

Kant, the Noumenal, Freedom and Powers

Alison Assiter

When one gets beyond a certain ‘age’ in academic life, one comes to see that the intellectual world, no less than the musical or the artistic, or even the world of clothing, is subject to fashion. These ‘fashions’ may have some sort of extra theoretical ‘ground’, to use a contemporary term, unlike, for example, that for punk or for beards. Nonetheless, there are parallels with the latter.

One fashion that is current at the moment, in certain philosophical circles, is a predilection

for a certain type of materialism or realism as well as, in turn, a return to ontology and metaphysics, following a decline in interest in these domains in the mid-20th century. The 1930's verificationists, to take the most outrageous example of the contrary view, had proclaimed, for a number of years, that metaphysical claims constituted literal nonsense.

As someone who was a die-hard realist when a non-realist form of post-modernism was all the rage, I welcome this recent move. However, in this paper, I would like to offer a certain redress, a move back to the epistemic, not in order to deny this realism, but in order to

suggest that reading Kant through Lacan or through the lens of Laruelle, Meillassoux, or indeed through the lens of a certain form of Critical Realism, may fail to do justice to a crucial dimension of his thought.

In the first section of the paper, I will respond to a variant of a certain type of realist critique of Kant. I will also suggest, more controversially, that if one takes seriously Kant's notion of 'spontaneous causation', it may be possible to offer a Kantian defence of the 'grounding' of the phenomenal in the noumenal. This notion of 'grounding' is important for a number of reasons, one of which is that it can allow for a change in the terms of reference of

certain debates on freedom of the will. Although this paper will not spell out the arguments for the latter view, I will lay out, in the final paragraphs of the paper, how the latter argument might be developed. The second section of the paper will be a discussion of Bhaskar's 'transcendental realism' versus Kant's 'transcendental idealism'. I will suggest that although Bhaskar's arguments are not as strong as Kant's, one might develop some arguments for a realist position that are stronger than his. Indeed, I will suggest, controversially, that one can find a strong realist argument in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

It may be, indeed, that the recent debates about Kant's work are themselves filtered through discussions that were taking place in the work of the post- Kantian German Idealists who read Kant's thought as leading to scepticism. Fichte, to take one example, saw Kant's project as leading to absolute scepticism.¹

Some recent defences of realism

The form some of the recent defences of realism take ranges from Meillassoux's '*grand dehors*' to Bhaskar's transcendentally real. Despite their differences, there is, nonetheless, some commonality between them. Each of them sets

¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987).

out to decry something Meillassoux labels Kant's 'correlationism' and Bhaskar his 'empirical realism'. Meillassoux has claimed, in a vivid phrase, that much of 'pre-meta-physical' contemporary philosophy—by which he means phenomenology and 'various currents of analytic philosophy'²—has lost 'the *great outdoors*, the absolute outside'.³ This metaphor, for him, conveys the idea of an 'outside' that is not relative to we humans, a domain of reality that exists in itself whether or not we are thinking of it.

By 'correlationism,' Meillassoux refers to the view that the only reality that exists is one

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 6.

³ *Ibid.* p. 7.

that is, in some sense, a construction of the subject. He writes: ‘By “correlation” we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other’.⁴ For Meillassoux, Kant is the paradigmatic culprit. Bhaskar expresses a similar view. “Empirical realism’, which includes the philosophy of Kant, inappropriately denies, according to Bhaskar, the existence of the ‘real’ world of rocks, stars, and tides.⁵ Bhaskar’s empirical realist thus also denies the existence of some form of the ‘great outdoors’. Bhaskar labels his own position, in contrast to

⁴ Ibid. p. 5.

⁵ See Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Verso, [1975] 1998).

‘empirical realism’, ‘critical realism’. For both Bhaskar and Meillassoux, then, the Kantian view that the world is derived from the forms of space and time as well as the concepts that we, as finite beings, deploy to ‘create’ appearances renders natural objects like stones incapable of an existence independent from the creative powers of such limited beings as ourselves.

By contrast to this Kantian ‘correlationist’ perspective, then, the recent realists seek to defend a conception of Being, or the Absolute or Nature, that exists whether or not there are any beings like us to experience ‘it’. Described in this way, this attempt invites the retort: is this not exactly Kant’s noumenal world? The

contemporary realists, however, argue that the noumenal is like having your cake and simultaneously eating it. The noumenal, they lament, is, for Kant, both required for experience to be possible and such that we are unable to say anything about what it is. We experience the world through the spectacles of space and time. The noumenal is supposed to be outside these and yet it is also expected to play the role of grounding experience. They would argue that the faculty of sensibility, for Kant in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, ‘receives’ representations and these must emanate from the noumenal, yet the noumenal is constructed in such a way that it cannot itself cause anything to

happen. The noumenal cannot fulfil this function when it is outside the conditions—the principle of causation, for example—that are required for this ‘grounding’ to make sense.

