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Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 55, Number 1, January 2017,
pp. 131-142 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2017.0005>



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Kant on Cognition, Givenness, and Ignorance

ANDREW CHIGNELL*

ABSTRACT My goal in this paper is to examine two central aspects of Kant's theory of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) in the context of the account offered by Eric Watkins and Marcus Willaschek. I first focus on what it is for an object to be "given" to the mind and how such "givenness" (allegedly) underwrites both mental representation and reference. I then consider Watkins and Willaschek's interpretation of Kant's claim that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves, and conclude by sketching an alternative (and less empiricistic) account of that claim.

KEYWORDS Kant, cognition, reference, ignorance, things-in-themselves

ERIC WATKINS AND MARCUS WILLASCHEK PROVIDE a valuable service to people working on Kant's epistemology and philosophy of mind by laying out a synoptic picture of Kant's view of theoretical cognition (*Erkenntnis*). Their picture incorporates admirably clear accounts of the familiar building blocks of cognition—sensation, intuition, concept, and judgment—as well as some innovative interpretive theses of their own.

Watkins and Willaschek's basic claim is that, for Kant, theoretical cognition is "a mental state [or "representation"] that determines a given object by attributing general features to it" (W&W, 84). So Watkins and Willaschek view Kantian cognition fundamentally as a mental state of "awareness"—one that has both intuitive (sensible) and discursive (thought) elements, and that is directed at an "object." Their example of an object throughout the paper is a red ball, but presumably open-air spaces or the sky or the ocean would also count—not exactly 'objects' in the colloquial sense, but still 'objects' of our cognitional awareness.

Because it is an effort to provide a synoptic account of theoretical cognition, the paper covers a lot of ground very quickly—it could almost be a précis for a book.¹ In this brief comment, I will focus on two main elements of Watkins and

¹In fact, I think there is one Kant scholar, and perhaps more than one, who is currently writing a book on Kant's theory of cognition. And of course the neo-Kantian Eduard Hartmann wrote a book on it (*Kants Erkenntnistheorie und Metaphysik*) long ago.

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Willaschek's account: their account of what it is for an object to be "given" in cognition, and their account of what motivates Kant's famous prohibition on substantive theoretical cognition of things-in-themselves. At the end of the paper, I'll present my own alternative view of what motivates that prohibition.

I. GIVENNESS AND PRESENCE

The idea of something being "given" to the mind is a key part of Kant's account of cognition. The Latin term Kant is thinking of here is just "*datum*"—some thing or piece of information that is provided or available. For Kant, according to Watkins and Willaschek, the "object" of the representation must be "given" to the mind through *sensibility* in order to be determined in thought (where "determination" involves the ascription of general features by way of concept-application). In fact, Watkins and Willaschek sometimes characterize the entire "sensibility" side of Kant's story as designed to satisfy what they call the "givenness condition" (W&W, 90).

The motivation for this condition, in turn, is that "givenness in the relevant sense involves an immediate relation to an existing object" (W&W, 84) and *only* the givenness relation can put us in position to make further determining judgments about it. "The object must be given," Watkins and Willaschek argue, "since cognition must actually latch onto an object" (W&W, 86). Clearly 'object' here refers to an appearance (*Erscheinung*) in Kant's technical sense, since, as Watkins and Willaschek explicitly state, things-in-themselves are not given and thus not cognized. (I find some ambiguity in the way they use the term 'object' in this paper, however, especially in the account of affection and sensation. I will return to that point below, but for now we can assume that the "objects" of most of our cognition are appearances.²)

Maddeningly enough, Kant himself never clearly states *what it is* for an object to be given, although he uses the term all over the place. Still, Watkins and Willaschek gamely offer a necessary-and-sufficient-conditions analysis:

[Kant's] usage suggests that an object is given if and only if
 [i] the object is present to the mind so as to
 [ii] guarantee that one's representation refers to it, and
 [iii] make it possible to represent that particular object and (some of) its non-general features. (W&W, 89)

It would be worth looking at the textual support for all three elements of this analysis, but here I will focus primarily on philosophical issues.

