, is to consider it as “determinate” in the sense that it is limited by some limit (*terminus*) — which, at least in the case of sensible, corporeal substance, means to consider it as composed of quantitative form and qualitative *materia ex qua*. The distinction will not seem illuminating, however, if one of these kinds of

determination always takes place through the other. If an intellectual representation always represents a being precisely as what that being is, i.e. according to its quiddity, then the being is aim (*terminus*) of the representation precisely as subject of its specific limitation (*terminus*). This is the rationalist position. As Baumgarten puts it:

If a being is conceived as determinable, it is called the *materia ex qua*; [if it is conceived as lying] in the act of determination itself, [it is called] the *materia circa quam* (the object, the subject of occupation); the determination having been made, [the being is then called] the *materia in qua*, and this together with the *materia ex qua* is called the *subject*. (*Metaph.*, §344)

Here the aim of representation is a specific substance, and the substantial form is both the aim (*terminus*) of an intellectual act of reference and the limit (*terminus*) by virtue of which the substance has its specific essence, and is thus subject to, i.e. *materia in qua* for, its appropriate modes. Put this way, in fact, the conclusion may seem inevitable: how else *could* a cognitive faculty be directed at a specific object, if not by way of the limitation which makes that object what it is?

Kant holds that this seeming inevitability is an illusion. To see why, consider first a similar argument about the object of a practical faculty: that no action has a bad object, because every being as such is good. To this, Thomas responds:

Although exterior things are good in themselves [*in seipsis*], nevertheless they do not always have a due proportion to this or that action. And thus, insofar as they are considered as objects of such actions, they do not have the *ratio* of good. (Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, 1–2.18.2 ad 1)

Although the being object to the action is always in itself something good, a good object nevertheless may not be good per se: may not be good, that is, *qua object of this action*. It would be possible, although confusing, to put the point this way: although the will, and therefore the action, always has as object something good in itself (*bonum in se*), nevertheless its object may not be a good in itself (*bonum per se*) — may not be good qua object.

That the theoretical intellect might be directed at an object other than by the quiddity of that which is its object is a parallel possibility. Although

that which is object of a cognitive act, that is, of a representation, is always, in itself, a thing, nevertheless it need not always be a thing *per se*: need not be real qua object of this representation. *Realism*, as opposed to nominalism, about the object of some representation, is the view that its object is a *res per se*. The opposed, nominalist view is not, then, that there is no such object (which would mean that the representation fails to represent), nor that the object being is not real (which is impossible), but rather that the object represented is not real *as such*, i.e., that the character under which the intellect represents it is not its quiddity.

The most famous case of such disputes has to do with universals. More important for our purposes, however, is the dispute about individual accidents.<sup>22</sup> If, for example, I represent some substance, A, as *one* — is there some *res* B not included in the quiddity of A, i.e. really distinct from A, such that the nature of B is to be *the unity of A*? If not, then the name “unity” can be called a “pure name,” in that it is not predicated in quid of any *res*. In this sense, Avicenna, and, following Avicenna, Thomas, are already nominalists about “one” in the most general sense, that is, about transcendental unity. But the point is made more clearly by Scotus:

“One,” as distinguished from “being,” names something accident, as a passion, to being — taking “accident” broadly, with Avicenna, for everything which is outside the essential *ratio* of something. It is clear that the argument which the Commentator [i.e., Averroes] makes against Avicenna in *Metaphysics* 4 is not valid, because it would indeed conclude [correctly] if “one” named an accident really distinct from substance ... but it does not conclude [correctly], since “one” thus names an accident which is [only] outside the formal *ratio* of being. (Duns Scotus, *In De an.*, 21.20, pp. 214,8–16)

Here Scotus defends Avicenna’s calling *one* an “accident” by saying that it

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<sup>22</sup>For more on this, and with much explicit reference to Kant, see especially Martin, *Ockham*. I owe a great debt to Martin in directing my attention to these issues, although, in the end, I find that I disagree with him on several important counts. Perhaps most saliently: it will turn out, on my interpretation, that Kant is actually closer to Scotus than to Ockham. More generally and more fundamentally, Martin, to my mind, underestimates the extent to which Kant’s thought and terminology is traditional (in particular, with respect to the term “transcendental”), and also undervalues Kant’s systematicity — in fact, comes close to commentators such as Strawson and Bennet in his scorn for it (see e.g. Martin, *Kant*, pp. 85–6, 89, 91, 96, 101, 106).