This is, indeed, a version of an argument earlier put forward by Hegel. According to him, the Kantian ‘thing -in -itself’ is self-contradictory. It is supposed to cause sensation but it cannot do this since causation is a category of our minds. Moreover, the whole conception of an unknowable existence is self-contradictory anyway since if we know that a thing exists, then we have some knowledge of it,

which itself therefore involves a self-contradiction.⁶

In the first section of the paper, I would like to defend what I will characterise as the ‘epistemic’ Kant against these recent views that see him as falling foul of this objection.

The In-itself and the Real

For a statement of the position I will critique, I would like to take, as my point of departure, the work of two recent scholars—one an interesting presentation and paper by Kirril Chepurin⁷, and

⁶ See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, forward by J. N. Finlay (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), p. 121.

⁷ Kirril Chepurin, ‘Utopia in Excess, Political Theology as Critique in Kant and Fichte’, paper delivered at conference on Political Theology, Liverpool Hope University, July, 2015. This is a very interesting and wide ranging paper and I do not claim to do justice to the whole paper. I am, rather, considering only the initial assumptions made about the phenomenal/noumenal distinction.

the other a paper and an excellent book by Dustin McWherter.⁸ The two writers approach Kant from different perspectives, but they have in common a particular view of his philosophy. Both Chepurin and McWherter defend a view of Kant that runs a little like the above characterisation: Kant, they claim, both requires the ‘noumenal’, which, in their eyes, is equated with the ‘real’, and simultaneously denies that this ‘reality’ exists in the form in which it is required. To quote from Chepurin: ‘German idealism has an excessive Utopian structure and Utopian core, and it is this Utopian structure

⁸ Dustin McWherter, *The Problem of Critical Ontology: Bhaskar Contra Kant* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

that first makes it ‘idealist’...or makes it into a non-realism’.⁹ Also, Chepurin writes:

Idealism, I will argue, is a non-realism insofar as, in its Kantian origin which then mutates in post-Kantian German Idealism, it ‘suspends’ the real and proceeds from *not relating* to the real, from denying its own emergence from the real (from the environment, from nature, from the in-itself). Idealism, then, of which Kant’s transcendental idealism is the original example, is indifferent to its emergence from the real.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁰ Chepurin, ‘Utopia in Excess’, p. 2

Chepurin, quoting Kant, writes that, for the latter: ‘if one does not assume this kind of ideality of time and space [i.e., the realm of appearance as the ideal], nothing else remains except *Spinozism*, in which space and time are essential definitions of the first being [*Urwesen*, God] itself’.¹¹ Kant, then, gestures towards the in-itself being the ‘ground’ (A380) and ‘cause’ (B567) of appearance, while refusing to explain that further. To attempt to paraphrase Chepurin, his claim seems to be that Kant both requires a strong version of realism, on the argument, and is unable to provide it, since the way in which he characterises the noumenal prevents it from

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1970). Chepurin, op.cit. p.2.

functioning as the causal ground of appearances. In effect, Kant's position involves a 'suspension' of what Chepurin labels Kant's conception of the 'real'.

McWherter, in his turn, while he offers a range of interesting arguments about the ontological status of Kant's various claims, also makes reference to the above assertion. He writes, after arguing that Kant attempts to 'circumvent ontology with epistemology' and that the non-ontological status of appearances can only be secured if ontological status is located elsewhere: 'However, as transcendental idealisms earliest critics famously protested, it is exactly this location of an "elsewhere" in

things- in- themselves that Kant deprives himself of the right to identify in virtue of his restriction of the objective validity of the categories to appearances. For example, claiming that things in themselves actually exist uses the category of existence beyond its domain of legitimate application.¹²

Some Questions

I would like to pose a question about this: why should we equate the noumenal with the real? One reason that might be offered for equating the two is that Kant labels the world we know, the world of material objects in space and time, the world of ‘appearance’. Presumably, there would have to be some separate world—the

¹² McWherter, op.cit. p. 51

world of ‘things -in -themselves’—that would ground this domain of ‘appearance’. But this latter world, to reiterate, fails to meet the criteria it would have to meet in order to fulfill its role of grounding the former since it is unknowable, outside space and time and beyond the reach of the principle of causation.

However, another reading of Kant proposes that the noumenal world is not the ‘real’ world. Kant contrasts his own transcendental idealism—an idealism about whether or not the world we know is the only possible way of knowing—with the realism of some of his predecessors. For Leibniz, for example, the world we know is equated with the ‘real’ world.

