How Does Transcendental Idealism Overcome the Scandal of Philosophy? Perspectives on Kant’s Objekt/Gegenstand

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Chapter 1
How Does Transcendental Idealism Overcome the Scandal of Philosophy? Perspectives on Kant’s Objekt/Gegenstand Distinction

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Abstract

We argue that, far from being merely synonymous terms for “object”, Kant explicitly distinguishes “Objekt” and “Gegenstand”; moreover, this distinction illuminates certain contours of Kant’s theory of intuition and its relation both to transcendental idealism and to his moral philosophy. After summarizing several previous interpretations of this distinction, we offer textual evidence for the relevance of two perspectival distinctions in the first Critique, between viewing objects (1) either as appearances (whereby Gegenstände are given in intuition) or as things in themselves (whereby empirical Objekte are determined as actually existing), and (2) as two types of Gegenstände (phenomena or noumena). We explain why Kant’s Refutation of Idealism, responding to Jacobi’s criticism of transcendental idealism, refers only to “Gegenstand”, and never mentions “Objekt”, in attempting to overcome the “scandal of philosophy” (Bxxxix). As such, this distinction serves as a bridge from theoretical to practical philosophy, where “Gegenstand” demarcates the relationship between will and moral action, while “Objekt” is the effect of the will. God, freedom, and immortality are Gegenstände in theoretical philosophy but attain objective reality in practical philosophy through their relation to the highest good, the ultimate Objekt of moral striving.

If there perhaps occurs only one single word for a certain concept that, in one meaning already introduced, exactly suits this concept, and if it is of great importance to distinguish it from other related concepts, then it is advisable not to be prodigal with that word or use it merely as a synonym or an alternative in place of other words, but rather to preserve it carefully in its proper meaning… (A312–313/B369)

1. Jacobi’s challenge to transcendental idealism’s account of intuited objects
Kant’s theory of transcendental idealism answers a twofold question: How is it possible for us to intuit particular objects, and what makes such intuition impossible for certain (metaphysical) types of object? While the other chapters in this book explore various aspects of Kant’s theory of intuition, and the many controversies arising out of it, this opening chapter steps back from
Kant’s core question and asks: *What does Kant mean by “object”?!* In the course of defending transcendental idealism, Kant introduces and discusses many different *types* of object, only some of which relate to intuition. Indeed, the question of whether or not a particular object is (or can be) intuited is crucial to the way we are permitted to talk about it. Given this widely accepted fact, we find it nothing short of astounding that interpreters have not devoted more attention to unpacking the question of whether Kant intended to distinguish between two words he uses, which are both normally translated as “object”: namely, *Objekt*¹ and *Gegenstand*. While several valiant attempts have been made, as we shall see later in this section, each has been relatively brief and narrowly focused. But if widespread agreement is to be reached on the importance of such a distinction, in the manner Kant urges in the passage quoted above, the exposition needs to be comprehensive and its defence well-grounded in Kant’s text. We therefore aim to begin the task of filling this lacuna by defending a way of understanding how these two terms shape and even determine Kant’s theory of the object, in both its theoretical and its practical applications; this should prepare readers for a more nuanced assessment of the chapters that follow, all of which use the word “object” regularly. As we shall see, Kant’s theory of the object is integrally bound up with his theory of how the peculiar features of human intuition (as limited to sensibility) make transcendental idealism the correct theoretical understanding of human knowledge.

At A369, Kant famously defines “transcendental idealism” as a “doctrine” that requires us to regard “all appearances…as mere representations and not as things in themselves,” for “space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or conditions of *Objekte* as things in themselves.” Shortly before Kant published the second edition of the first Critique, F.H. Jacobi published *David Hume on Faith*, which included an appendix criticizing Kant’s new—fangled, “transcendental”—version of idealism. Jacobi’s discussion of Kant’s position uses both “*Objekt*” and “*Gegenstand*” in ways that suggest he was aware of an implicit distinction between them. Most significantly, the oft-quoted claim that Jacobi makes at the climax of his criticism—typically misquoted as the claim that one cannot enter Kant’s system without assuming the *thing in itself*, yet with this assumption one “cannot stay within his system” (Jacobi, 228)—is actually not primarily (if at all) a claim about the thing in itself. Rather, Jacobi’s actual challenge concerns Kant’s assumption that what affects us through the process of intuition is a *Gegenstand*, which Jacobi takes Kant to regard as an object *within us*, not one that is external to the mind (228): “without that presupposition I could not enter into [Kant’s] system, but with it I could not stay within it.” Jacobi treats Kant’s use of “*Gegenstand*” as referring not to objects outside the mind (and certainly not to the thing in itself), but to the mental *awareness* we must have of an object in order for us ever to cognize it objectively. Because *Gegenstände* are only in the mind, he argues, Kant’s claim that they affect our sensibility makes no sense, unless Kant admits that transcendental idealism leaves no room for empirical realism.²

Jacobi’s charge profoundly affected Kant. In response, he composed the Refutation of Idealism, the only entirely new section (other than the Preface) that Kant added to the second (1787) edition. (All other, *seemingly* new material, as Kant emphasizes at Bxxxixn, consisted of thoroughly rewritten versions of sections that also existed in 1781.) A fact that has gone curiously unnoticed in the literature, that the entire text of the Refutation employs only the term “*Gegenstand*”, never “*Objekt*”, therefore seems highly significant for our purposes. In §3, we will consider the implications of this fact and will argue that Kant had already demonstrated in the Deduction (in both the A and B editions) that *Objekte* are external to us; what remained to be argued (in response to Jacobi) was that, even if we limit our attention to *Gegenstände*, we can...
justify our belief that cognized objects are external (and thus legitimately defend a robust realism) without taking refuge in faith.