Regarding (i): It is hard to find 'present to mind' very illuminating as an analysis of 'given to the mind.' Both phrases seem like metaphors for a kind of phenomenology or mental awareness, but it is not clear how much work the metaphors are doing (the same goes for the metaphors of 'acquaintance' and 'latching onto'). It also is not clear whether 'presence to mind,' according to Watkins and Willaschek, must be *conscious* or whether it can be less-than-fully

²A possible exception here is a mathematical object constructed in pure intuition. That is one type of object that can be "given" in cognition, but it is not obviously a full-blown 'appearance' (*Erscheinung*). It is also not clear that we should think of it as 'existent.'

conscious. Am I acquainted in the relevant respect with all of the objects in my perceptual field as I am walking to work, or only with the objects on which I am presently focused (the car in front of me, the traffic light, etc.)? Are there times at which I am awake but there is *no* object present to my mind?

More importantly, is ‘presence to mind’ compatible with the existence of physical intermediaries between the object and mental consciousness? In other words: is an object still “given” if my awareness of it goes “through” a physical screen or telephone? And what about psychological intermediaries? At B137, Kant says that cognitions “consist in the determinate relation of given representations to an object.”³ So in this passage the *representations* are given, and they then relate to an object in a “determinate” way. Kant goes on to offer his famous account of *object*: “An **object**, however, is something whose concept **unites** the manifold of a given intuition” (B137, modified). Here again, the representation (i.e. the intuition) is what is given.

Elsewhere, though, Kant is certainly willing to speak of objects themselves as given. Are the latter cases mere shorthand for the more complicated theory sketched in passages like the ones just quoted? Or is he saying that objects of a representation count as (mediately) given when the representation of them is (immediately) given? Answers to questions like these would help us cash out the metaphors.

2. GIVENNESS, REFERENCE, AND REPRESENTATION

The second (ii) and third (iii) components of Watkins and Willaschek’s analysis of givenness state that “presence to mind” *guarantees* reference to a particular object, and also makes it *possible for us to represent* its token (non-general) features. I will consider these points in order.

2.1. Reference

Watkins and Willaschek say that

- an intuition can *refer* to its object directly because
- [a] no (objective) representation mediates between the intuitions and its object and because
- [b] the intuition depends on the object for its existence. (W&W, 93)

The parenthetical reference to something ‘objective’ here is clearly meant to bracket sensations: these are states that do “mediate” in *some* way between the intuitions and the objects, but Kant also says that sensations “relate merely to the subject as a modification of its state” (A321/B377). In other words, sensations are produced in us somehow via affection but do not convey information *about* the things that produced them. When they are “taken up” into the formal structures of

³For the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I refer to the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions. For other texts, I use (abbreviation, volume number, page number) to cite from the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA), *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (29 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–). Translations come from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). Where I modify the Cambridge translation, I add ‘modified’ after the in-text citation.

sensibility, the complex form-matter state that results is an intuition. So sensations effectively become constituents of the intuition and do not “mediate” between it and the empirical object.

That explains the ‘directness’ claim, but what explains the claim about reference? Merely saying that there are no objective states mediating between my current perceptual intuition and my dog, Fido, does not explain how this intuition *refers* to Fido. Watkins and Willaschek decline to take sides on the debate about what such immediate reference consists in, mentioning only that there are three options: “direct presence to mind, taken in a phenomenological sense,” “direct reference illustrated by demonstrative terms,” and direct awareness via “singular marks” (W&W, 93n37).

Clearly the first option—direct presence to mind—does not take us very far. What we are trying to analyze is ‘givenness,’ which Watkins and Willaschek in turn analyze as ‘presence to mind’ that allows us to refer to and represent the object. But if reference itself is *also* just “direct presence to mind, taken in a phenomenological sense” then we have not said very much at all.

It is not obvious what the second option amounts to. Watkins and Willaschek note that direct reference can be “illustrated by demonstrative terms, which require a context of use (typically place, time, or person) to establish reference” (W&W, 93). It is true that the reference of a demonstrative like ‘that’ or ‘this’ is determined partly by context—i.e. by which objects are in the vicinity of the speaker or pointer. But it is unclear how, without an appeal to something like “marks,” a mental state succeeds in having demonstrative content (or something that can be illustrated by demonstrative content)—that is, how it points to *that* or *this* object.