But Kant imagines the possibility of beings who might see the world differently from us. Such beings would inhabit some possible world. But claims about the actual world we live in are different. It is very important for him that we refrain from simply speculating about the way the actual world might be. Kant intended his claims about our world to be provable. He set out to provide solid grounds for his claims about the world of objects in space and time. So, when he characterises the ‘noumenon’ negatively, then, Kant means that it is ‘something I know not what’. This, of course could be read as implying that it is some *thing* that is unknowable in principle by beings like us. But it

might be alternatively characterised as implying simply that there are many possible worlds out there—we might call them ‘noumenal’ worlds but they are not equivalent to the actual world that we finite, limited beings know. Indeed, the notion of a positive noumenon makes more sense when the noumenal is read this way, since it is described as the object of a ‘non-sensible’ intuition. In other words, if there were some Being or being, who had direct access to the ultimate possible world then this being would know the noumenal. We can hypothesise the existence of such a Being but we cannot know of its existence.

It is also important to note that although Kant uses the word ‘appearance’, to describe the world we know, he famously does not intend this word to be understood in an empirically idealist manner. He explicitly distinguishes ‘appearances’ from their subjective counterparts— ‘intuitions’ and ‘concepts’. ‘Appearance’ is the ‘undetermined object of an empirical intuition’.¹³ Appearances are comprised of matter and form. These are the ‘definitional’ claims about appearance. But Kant also, in several places, but specifically in the ‘Refutation of Idealism’ section of the first *Critique*, sets out to prove that there must be

¹³ Ibid. A20/B34.

objects existing in ‘space outside me’,¹⁴ in order for me to be conscious of my own existence in time. Indeed, in this section, Kant aimed to show that ‘material idealism’, in both its problematic and its dogmatic forms—the form of idealism which ‘declares the existence of objects outside us to be either doubtful and indemonstrable or false and impossible’—is false. He shows that we could not have a sense of our own experiences in time unless there were something outside these experiences. The consciousness of myself, he argues, which is required in order for us to think or to imagine anything at all, requires the possibility that something exists outside me. I could not identify

¹⁴ Ibid. B276.

any of my thoughts as thoughts of redness or thoughts of fire, for example, unless something existed outside those thoughts on the basis of which I could have a coherent thought.

So Kant is, in this limited sense, already a realist, and a realist about the independent existence of rocks and stones, despite the fact that the label he gives for this ‘realism’ is ‘appearance’. He gives it this label because it is important for him that he offers grounds for any claim he makes about the world that is knowable to such limited, finite beings as ourselves. He contrasts the ‘transcendental’ employment of a concept, which consists in its application to things in general and ‘in

themselves’, with its empirical employment, which consists in its application to objects of a possible experience.¹⁵ It is a criterion of a concept’s having application that we have both the ‘logical form of thought in general’ and the possibility of giving it an ‘object to which it applies’.

Hence, it is possible to argue that equating the noumenal with the ‘real’ is both textually wrong and ignores the epistemic claims made by Kant. We might also argue that, contrary to Bhaskar’s claim that the world of rocks and stones does not, for Kant, exist independently of the subject, that this is not true for an individual self. In general, beings like us create the

¹⁵ Ibid. A239/B298.

conditions that make knowledge of any kind possible and these conditions actually require the relative independence of ‘things outside me’ from my own experiences, for Kant.

The Grounding of the Phenomenal

What of the other assertion made by Chepurin and McWherter, the claim that the noumenal is supposed to ‘ground’ the phenomenal and that Kant makes it impossible for this to happen since we know nothing about this noumenal world and causation lies within the phenomenal?¹⁶

¹⁶ One interesting interpretation of the ‘grounding’ of appearances is given by Beth Lord. She suggests that it is the productive understanding that makes the conditions for the production of knowledge possible. Hers is an interesting reading but it may result in Kant becoming too much like a Berkeleyan idealist. See Beth Lord, *Kant’s Productive Ontology: Knowledge, Nature, and the Meaning of Being* (Doctoral dissertation), Warwick University 2004. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/36683/1/WRAP_THESIS_Lord_2003.pdf, first accessed June, 2015.

I would like to suggest an alternative view of the relation between the noumenal and phenomenal which will, I hope, avoid this objection whilst retaining what is important in the epistemic reading outlined earlier. This alternative reading draws on two notions in Kant's writings. In particular, Kant distinguishes causation, on the one hand, from the 'ground'/'consequent' relation on the other. The latter allows for an alternative relation between noumena and phenomena to the causal one defended in the Second Analogy. It allows specifically for the 'self-positing' notion of causation defended by Kant in the Third Antinomy. In this section of the CPR, he

defends a notion of a ‘first cause’ or an ‘absolute spontaneity’—a cause that begins of itself. He argues that if we assume the notion of a causal series that applies with unlimited universality, we are faced with a self-contradiction. If the principle of universal causation were to be applied in such a fashion, then there would be no beginning of the series and therefore no completion of it. For this reason, there must be a first cause or an ‘absolute spontaneity’.