isn't a *real* accident. In denominating a substance, A, as "one," we are indeed not referring to it via its quiddity: the *ratio* (λόγος) by which we refer to it is not the *ratio* of A's quiddity, in relation to which A is called a "thing."<sup>23</sup> Not, however, because that *ratio* includes some *other* thing, some further degree of reality beyond that of A. Rather: we are referring to that very being, A, but, so to speak, indirectly, by means of a predicate which doesn't say *what* (*quid*) A is. So, although the object of our representation *one* is a being, namely A, and therefore, like every being, is a thing, nevertheless its object (the *unit*) is not *as such* a thing: it is not a thing per se.

Now Scotus, in this context, is explicitly discussing only the *transcendental* unity that belongs to every being as such. The unity which falls under the category of quantity is according to him a real accident: basically, continuity. More radical nominalists have held, however, that there are no real accidents whatsoever except for certain qualities (for example, colors). Every *res*, therefore, is either a substance or one of those real qualities:

So therefore I say that Aristotle's intention was . . . to posit that every thing [*res*] is either a substance or a quality. And if he is found somewhere to say that substance is not quantity, or that quality is not quantity, he should be understood [to mean] that this proposition: "substance is quantity," is not per se; nor, further, this one: "quality is quantity." And that is because the name "quantity," when it is used [*accipiatur*] for permanent continuous quantity, connotes that one part is distant from another in situation, whereas the name "substance" or "quality" does not so [connote]. (William of Ockham, *SL*, 1.45, pp. 144-5)

And perhaps Ockham could have gone farther, and denied even the reality of all qualities. (Some think he would have, if not for worries about transubstantiation.) But wouldn't even he have had to stop there? To be a nominalist about, say, quantity, is to hold that the representation of a being as quantum is an indirect, and therefore *mediate*, representation: if I represent via a character which fails to specify *what* is so represented (i.e., which is not predicated in quid), then I must depend on some second representation for direction towards the object. And that second representation must

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<sup>23</sup>It is not the *ratio substantiae* = *qawl al-jawhar* = λόγος τῆς οὐσίας, i.e. the *oratio quid est esse significans* = *qawl al-dāll 'alā māhīyat al-šai'* = λόγος ὁ τί ἦν εἶναι σημαίνων. See Aristotle, *Cat.* 1.1<sup>a</sup>2; *Top.* 1.5.101<sup>b</sup>38.

seemingly be a further intellectual act which, so to speak, aims straight at the being in question, representing it as a thing, i.e. as what it is. Without such an underlying *immediate* representation, the mediate one would be without content, that is, without *materia circa quam*. And so it seems that, no matter how radically nominalist one is about accidents — that is, about representations of beings via their non-essential predicates — one can't possibly be nominalist about the category that represents beings as the *subjects* of predication, namely the category of substance.

According to Kant, this conclusion would be correct, *if* the representation by which our intellect is in immediate relation to objects were itself intellectual. In that case, our representations of substances would have to be representations the objects of which were, per se, things. But, of course, Kant holds that we have no such immediate intellectual representations — that is, no intellectual intuitions:

In whatever mode and through whatever means a cognition may refer to [its] objects, that through which it refers to them immediately, and to which all thought aims as its means [of reference], is *intuition*. This only takes place, however, insofar as the object is given to us; and this, again, is only possible, for us humans at least, insofar it affects the mind in a certain way. (*KrV* A19/B33)

All our acts of representation aim at their objects, ultimately, by way of a *passive* faculty, which is to say: the ultimate and immediate determination (reference) to the object is established, not according to any principle in us, but according to a principle *in the object*. So this immediate determination occurs without our having any representation at all of the quiddity of the object, of what that being is to which we refer — rather, the object, so to speak, has a representation of us (a principle according to which it affects us). Kant's view, therefore, that the objects of our cognitive acts are never, per se, things, is based on his view that they are objects of sensible, rather than intellectual intuitions; that is: that they are phenomena, rather than noumena. Every noumenon, every object of an intuitive intellect, would be, *an sich*, a thing; the objects of our discursive intellection, however, are things, indeed, but not *an sich*.