Direct reference via ‘singular marks’ is the third option, but Watkins and Willaschek seem hostile to it on textual grounds, and bury discussion of it in a footnote (W&W, 93n37).

A fourth option that Watkins and Willaschek do not include in this list but do discuss elsewhere is a straightforward causal theory of reference. They insist here, however, that their own account of reference involves the sorts of existential dependence claims that would be supported by causal relations: if there is an effect (intuition) then its cause (object) must exist, and vice versa. Elsewhere in the paper, Watkins and Willaschek include this among the ways in which a causal theory could help explain reference:

First, it can explain how an empirical intuition is supposed to relate to a particular object, since an empirical intuition can both represent and refer to the object that affects it in virtue of the object being its cause. Kant’s view would resemble contemporary causal theories of reference in this respect. Second, an intuition provides evidence of the existence of the object that caused it, since, in the empirical case, the intuition would not exist if the object did not cause it. (W&W, 90)

Despite these advantages, Watkins and Willaschek seem to back away from a straightforward causal theory on the grounds that “external objects do not generate representations that the human mind simply receives; instead, an object acts on the mind and the mind creates a sensible representation in response” (W&W, 90–1).⁴

⁴Although note that on page 93 they say that “an intuition (such as the intuition of a particular ball) is essentially a *token* that depends, both in its existence and in its representational content, on

Here is one of the places where the meaning of ‘object’ gets a bit fuzzy. It looks as though Watkins and Willaschek are talking about noumenal affection—they go on to say that the mind “must *produce* representations in response to being acted on from without” (W&W, 90). This is the same mechanism they describe a few pages earlier when they say that Kant’s

revolutionary idea is not just that human cognition has sensible and intellectual conditions, but also that sensible conditions [spatio-temporal structure] are merely subjective (in that nothing corresponds to them in the objects) and are “put into” the objects by the cognizing subject with the result that the objects of cognition are ‘mere appearances’ rather than ‘things in themselves.’ (W&W, 88–9)

Watkins and Willaschek indicate here that “nothing corresponds to [space and time] in the objects,” so they must be talking about the things-in-themselves, since of course empirical objects *do* have spatio-temporal properties. The latter two uses of ‘objects’ in this passage, however, seem to refer to empirical objects or appearances.

In any case, if we follow Watkins and Willaschek in taking the “external object” that “acts on the mind” and to which “the mind creates a sensible representation in response” as a thing-in-itself, then the relation between the “object” and the representation *cannot* be what guarantees reference. Intuitions are formed *in response* to external affection, but they do not *refer* to the things-in-themselves that affect us. Rather, they refer to the empirical objects (like Fido) whose appearance is somehow grounded in the existence and character of those things (by way of affection). I thought that something like this is what motivates Watkins and Willaschek’s hesitance here about the causal theory of reference.

A few pages later, however, they return to the issue and indicate that there *is* a causal relation between empirical objects and sensations:

reference to a particular object could be accounted for either by the causal link between a sensation and its object (noted above) or by the formal features of intuition (specifically, the spatio-temporal location the sensed object occupies) or both. (W&W, 92)

At this point, the model has become opaque (to me at least). Again, Watkins and Willaschek say that there is noumenal affection by external things and that this produces sensations in us. This sensory “matter” is then “taken up” into a manifold to form spatio-temporal intuitions that immediately refer *not* to the things doing the noumenal affecting but rather to empirical objects. It is the sensational “matter” of an empirical intuition that “make[s] accessible to the mind the existence of an [empirical] object, leaving the object’s general features undetermined” (W&W, 94). But as we have seen, this affection relation *cannot* be the causal or quasi-causal relation that underwrites reference. Are Watkins and Willaschek suggesting that there is also a different and explicitly empirical-causal relation between empirical objects and the mind? This is the famous ‘double affection’ doctrine that many commentators try to avoid.⁵ Do Watkins and Willaschek mean to incorporate

(the causal relation to) its object.” In the end, as will become obvious below, I cannot tell whether Watkins and Willaschek are endorsing a causal theory of reference or not.