In the Antithesis of this Antinomy, Kant argues the opposite. But, he claims, thesis and antithesis can both be true. The principle of universal causation can apply in the phenomenal

world and the notion of an ‘absolute spontaneity’ in the noumenal. He argues, in the first *Critique*, that I have freedom in this latter sense: ‘By freedom, on the other hand, in its cosmological meaning, I understand the power of beginning a state *spontaneously*’¹⁷ As a noumenal self, or as he puts it in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*,¹⁸ a ‘person’, I can be shaped by my will. The self as a ‘person’ in this sense lies outside the domain of operation of the universal principle of causation defended in the Second Analogy. Alongside the notion of freedom of the will, is a conception of the ‘grounding’ of the whole phenomenal world.

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A533/B561.p. 464 Kemp Smith.

¹⁸ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyd Hudson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1960).

Given this, there need be no contradiction between the noumenal ‘grounding’ of appearances and the fact that the principle of causation applies universally in the phenomenal world. Kant would, on this new hypothesis, be a realist about noumenal powers, the spontaneous powers of noumenal agents and about the ground of the whole phenomenal world but he would be only a speculative realist. We would be able to make speculative claims about this reality but we could not say that it must be this or that way. We need, the claim would be, the phenomenal world – Meillassoux’s ‘correlationist’ world – to be grounded but we cannot know what this ground is like.

In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant elaborates on the possibility of an a-temporal ground of the whole of nature in parallel to the ‘spontaneous will’ of the rational and moral agent. There, he famously defends a teleological notion of causation, albeit one that is only regulatively construed. A tree is cause and effect of itself and constitutes, effectively, a self-regulating system, even though this is only regulatively the case for us. Moreover, the ultimate exemplification of ‘purposiveness’ for Kant is ‘man’ acting as a moral agent.¹⁹ We rational beings have to suppose, for the

¹⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett

Publishing, 1987. CJ.

understanding of morality, that 'man' is the ultimate purpose. More precisely, 'man' acting as a moral agent is the purpose against which we judge the purposiveness of everything else.

Kant writes:

Man is the only being on earth that has understanding and hence an ability to set himself limited purposes of his own choice, and in this respect he holds himself lord of nature; and if we regard nature as a teleological system then it is man's vocation to be the ultimate purpose of nature, but always subject to a condition; he must have the understanding and the will to give both

nature limited purposes of his own choice, and in this respect he holds himself lord of nature; and if we regard nature as a teleological system then it is man's vocation to be the ultimate purpose of nature, but always subject to a condition; he must have the understanding and the will to give both nature and himself reference to a purpose that can be independent of nature, self-sufficient and a final purpose.²⁰

This final purpose, then, would be a noumenal ground of the whole, or some version of a God. It would operate outside time and, as such, it

²⁰ Ibid. p. 318. AK, 431

could not function in the temporal fashion that is presupposed by the example of the tree. Yet, like the tree, this final purpose could be both cause and effect of itself—it would be responsible for producing nature but it could also be construed as being, in some alternative sense, identical with nature. There is, therefore, a way of construing the relation between the ‘noumenal ground’ of the whole and the phenomenal world that does not lead to the self-contradiction suggested in the criticism of Kant presented earlier. Kant would be, to reiterate, a realist about the ground of the natural or phenomenal world, but we cannot know what this ground is like. In the third *Critique*, as we

have seen, he describes this ground as God. Yet it is clear that he has argued that we cannot know of God's existence.

In the next section of the paper I would like to assess the power of transcendental idealism versus a realist alternative—Bhaskar's transcendental realism. Bhaskar's 'critical' realism is a form of realism that is more than speculative. It claims that there must be a reality of a certain kind – and we can specify what kind –that is absolutely independent of the human.

Transcendental Idealism versus Transcendental Realism

Opposing the transcendental idealism of Kant, Roy Bhaskar defends what he calls a transcendental realist position. In his work, *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar offers a transcendental analysis, using a Kantian form of argument, for the conditions of the possibility of experimental activity. In short, he argues that the conditions that make experimental activity possible require transcendental realism. Unless we assume a transcendental realist position, experimental activity, which is a crucial requirement for the possibility of science, would make no sense.

Experimentation, then, according to Bhaskar, is a significant feature of the natural and (in some cases also) the social sciences. This is the initial premise of his argument, and he proceeds to demonstrate certain conditions that he argues are required in order for this premise to make sense. He claims (and this is the crucial feature of his ‘critical’ realism) that, in order for it to make sense, there must be something that is absolutely independent of humans. As he puts it:

‘We can easily imagine a world similar to ours, containing the same intransitive objects of scientific knowledge but without any science to produce knowledge of them. In such a world, which has occurred and may come again, reality

would be unspoken for and yet things would not cease to act and interact in all sorts of ways.’²¹

In support of this claim, Bhaskar argues that it is necessary to draw a distinction between the regularities of succession generated by scientists in an experimental context and the causal laws these regularities describe. If this distinction were not made, then we would have to draw the implausible conclusion that scientists themselves generate causal laws. This would in turn commit one to the absurd view, according to Bhaskar, that scientists themselves cause and generate the laws of nature.