## 6 The noumenon in the negative sense and the empirical object as *Dinge an sich*

I take it the main point, about the meaning of *Ding an sich*, has now been established. It is worth examining a few contexts in which Kant uses the phrase, however, if only in anticipation of certain possible objections.

With this in mind, I begin with what is, or should be, a familiar point, namely that the distinction between potency and act is properly speaking relative:

We must distinguish with respect to potency and entelechy. . . . For there is a certain [sense of] “knower” [ἐπιστήμον = *sciens*], such as [that in which] we might say that a human being is a knower, because the human [as such] is among the knowers and those that have knowledge/science [ἐπιστήμη = *scientia*]; but there is [also a sense such] as [that in which] we say that [only] the one having grammatical [knowledge/science] is already a knower. Each of these is not potent [δυνατός] in the same way, but, rather, the one [is potent] because the genus and the matter are such, whereas the other because [he or she] is capable [δυνατός] of speculation at will, if none among the external [causes] prevents it. (Aristotle, *DeAn.* 2.5.417<sup>a</sup>22–8)

The distinction made here is traditionally referred to as the distinction between first and second potency, and (as Aristotle implies) it goes along with a distinction between first and second act. Every human, for example, is potentially knowing, i.e. possesses a cognitive faculty. That is a first potency, and its act is actually to know something, i.e. to possess a science. But this first act can in turn be regarded merely as a potency — the second potency — since the one who has acquired a science continues to possess it even while asleep or occupied with other things. The second act, which is act relative to this second potency, is the speculation (θεωρία = *speculatio*) of what is known.

Recall, however, that, just as potencies are defined by their acts, so acts are defined by their objects. The distinction between first and second potencies therefore also implies a distinction between first and second objects. The object, or matter (*materia circa quam*) of the first act is not the same as that of the second act. In the case of cognitive faculties, moreover, the relationship between the two is far from straightforward. In the act of such

a faculty — that is, a representation — the subject in which the faculty inheres becomes assimilated (adequated) to some one actual object among the many that were possible in the state of mere potency, and this requires determination, that is, direction. In particular: the first act of such a faculty involves a direction towards its object. But this first act is itself the second potency, and so the second object is object of a faculty which, *as faculty*, already includes this direction towards the first object. The generic nature of the second object is therefore correlate to that first direction.

Whether or not this second object is per se a thing will then depend on the relationship between the principles according to which the first and second faculties are directed to their respective objects. If the two principles are the same, such that the direction of the second faculty simply adds further determination to the direction of the first, then a second object will be the aim of reference just insofar as its essence is some particular specification of its general nature: that is, it will be an object just insofar as it is a thing. If, on the other hand, the two principles are different, then the further specification of the second object as thing will be different than its further determination as object.

Kant makes, with respect to our cognition, not just one, but at least two distinctions between prior and posterior potency. In other words, he distinguishes between a first, second, and third cognitive faculty, and therefore between a first, second, and third object. This three-way division follows from the nature of our discursive intellectual faculty, which can be considered:

1. As *pure discursive intellect*, that is, as cognitive faculty of a discursive intelligence in general, without regard to the species of its sensibility. The object of this first faculty (the first object) is the *transcendental object*.
2. As *pure cognitive faculty*, including both pure intellect and pure sensibility. The objects of this second faculty (second objects) are *appearances*.
3. As the faculty of *pure empirical cognition*, i.e., empirical cognition in general, in abstraction from any specific sensation — in other words, the science or knowledge of nature (physics). The objects of this faculty (third objects) are *physical things* (bodies).

The act of the first faculty is the second faculty (discursive intellection of an indeterminate spatiotemporal object), and the act of that second faculty is the third faculty (discursive intellection of a body in general). The act of the third faculty is the cognition of some actual individual body. These faculties are always already in act (all cognition begins with experience), but we can still distinguish potency and act in such cases by abstraction.