⁵For double affection, see Bryan Hall, “Appearances and Affection” and Nicholas Stang, “Double Affection.”

double affection into their very analysis of Kantian cognition? If so, it would be good to make that clear (and also say why this does not raise other problems).

There is at least one other option to consider. If the reference relation between intuitions and their objects is not based in causation, then perhaps it is broadly semantic—the intuition *is the mental state that it is* because its characteristic content ensures that it refers to *that* particular object. This gets close to the ‘singular marks’ account (although I agree with Watkins and Willaschek that there is not much mention of it in Kant’s own writings). On that account, the givenness of an object to the mind involves an awareness that immediately refers to an object by virtue of its content rather than its causal history. This intuitional awareness could thus be said to *depend for its existence* on that object insofar as referring to that object *makes it the mental state that it is*. For example: my present intuition essentially refers to Fido in virtue of its content—that is what makes it the intuition that it is. If Fido did not exist, then I would not have *this specific* intuition. Conversely, the fact that I have *this specific* intuition “implies” or at least “provides evidence” that the object of the intuition exists (W&W, 90).

But note: in the context of Kant’s transcendental idealism, it seems like this semantic thesis will have to boil down to the claim that the intuition *is the intuition that it is* by virtue of *taking up the sensations that it does*. That is because the formal character of intuition contributed by the mind is in principle general—other objects *could* have existed at a particular space-time point in the history of the empirical world. So the ‘guarantee’ of reference must come from the sensational content alone—sensations are what provide the distinguishing content that makes an intuition the unique intuition that it is. But then sensation plays a crucial *non-causal* role in establishing the reference of intuition. The things-in-themselves, in turn, play a crucial *quasi-causal* role, since the *manner* in which they produce sensations via affection constrains the way that the latter are “taken up” by intuition. Something in them or the manner in which they affect the mind and produce sensations explains *why* the resulting intuitions have the content that they do (and are thus the intuitions that they are). But things-in-themselves are not the objects of reference.

Watkins and Willaschek may be suggesting something like this picture when they say that sensations “are also not *purely* subjective since they have an *indirect* orientation towards an object” (W&W, 92). But they muddy the waters by using ‘object’ in two different ways and also speaking, at least sometimes, in terms of reference being guaranteed by straightforward causal relations.

A final, related point: we have seen that Watkins and Willaschek take the reference component of cognition to guarantee that its object actually exists (W&W, 89–90, 94). But how does this work for *indirect* awareness—i.e. intuition that goes by way of a photograph or a screen, say? Do we not intuit the presidential candidate when we see her giving a speech on television (or hear her on the radio for that matter)? But then do we not also intuit the totalitarian dictator, now long dead, through photographs and screens and radios? It is hard to see what would make for a principled distinction between these cases. If that is right, then perhaps it would be better to say that intuition refers to an object that *exists at some time or*

other.⁶ Alternatively, we could say that, strictly speaking, what intuitions refer to is a series of existing, particular *features* (in this case the depicting features of the photograph), rather than *existing* objects. The full-blown ‘objects’ of cognition might then only come into the story with the application of categories by the understanding.⁷

2.2. Representation

The second conjunct in the analysis of givenness says that the mental state involved “makes it *possible*” to represent the object and its non-general features. The modal claim here is puzzling: does not the mental state *actually* have to represent the particular object and its non-general features in order to give the object to the mind? Perhaps Watkins and Willaschek would make the conjunct conditional: the object has to be present to mind such that, *if* we form a representation of it at all, then the object of that representation is the object and its non-general features. But in the absence of an actual representation, it is not clear what “presence to mind” would be.