²¹ Bhaskar, *op.cit*, p. 22.

One might, however, inquire, from a Kantian perspective: how do we know that natural scientists do not themselves generate causal laws? How can we be sure that scientists do not themselves produce the laws of nature? Moreover, is it not also the case that all that is required for Bhaskar's argument to get off the ground is that the laws are independent of the particular scientists or group of scientists' experimental activity?

A second argument offered by Bhaskar is that if scientists did indeed generate causal laws then there would be no point to their activity. The whole point of experiential activity would

be lost, since scientists would be producing the laws rather than investigating them. Once more, though, it would be perfectly possible for a Kantian to complain that, although this scenario would indeed be implausible and would render scientific activity somewhat odd, the argument has not shown that the distinction between the activity of scientists in generating causal laws and the laws themselves must be made.

I would like to present one caveat to Bhaskar's argument. This is that, as noted, Bhaskar wants his 'critical' realism to apply both to the natural and to the social sciences. In the latter context, he writes: 'in rejecting this ontology (that of

empirical realism) and sociology, transcendental realism also situates the possibility for a new critical naturalism... such a naturalism can sustain the trans-factuality of social structures while insisting on their conceptuality (or concept dependence).'²² If Bhaskar means that social structures must be conceived to be independent of the social scientist as well as being somehow conceptually constructed by the social scientist, then the question would arise: but how is this different from Kant's empirical realism? One might further ask, even if the social structures were not constructed by the social scientist, it is

²² Roy Bhaskar, 'Transcendental Realism and the Problem of Naturalism', in Gerard Delanty and Piet Strydom (eds.) *Philosophies of Social Sciences; Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Maidenhead: OUP, 2003) 447.

nonetheless obvious, given that they are *social* structures, that they cannot be independent of humans in the way outlined in relation to the objects investigated by the natural sciences.

In the rest of the paper, I would like to consider whether or not it is possible to develop arguments for a realist position that might reflect the spirit of Bhaskar's thinking about the natural sciences, if not his actual arguments. I will do this by suggesting some possible moves that might be made by a possible realist and responses Kant or a Kantian might make to them. Indeed, I will suggest that Kant himself has a realist argument of the relevant kind.

In general, Bhaskar is clear that he is deploying a broadly Kantian argument form—a transcendental argument—one that takes the form of suggesting the conditions for the possibility of X being the case. The question arises, however, whether or not the use of this argument form, even if we accept his strong premise concerning the natural sciences, carries the same weight outside its original Kantian context. Kant, in deploying the form of argument, is concerned with describing the conditions necessary for the possibility of experience. Operating in a context where Hume’s discussion of causation had famously ‘awoken him’ from his ‘dogmatic slumber’, he

set out to demonstrate, amongst other things, that if Hume's conclusions were true, then no experience would be possible at all: if the world were constantly changing, as it might be on Hume's view, then we could not even have the kind of experience that is initially presupposed by Hume. We could not, in other words, have the kind of experience that is required for us to make a claim about, for example, the sun and whether or not it will rise tomorrow. In order for us to be able to make such claims, we need to assume a relative degree of stability both in our own consciousness and in the world that contains the sun. These claims are made in various forms in the three Analogies section of

the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and particularly in the Second Analogy. There, Kant argues, against Hume, that while individual causal sequences are not themselves necessary, the principle of causation must be presupposed in order for us to distinguish, amongst our temporally successive experiences, those that represent objective succession from those that represent objective co-existence.

At the moment, I am not assessing the extent to which Kant is right about these claims. The point in question is the strength of the argument, if he is right. If he is right, then there are certain conditions that are required in order for such finite beings as ourselves to think or to have

conscious experience or any knowledge at all. In contrast to Kant, Bhaskar appears to be making a far weaker claim. Even if we accept—a point that is controversial—that experimentation is ubiquitous in science, and even if we accept all the steps of Bhaskar’s argument, we will not have produced an argument that is as strong as Kant’s. It will not be as strong because describing the conditions necessary for the possibility of experience is stronger than describing the conditions necessary for experimentation in science. Denying that something is necessary for scientific experimentation to be possible has less drastic consequences than denying the conditions

necessary for experience to be possible. The former actually requires the latter. If no experience were possible, there could be no scientific experimentation; however, it is not the case that if there were no scientific experimentation, there could be no experience. Therefore, even if I were to accept Bhaskar's premise and his argument for that premise, his argument would not constitute a refutation of Kant's transcendental idealism and a proof of transcendental realism. Indeed, it is possible to accept his premise and simply claim that there might be no scientists and therefore no scientific experimentation.