The act of the faculty (1), the pure discursive intellect, is due to our own specific nature as subjects in which cognitive faculties inhere, in particular due to the pure form of our intuition. Nevertheless the actuation of the first faculty is *passive*, in the sense that our form of intuition cannot be derived from any principle internal to the nature of a discursive intelligence as such. This self-affection, of course, is always one and the same, and so therefore is the first act: our pure discursive intellect has always already suffered its specification by the human form of sensibility.

The topic of the First Critique, however, is for the most part faculty (2) above, the specifically human faculty of pure cognition, i.e., including our specific form of sense. And it was about the second object, the object of this second faculty, that we above concluded that, since it is a phenomenon rather than a noumenon, it is not a *an sich* a thing. We can reformulate the train of thought leading up to that conclusion in light of the above observation about second objects in general.

The second faculty, that is, the pure human faculty of cognition, is the same as the single a priori act of the first. Following what we said above, then, we expect that the direction of the first faculty will be reflected in the generic character of the objects of the second. But this means that the basis for direction toward second objects, and hence the precondition for any attribution of reality to them, is itself the result of a principle in the subject — that is, it is *ideal*:<sup>24</sup>

The proposition: All things are next to one another in space,  
holds [*gilt*] under the limitation: when these things are taken as  
objects of our sensible intuition. If I here join this condition to

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<sup>24</sup>So note that, although the opposition between realism and nominalism is not the same as the opposition between realism and idealism, “real” means the same in both cases: the question in the first case is whether or not a representation refers to its object by way of the quiddity, the *realitas*, of that object; in the second case, the question is whether the representation conforms to the quiddity (*realitas*) of its object or to the quiddity of the subject in which it inheres as a mode: the quiddity of the mind, which is the common formal reality of every idea (representation) as such.

the concept, and say: All things, as external appearances, are next to one another in space, then this rule holds universally and without limitation. Our exposition teaches, accordingly, the reality (i.e. the objective validity [*Gültigkeit*]) of space with respect to everything that can come before us externally as object, but, at the same time, the *ideality* of space with respect to things, when they are considered [*erwogen*] through reason as such [*an sich*], i.e. without regard to the quality [*Beschaffenheit*] of our sensibility. (*KrV* A27–8/B43–4)

The generic nature of the second object, as figured continuous extension, is correlate to the specific quality of our pure cognitive faculty. But further direction towards a specific second object proceeds, not from our specific quality as subjects, but from the qualitative nature of the object, which affects us according to a principle of its own. The conclusion that the second object is not *an sich* a thing follows from this difference between the principle (human nature) according to which the first faculty is directed and the principle (nature of external things) according to which the second faculty is directed.

But what of the first and third objects?

Since the self-affection which actuates the first faculty is always one and the same, that faculty always has a single actual, specific object — an a priori object — which is specified by the qualities of continuity and direction. Its direction towards this object is not the limitation of anything homogeneously manifold: directionality does not itself lie in some direction relative to the pure discursive intellect, such that we could turn through an angle from our form of sensibility to another. The *general* object of the first faculty therefore not only lacks determination, but lacks any principle of determinability:

Thought is the action [*Handlung*] of referring a given intuition to an object. If the species of this intuition is in no way given, then the object is merely transcendental, and the intellectual concept [*Verstandesbegriff*] has none other than a transcendental use. . . . The merely transcendental use of the categories is thus in fact no use, and has no determinate, or even, with respect to the form, determinable object. (A247–8/B304)

This is why the first faculty, the pure discursive intellect, represents no *thing* at all: neither phenomenon, nor noumenon, nor some more general kind of thing (a *Ding überhaupt*).

In the transcendental synthesis of the manifold of representations in general, thus in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am per se, but rather only that I am. *This representation is a thought, not an intuition.* (B157)

The pure categories, which are components of this first faculty (the results of its hitherto little-attempted analysis), do not, therefore, in their restriction by the form of sensibility, pass from the representation of a thing in general to a more specific thing, but rather first come to represent a thing at all:

Although the schemata of sensibility first realize the categories, they themselves likewise restrict [*restringieren*] them, i.e. limit [*enschränken*] them to conditions which lie outside the intellect (namely in sensibility). (A146/B185–6)

Hence the pure categories lack objective *realitas*: they do not represent their object as *res*.