The other way to go is to say that the mental state actually has to represent the object, and then read “makes possible” as something like “enables.” If this is what Watkins and Willaschek mean, then our awareness of the object could still consist in an actual representation *of* the particular features of a particular object. But here again, the representation is produced from the matter of sensation and the forms of intuition. And, as noted earlier, the formal structure (spatio-temporal location) contributed by the mind can apply to more than one particular object. So the matter of sensation again plays a crucial role here that Watkins and Willaschek do not emphasize. It is *because* the intuition takes up certain sensations that it succeeds in representing certain token features of a particular object. Moreover, as we have seen, at least part of the reason why sensations are taken up in the way that they are has to do with facts about things-in-themselves: the particularizing matter of sensation is the *only* thing we get from noumenal affection; all the rest of the general ‘form’ comes from the mind itself. So although the theory of givenness here does not *need* to include a causal theory of reference or representation, the quasi-causal grounding relation to things-in-themselves is playing a crucial and under-acknowledged role.

3. GIVENNESS AND IGNORANCE

Watkins and Willaschek tie this theory of givenness directly to two of the most famous doctrines in the critical philosophy: transcendental idealism (conceived as a commitment to the distinction between spatio-temporal appearances and non-spatio-temporal things-in-themselves) and the prohibition on synthetic a priori cognition claims in speculative metaphysics (W&W, 88–9). I have said something about the first doctrine above, and in this section I want to focus on the second. Because cognition requires or at least involves givenness, and because things-in-

⁶Note that this might not be the case for tactile intuition. It is hard to know what it would be to touch or feel something that no longer exists.

⁷Thanks to Gary Hatfield for discussion of this point.

themselves (allegedly) cannot be given, there can be no theoretical cognition of things-in-themselves—in particular those things-in-themselves that are the objects of traditional metaphysical speculation: God, the immaterial and immortal soul, the incompatibilistically free will. But why is it that a thing-in-itself cannot be given?

In response to this question, Watkins and Willaschek simply highlight Kant's statement that, for us, givenness occurs *only* "through sensibility"—either "when the object 'affects the mind in a certain way' (A19/B33) or when the mind constructs the object 'in pure intuition (A713/B741)'" (W&W, 89). In the first case, Watkins and Willaschek claim, noumenal "affection gives rise to sensations, which are required for empirical cognitions" (W&W, 89). That is the story I have been discussing above. In the second case, involving mathematical cognition, external affection is not required; I will set this case aside here. Their key point is that, for us, intuition is both necessary and sufficient for givenness (W&W, 89–90).

But so far this is mere stipulation. What reason does a metaphysician have to accept it? Descartes, for instance, thinks that we have a faculty of clear and distinct perception that allows us to discern the true and immutable natures of some things (including God and the soul and matter). Many contemporary metaphysicians likewise regard some sort of conceivability as a reliable guide to the characteristic features of metaphysical kinds and natures. How does Watkins and Willaschek's Kant propose to rule out such a picture?

Perhaps Kant means to invoke certain kind of phenomenology when he talks about the "givenness condition"—a phenomenology that ipso facto rules out the possibility that anything can be given in a non-sensory way. The features of an object simply must come to mind in *that* particular way—the sensory/intuitive way—in order to provide content for cognition. But this, too, looks pretty weak by way of probative force against a rationalist.

Another response Watkins and Willaschek might offer on Kant's behalf here involves the doctrine of the generality of concepts—i.e. the doctrine that there are no genuinely singular concepts that refer to only one possible object, and so no particular object can be "given" by any concept or idea.

This cannot be completely right, of course, since (as Kant recognizes) the concept of God refers to only one possible being. But I do not see how it helps in any case, since it is not at all clear why givenness (i.e. representation plus reference to an object that enables further determination of it) *requires* that its vehicle pick out only one *possible* object. We represent and refer to objects using definite descriptions all the time: *the tallest manservant in Prussia*, for instance. Such a description involves a representation of a particular object—let us call him Lampe—and it allows us to ascribe further general determinations to that object (*being male, understanding German, living in a country that became part of Russia after World War II*, etc.). The fact that in another possible world, someone other than Lampe—or no one at all—satisfies that description does not seem to prevent us from "latching onto" Lampe via this description in the way required for this-worldly representation, reference, and property-ascription.

As mentioned above, I am also not sure why it is important that givenness to the mind be such that it "implies that the object exists" in the way the Watkins and Willaschek suggest (W&W, 90). Perhaps they think that you cannot genuinely refer

to an object unless it exists (although there would seem to be clear counterexamples to this claim—fictional beings, or things that used to exist, as noted earlier). But even granting this, we could just add a modal operator to our definite description: *the tallest actual manservant in Prussia*. It would be good to know more about why this description does not succeed in making a particular existing man “present to mind” in such a way that we can ascribe other features to him.