We might claim, then, that it is perfectly possible for beings like us to survive without scientific experimentation. The lack of scientific experimentation would not imply that we would cease to have experience. Kant, as is well known, set out to outline the underpinning conditions that, he argued, were required in order for Newtonian science to be possible. But he equated this with the possibility of knowledge in general or with experience in general. Bhaskar, even if we were to concede his premise, as a condition of the possibility of experimentation in the natural sciences, would not have shown that there must be a world that is absolutely independent of beings like us. He

would have shown only that it is a requirement of the natural sciences that we must assume such a world. To refute Kant's transcendental idealism, he would also have to have shown, something that, to my knowledge, he did not show, either that we could not survive without natural science or that a reality independent of humans is necessary for the possibility of experience in general.

In the remainder of the paper, I will consider whether or not different arguments can be offered for some form of realism that is stronger than 'empirical realism' and also than the form of realism defended in the first section of this paper. Kant himself, as noted, demonstrated the

necessity of something existing independently of our combined sensory and conceptual states in order for us to be aware of these states. Someone sympathetic to Bhaskar, however, could argue that if the world of trees, fields, rocks, planets, and stars were only a construct of the human forms of experience, through the human frame of time, space and causation, then these things would fail to fulfill the conditions Kant himself requires of them. Kant requires that something exist independently of the consciousness of an individual self, in order for this consciousness to make sense to the self. So if the tree in my garden were purely a construct of my sense experience combined with my

conceptual apparatus, then it would strictly fail to exist independently of me, and thus it would fail to meet the criteria laid down by Kant for the elements of my stream of consciousness making sense.

It is possible to suggest, moreover, in a stronger challenge to Kant, that he, on his own premises, is unable to account for the coming into being of the temporal—if such a view makes sense. Using an argument that is similar to one presented by Meillassoux, we could suggest that the transcendental conditions that are required for experience to be possible, on Kantian premises, themselves need to come into being. Meillassoux has suggested that the

transcendental subject needs to come into being. If it didn't come into being, then it would violate the conditions for the 'essential finitude of the subject'.²³ One might claim, then, either that time has always existed in which case it would be difficult to account for change, or that time came into being, in which case, time could not be the form of inner sense of beings like us. On this argument, then, there would be a reality – a temporal one – that pre-existed beings like us, and out of which we emerged. The argument would not show quite what Bhaskar would like, but it would at least demonstrate that there must be something that existed *anterior* to beings like us.

²³ Meillassoux, p. 24.

The argument could take the following form: in order for the spatio-temporal conditions that we deploy to construct experience to make sense, there must be something permanent against which we engage in this construction. Otherwise we would be spinning in a void.

Indeed, and ironically, it is possible to read Kant's first Analogy in a fashion that lends support to a strong realist position analogous to this one. In the first Analogy, Kant describes 'appearances' as being in time. He writes:

'All appearances are in time; and in it alone, as substratum (as permanent form of inner

intuition), can either co-existence or succession be represented.’²⁴

He goes on to note that time itself cannot be perceived and that therefore there must be something else, something ‘permanent’, a ‘substratum’ to represent time. Now Kant has been represented by respected commentators, on this matter, as confusing a principle of the conservation of matter with some transcendental condition of the possibility of experience.²⁵ It has been argued, by Peter Strawson, in particular, that no absolute permanence is required as a transcendental condition of the possibility of experience. What Strawson

²⁴ CPR, B225, Kemp Smith, p. 213.

²⁵ Indeed, Henry Allison claims that ‘virtually all the commentators’ read Kant this way. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defence*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 242.

argues is necessary instead is: ‘that we should be able to identify places, and hence objects or processes, as the same at different times.’²⁶ All that is needed, on this view, is a relative degree of independence from the elements of my consciousness and a relative degree of permanence.

However, it is possible to interpret Kant, rather, as noting the above realist point about time. It is possible, in other words, to claim that he is arguing here that we need a permanent temporal order in which to locate experience. Since we cannot perceive time itself, there needs to be something within the spatio-temporal

²⁶ Peter Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: an Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Methuen, 1966) 129.

frame, that is independent of our experience and that acts as a proxy for this permanent frame. Kant labeled this something ‘permanent substance’. Amongst the commentators on Kant, Henry Allison makes the case for a permanent substance. Indeed, such a substance must be more fundamental than Bhaskar’s rocks and stones, since these come into being and perish. Allison further notes that Kant argues, in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*²⁷, for a principle of the conservation of matter. However, as Allison recognizes, this derivation requires empirical premises and is thus at a

²⁷ Kant, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, trans Michael Friedman, the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

different level of argument from the need for the transcendental principle.