If the generic object of the first faculty, the transcendental object, is in no way represented as real, how can the question even arise as to whether it is real per se, i.e., a *Ding an sich*? The answer is that it arises only in a way which is, as it should be, thoroughly disappointing. The object of pure discursive intellection, or in other words what Kant calls a “noumenon in the negative sense,” is indeed a thing, but only because our representation of it is the product of abstraction:

If under a noumenon we understand a thing [*Ding*], insofar as it is not *the object of our sensible intuition*, in that we abstract from the species of our intuition of it; this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense. (B307)

The actual object (the object specified by our form of intuition) is a thing, and so when we abstract from the specific quality which determined that object, we are still left with a representation of an object that is a thing, only: we have abstracted from the feature of our whole actual representation that attributed to it any determinate or determinable reality. In other words: the object so considered completely lacks determination in the sense of limitation, in a way that perfectly matches its complete lack of determination as an aim of reference. It is an *ens rationis*: “the object of a concept to which no specifiable [*anzugebende*] intuition corresponds, = *nothing*” (A290/B347).

And so this object is a thing just insofar as it is an object (namely, not at all): that is, it is a *Ding an sich*. It is of this empty correlate of the faculty of discursive intellection as such that Kant says:

that objects are as such [*an sich*] quite unknown to us, and that what we call outer objects are nothing but mere representations of our sensibility, whose form is space, but of whose true correlate [*Correlatum*], i.e. the *Ding an sich selbst*, nothing is thereby cognized, nor can be cognized, after which, however, we never ask even in experience. (A30/B45)

In other words: when we think the first, transcendental object as real, we think it as a *Ding an sich*, but this, our general representation of it, is not even *in potentia* a specific, determinate representation of a thing.

As for the third object: what can be said a priori about an object of the second faculty is, first of all, that it is a figured continuous extension lying in a certain direction, and, secondly, that it has some power of affecting us, according to which affection (i.e., the sensation) we are directed toward it as object. An object so described is what Kant calls an *appearance*: “That intuition which refers to the object via sensation is called *empirical*. The indeterminate object of an empirical intuition is called *appearance*” (A20/B34). But now the character which was subjective relative to the second faculty, that is, sensation, will appear as objective relative to the third faculty. A particular power of affecting us (via a moving force) belongs to the generic nature of the third object, i.e. the empirical object, the empirical *materia circa quam*. This explains the distinction which Kant makes between metaphysical and empirical matter. Metaphysical matter is the second object (the second *materia circa quam*):

If I should explain [*erklären*] the concept of matter, not through a predicate which belongs to itself as object, but rather merely through the relationship to the faculty of cognition in which the representation can be given to me at all [*allererst*], then matter is any object of outer sense; and this would be the merely metaphysical explanation [*Erklärung*] of it. (Ibid., Ak. 4:481,2–6)

Empirical matter, on the other hand, is the third object, the object of the science of mathematical physics: “the movable, insofar as such can be an object of experience” (*MAdN*, Ak. 4:554,6–7).

But the subject of cognition, qua subject of the third faculty, has already been generally affected by the empirical object. As a result, the specification of the third object as to degree and direction of moving force is at the same time its further determination as aim of reference. The empirical object, as object of mathematical physics, is thus *an sich* a thing, i.e., *an sich* real. What remains ideal are only the accidental ways in which particular humans are affected by particular objects, insofar as they are not understandable as degree or direction of force:

For in this case that which originally [i.e., relative to the second faculty] is mere appearance, e.g. a rose, counts, in an empirical sense, as a *Ding an sich*, which nevertheless can appear differently, with respect to color, to each eye. (*KrV* A29–30/B45)

Relative to the third faculty, then, the distinction between what is *an sich* real in the object, on the one hand, and what belongs to its mere subjective appearance, on the other, is a distinction with positive content on both sides.

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