A related point: Watkins and Willaschek tie givenness so directly to intuition that it threatens to place unobserved as well as unobservable objects outside the domain of cognition. How can the ‘magnetic matter’ that moves iron filings around, or the galaxies we postulate on the basis of astronomical observations, count as given on Watkins and Willaschek’s account? Kant himself suggests that if we had “finer” or more powerful faculties then we *could* perceive such objects like “magnetic matter” (A226/B273) or Newton’s “lamellae” (“On a Discovery,” 8:205). But he also suggests that these objects can *presently* be cognized on the basis of inference.

My own view of these issues does appeal to givenness and intuition, but it is grounded in Kant’s evolving picture of modal metaphysics and epistemology.⁸ In the *Nova Dilucidatio*, *The Only Possible Basis*, and other pre-Critical texts, Kant just seems to assume that things can be “given” to the mind as really possible and really compossible—given to us in thought, so to speak, just by way of conceiving them (*Only Possible Basis*, 2:77). This is a classic rationalist assumption: again, think of Descartes clearly and distinctly conceiving the possibility of a distinct immaterial mind or a supreme being, or of contemporary modal rationalists taking something like ‘ideal positive conceivability’ as a guide to real possibility.

By 1781, however, Kant had given up the assumption that real possibilities are “given” to thought in this non-problematic way such that we can go on to demand a ground or explanation for them in actuality. We can *think* up various things, and we can individuate them by the predicates in our concepts of them: the concepts are not genuinely *empty* or nonsensical, despite Kant’s rhetorical flourishes to that effect. The problem in the Critical period is that Kant comes to regard such thoughts as unable to “give” objects about which we can make knowledge-claims, even on the basis of otherwise ‘irrefutable’ arguments. So what changed?

What changed, I think, is that during the 1760’s Kant became convinced that there is a metaphysical difference between what he calls ‘logical’ and ‘real possibility,’ and also came to think that what he calls ‘real opposition’ (*reale Entgegensetzung*) or ‘real repugnance’ (*Realrepugnanz*), sometimes obtains between logically consistent positive properties. In the “Negative Magnitudes” essay of 1762, for instance, Kant cites numerous examples of a kind of real opposition between two or more properties that “cancels out” (the verb here is ‘*aufheben*’) their respective effects: opposed winds on a sail, opposed physical forces, opposed emotions, and so forth.

Having noticed that there can be non-logical opposition in empirical contexts like this, Kant starts to worry (in my view) that something similar might obtain between supersensibles, too, and that non-logical opposition in that context might

⁸For the full version of the account sketched over the next few pages, see my “Modal Motivations.”

make the thing *absolutely* impossible. Thus in “Negative Magnitudes,” and more clearly in *The Only Possible Basis* of 1763, he cites a few cases that involve what I have elsewhere called *subject-canceling* (rather than *predicate-canceling*) real repugnance. This is a metaphysical opposition between properties that makes any being that jointly instantiates them really impossible (think of your favorite anti-Tractarian cases here: *being red all over* and *being green all over*). Kant’s own examples include the putative fact that “the impenetrability of bodies, extension and the like, cannot be properties of that which has understanding and will (*Die Undurchdringlichkeit der Körper, die Ausdehnung u. d. g. können nicht Eigenschaften von demjenigen sein, der da Verstand und Willen hat*).” It is not that *being extended* and *having a mind* are logically inconsistent: there is no way to generate a contradiction from their conjunction using standard rules and definitions. Rather, it is that “these predicates *can by no means co-exist together* as determinations in a single subject (*nimmermehr in einem einzigen Subject als Bestimmungen neben einander können statt finden*)” (*Only Possible Basis*, 2:85, modified, my emphasis). The ‘cannot’ and ‘can’ in these sentences refer to real modalities: a thing that is both extended and has a mind *cannot really be*.⁹