According to Allison's interpretation of the first Analogy, Kant is making epistemic points. To this extent Allison is in agreement with Strawson and others. Where he differs from the latter is that he argues that the perception of change requires a permanent and unchanging backdrop. While this is indeed an epistemic point, it also has ontological consequences. A permanent and unchanging 'substrate' cannot be created, through the framework principles of space and time, by us, since it is precisely a requirement of the argument that the permanent

is that – that it persists though all change. It therefore persists through the coming into being and going out of existence of the transcendental self.

This way of reading Kant is not necessarily incompatible with time being the form of inner sense, since the permanent, on this reading of Kant, is not time itself but some representative of time. But it does push Kant in a stronger realist direction than ‘empirical realism’ or than the form defended in the first section of this paper. The permanent substance noted here would exist, by virtue of this permanence, independently of the experience of particular

groups of beings like us, but within the phenomenal realm. Kant himself identified this permanent through the frame of Newtonian science but, as noted, it would not have to be identified this way.

Indeed, if we put ourselves in the shoes of the transcendental Kant, that Kant who is concerned with transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience, we would have to say that we do not and cannot know what this permanent is like.

So one might develop an argument that is not restricted in the fashion adumbrated by

Bhaskar, and that is to be found in Kant's own work, that leads to the conclusion that there must be something that exists relatively outside the experience of beings like us. The argument would not be restricted, as is that of Bhaskar, to that of laying down the conditions necessary for scientific experimentation to make sense since the latter argument is, as noted already, a weaker form of argument than is required to generate the desired conclusion.

A limitation of the argument, though, is that a realist like Meillassoux would require that time itself – and not merely some proxy for time – exist independently of beings like us. It is

difficult for Kant both to hold that time exists outside the frame of beings like us, in order for us to be able to come into being, and that it is the form of inner sense of beings like us. On the other hand, as Kant himself has made us aware, we cannot know that we did come into being.

For Kantian reasons, then, any realist proposal will be speculative. If we assume such a proposal to be about ‘permanent substance’ or about ‘things’ and ‘powers’, this will remain a speculative hypothesis. The German Absolute Idealists each made some sort of assumption about Being as a whole that Kant would claim they cannot prove to be the case.

There are good grounds for some kind of realist position. However, the realist cannot provide a conclusive reason, that would be as strong as Kant's own arguments within transcendental idealism, for her position. It is intrinsic to Kant's transcendental view that this cannot be the case, since we cannot step outside of ourselves and find conclusive proof that the 'outside' takes on a certain character. Although it seems undeniable that, for example, there must have been a time that is independent of 'our' framework principles, in which beings like us came about, it is difficult to prove this.

Žižek, making a parallel point, reads Kant as unable to resolve the dualisms between the

phenomenal and the noumenal, or between freedom and determinism. Yet he does not see this as a failure; rather he argues that Kant has brought to our attention the inevitability of paradox. Our understanding the world and our acting in it are impossible outside the production of antinomies that are incapable of conceptual resolution²⁸. As Steven Shakespeare has put it: ‘These antinomies are not the unfortunate result of a deficiency in thinking—the encounter with an impassable limit—but the productive force that engenders the very possibilities of conceptual thought, moral action

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 9Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 22,

and aesthetic judgment'.²⁹ Conceptual thought is impossible without a recognition that there are limits to this thought, and moral action is, in Shakespeare's account of Kant, inseparable from the paradox that freedom occurs within a mechanical, causally determined world. For Kant, then, it is important to recognise that there is always something that is outside a certain form of conceptual thought.

This seems to me to be an appropriate concluding comment to this section of the paper. The critical realist wants some clear conception of the nature of the 'outside' that is independent of ourselves as finite beings. But, for Kantian

²⁹ Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2015), p. 169.

reasons, this is a demand that cannot be met. This is not to say that there is no such reality, but this reality cannot be conceptualised in the way some realists appear to require. There is almost certainly a ‘reality’ of some kind ‘out there’, but any characterisation of its nature will necessarily be speculative. I am using the same word as Meillassoux. For me, as indeed is the case for him, the use of this word does not mean that it involves pure speculation and that no reasons can be given for the hypothesis. It rather means that we cannot be sure that we are right about it not only because someone cleverer or more imaginative might come up with reasons why we are wrong, but rather because we are

operating, in the context, at the very limits of the capacities of thought of beings like ourselves. Indeed, thinking about the nature of the 'real' may generate paradoxes.