By the time of the *Critique*, Kant saw the rationalist’s neglect of non-logical constraints on possibility as one of their most serious errors. In the Amphiboly of Pure Reason, Kant laments that with respect to the concept of God they

find it not merely possible but also *natural* to unite all reality in one being without any worry about opposition, since they do not recognize any opposition except that of contradiction (through which the concept of a thing would itself be canceled out), and do not recognize the opposition of reciprocal destruction. (A273–4/B329–30)

The error here is not just metaphysical but also epistemological: Leibniz does not recognize the distinction between logical and real modality, and so does not see that our grasp of the former may not be sufficient for “insight (*Einsicht*) into whether all realities *could* be united together in one object (*Objekt*), and hence into how God is possible” (*Pölitz*, 28:1025).¹⁰

This criticism of Leibniz (and Wolff) applies equally to Kant’s pre-critical self: the items with which Kant started his pre-critical proof (finite *possibilia*) and the item with which he ended it (the most perfect being (*ens perfectissimum*)) are presupposed a priori to be really possible as well as logically possible, simply because

⁹For further defense of these claims about subject-canceling real repugnance in the pre-critical period, see my, “Monstrous.”

¹⁰In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant asks us to think of a case of “two motions” that are “combined in precisely opposite directions in one and the same point” (*Metaphysical Foundations*, 4:491). In such a case the two predicates do not cancel one another out and leave the point at rest (as they would do if we were merely thinking of opposed *forces*—see e.g. A265/B321 and *Real Progress*, 20:283). Rather, the opposition cancels the entire subject to which they are ascribed: “[R]epresenting two such motions at the same time in exactly the same point within one and the same space would be impossible, and thus so would the case of such a composition of motions itself” (*Metaphysical Foundations*, 4:491). A few pages later, in a reflection on this case, Kant explains that “the representation of the impossibility of these two motions in one body is not the concept of its *rest* but rather of the *impossibility of constructing* this composition of opposite motions” (*Metaphysical Foundations*, 4:494). Similarly, later in *Metaphysical Foundations*, Kant indicates that a material being “is impossible if it has mere attractive forces without repulsive forces,” and that this impossibility has its basis in “the essence of matter” rather than in a logical contradiction (*Demnach ist Materie durch bloße Anziehungskräfte ohne zurückstoßende unmöglich*) (*Metaphysical Foundations*, 4:511).

we can think consistently about them. But if there are non-logical constraints on real possibility—constraints that we do not reliably track in some other way—then that presupposition looks unmotivated.

In my view, this recognition of a new distinction in modal space is at least part of what moves Kant to endorse a new modal condition on cognition: “I can *think* whatever I like,” he says, “as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance as to whether or not there is a corresponding object (*Objekt*) somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities.” But “to **cognize** an object, it is required that I be able to prove its [real] possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason)” (Bxxvi, note).¹¹ Since things-in-themselves cannot be experienced in actual intuition such that their real possibility is trivially entailed, and since they also cannot be given in mere thought in such a way that their real possibility is established, we cannot cognize them.

Watkins and Willaschek believe that, for Kant, the ‘givenness’ condition on cognition is fundamental, and that it has to be satisfied by appeal to intuition because we could not mentally “latch onto” particular objects and their features in any other way. My suggestion is that although we can conceive of (or intellectually latch onto) some particular things—including some of the favorite objects of speculative metaphysics—in a way that allows us to ascribe further features to them, we cannot claim bona fide cognition of them without also establishing that they are really possible. And showing that an object can be intuited (or connecting it in some salient way to actual intuition) is typically the only way we have of proving its real possibility. If this is right, then the modal condition on cognition, rather than any givenness condition, is the more fundamental one, and at the heart of Kant’s rejection of rationalism.

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¹¹A more precise articulation of the modal condition:

Necessarily, S cognizes that *p* only if, for any object referred to in *p*, if it is really possible then S is in a position to prove its real possibility, and if it is really impossible then S is in a position to prove its real impossibility.

Obviously more needs to be said about what “proving” real possibility amounts to. For my latest efforts in this regard, see “Modal Motivations” as well as “Knowledge, Discipline, System, Hope.”

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