I do have one caveat to this final comment, however. Although I accept that the notion of paradox adumbrated here is important, there is one significant dimension of human interaction that Kant sees as paradoxical that I would like to suggest need not be paradoxical in the way he imagines it to be. This is the aforementioned distinction between freedom and determinism. This distinction, it seems to me, is rendered paradoxical by Kant in a way that it need not be because of the assumptions he makes about his

world of ‘appearance’—his world of Newtonian substances that interact externally upon one another. He assumes, in the first *Critique*, that causes are related externally to their effects and that each cause sufficiently determines its effect. Something close to this assumption seems to me, indeed, to be common in some contemporary literature on freedom/determinism. Although the details of the discussion will have to wait for another paper, I would like briefly to outline the issue.

Freedom and self-causation

In the first *Critique*, as I have argued above, Kant defended a notion of self-causation. As

noted, Kant means to differentiate this conception from the causal principle he has defended in the second Analogy. The notion of ‘absolute spontaneity’ is radically distinct from the principle of causation that operates in the phenomenal world.

A number of contemporary philosophers, however, have doubted that there can be any such thing as ‘spontaneous causation’ or ‘self-causation’ or, therefore, freedom of the will.³⁰

To outline briefly one illustrative example, Galen Strawson in his paper, *The*

³⁰ For some examples of such contemporary thinkers, see Galen Strawson, ‘The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility’, *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 75, no. 1/2, *Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility* (1994): pp. 5–24.

*Impossibility of Moral Responsibility*³¹ states what he labels the 'basic argument' against the very idea of self-causation. Strawson argues that you act because of the way you are; to be truly responsible for what you do, you must therefore be responsible for the way you are, at least in crucial respects. But basically, he suggests that it is impossible for you to bring about your nature because you would have to have already existed with a particular nature. In turn, to have brought that nature into being, you would have to have existed as a previous nature and so on, leading to an infinite regress.

³¹ Galen Strawson, 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 75, no. 1/2, *Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility* (1994): pp. 5–24.

In his *Third Critique*, however, as noted above, Kant offers a different notion of self-causation from the version described here. There, he defends the idea that a tree is cause and effect of itself in the sense that the seed gives rise to the tree and the tree, in its turn, to further trees. If the laws of nature, overall, then were characterized in terms of the powers of objects, as Kant does here, (although, as noted, for him this notion of a causal power is only regulatively conceived) then there would be room for a less radical separation of freedom from determinism. Self-causation, then, could instead be understood in terms of the powers of

objects. Each and every object, then, might be endowed with a rudimentary notion of self causation in this limited sense, as the power to act. While the notion of radical self-causation might operate to characterize the ground of the whole of nature, a less drastic conception, like the relation between a seed and a tree, might function within the natural world.

If one were to adopt something analogous to this new notion, one need not arrive at the absurd view that, in order to be truly free, or to engage in acts that are self-caused, one has to violate the laws of nature.

Instead of there being, on this alternative view, then, a radical separation between the laws of nature and the freedom of beings like us, there could be a continuity between the two. In just the sense that the seed can give rise to the tree, I might have the potentiality partially to create myself as having a particular nature.

The suggestions made in these final remarks would involve a challenge to the Kant of the first *Critique* that is different from the realist challenge examined in the body of this paper. It would involve questioning the view that there is a radical separation between ‘nature’ on the one hand, which is said to be governed by natural

causal laws, and freedom on the other, where a different conception of causation is supposed to operate. The claim would rather be that humans are part of nature, that their causal powers are analogous, rather than wholly distinct from, the powers of objects in the natural world, including other animals and at least some natural objects.

In his third *Critique* Kant develops arguments about the causal powers of living things like trees that seem to lead in this direction. But, because of his Newtonianism, he was unwilling to accept the ‘real existence’ of causal powers. But his detailed account of how it is that the power of a seed to become a tree could not be accommodated within a regularity

of succession and Newtonian model of causation plausibly leads in the direction I am suggesting.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended Kant against two ‘realist’ charges against him. First of all I have suggested that his epistemic claims deserve more attention than some of the realists give them and that his ‘empirical realism’ involves him in moving somewhat in the direction of his realist critics.

Secondly, I have argued that Kant is able to give a defence of the notion of the ‘grounding’

of the phenomenal in the noumenal that does not involve him in extending the principle of causation defended in the second Analogy beyond its legitimate sphere of operation. Thirdly, I then moved to discuss the force of Bhaskar's 'critical realism' over Kant's transcendental idealism. While I have questioned the strength of Bhaskar's own key argument, I have suggested that some support can be given to the idea that there is a reality that is absolutely independent of the human and indeed that Kant himself developed an argument for such a position. However, contrary to the claim of Bhaskar in particular, one cannot show that this reality must be a certain way. Rather

claims about the nature of any reality outside the human will be speculative hypotheses.

In the final few paragraphs I have briefly considered the possibility, so long as the notion of self-causation is considered in the fashion of the third *Critique*, that a defence of freedom of the will need not involve, as some critics have suggested it does, implausibly breaking the laws of nature.³²

Alison Assiter, June, 2016

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