In §2, we examine textual evidence supporting our claim that Kant’s two technical terms for “object” have quite distinct meanings. We show that our interpretation establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding not only how Kant thought he had resolved the scandal of philosophy (§3), but also (in §4) how certain key features of his practical philosophy relate to the theoretical. But first, let us briefly examine three previous, but less comprehensive attempts at distinguishing between Objekt and Gegenstand.

By far the predominant approach among Kant scholars is simply to avoid making any Objekt/Gegenstand distinction. However, three interpreters stand out as exceptions: Henry Allison, Rudolf Makkreel, and Howard Caygill. Allison distinguished the terms in 1983, though his view underwent a shift—in light of criticisms, especially from Béatrice Longuenesse—such that he stopped using the distinction in 2004.³

According to Allison (1983, 135), an Objekt (at least in the B Deduction) is a “logical conception of an object (an object in sensu logico).” A Gegenstand, by contrast, is “a ‘real’ sense of object”—i.e., “an object in the sense of an actual entity or state of affairs (an object of possible experience)” (135). He relates objective validity to “Objekt” and objective reality to “Gegenstand”. However, the problematic nature of this latter claim can readily be seen in the very paragraph from which Allison infers his “reciprocity thesis” (144), the thesis that “The essential move in the first part of the Deduction is the attempt to establish a reciprocal connection between the transcendental unity of apperception and the representation of objects.” At B137, Kant explicitly relates objective validity to Gegenstand, rather than Objekt: “the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to a Gegenstand, thus their objective validity…”.

The most relevant point for our understanding of the distinction (see §2) is Allison’s claim that “Objekt” refers to an object “in sensu logico.” Longuenesse (1998, 111n) points out the problem with this claim:⁴ Allison is mistaken, because Kant’s point concerning “Objekt” in the Deduction (though Longuenesse does not grant a distinction between the terms) is “a consideration of the logicodiscursive function of the understanding”, while his point concerning Gegenstand is “a reevaluation, in light of the first consideration, of what we learned in the Transcendental Aesthetic about space and time, that is, about ‘the manner in which things are given to us’” (70n). In revising his argument, Allison (2004, 44) says that Longuenesse convinced him to reject his initial distinction, since she showed that “the object at issue in the first part of the Deduction is defined as the object of intuition as such and is therefore an intuited object rather than merely an object in the most general or logical sense.” As a result, Allison (44) rejected “the extremely vague and potentially misleading notion of an object in sensu logico.”

More recently, Allison has confessed that he now sees “a certain randomness in Kant’s use of these terms [Objekt and Gegenstand]”, such that Allison has “ceased placing any weight on the terminology” (2015, 380n). Yet he still emphasizes (380n)—what will be crucial in our account, below—that Kant makes a distinction “between two conceptions of an object rather than between two kinds of object.” This revised approach, along with Longuenesse’s criticism of Allison’s earlier position, pose no problem to the position we will defend: even if the Objekt is not merely an object in sensu logico, abandoning this claim does not require abandoning the distinction altogether.

Makkreel (1990, 39–40) frames his discussion of the distinction in relation to Allison’s. For Makkreel (40), “an Objekt need not be merely logical; it can be just as real as a Gegenstand.”
Still, Makkreel thinks Kant sometimes does view Objekte as merely logical. For Makkreel (41), “anything either merely thought or merely sensed would be an Objekt and becomes a Gegenstand—an object of experience—only through the mediation of the imagination. The difference between Objekt and Gegenstand is between an unmediated object and an object mediated by the schemata of the imagination.” While Makkreel’s interpretation of the distinction is more balanced, his view of “Objekt” as immediate depends on the notion of the object given in intuition. However, as we will see, Kant consistently uses “Gegenstand” for this aspect of the object. Makkreel refers to Kant’s statement at B145 to claim that Objekte are given in intuition; however, Kant there says that the unity of apperception “combines and orders the material for cognition, the intuition, which must be given to it through the Objekt.” On our reading, intuition occurs in response to the Objekt, but the material given in intuition is the Gegenstand. On this point, our reading is closer to that of Caygill.

Like both the early Allison and Makkreel, Caygill claims that “Kant’s distinction between Gegenstand and Objekt is crucial to his transcendental philosophy, although never explicitly thematized” (2000, 305). For Caygill, the two notions are intimately intertwined (305): “Gegenstände are objects of experience or appearances which conform to the limits of the understanding and intuition… When objects [Gegenstände] of experience are made into objects for knowledge, they become Objekte.” Caygill’s rationale for this view of the relationship (which seems to reverse Makkreel’s) is that, while Gegenstände are appearances, Objekte are “that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united” (305, quoting B137). Caygill’s interpretation of the distinction is correct, but does not go far enough. Moreover, although neglecting Kant’s distinction altogether (as Longuenesse prefers) need not doom an interpretation to failure, we shall argue that taking on board the full extent of its complexities can serve not only to highlight certain contours of Kant’s transcendental idealism that are otherwise easy to miss, but also to clarify various issues relating to his moral philosophy and to the overall coherence of his entire philosophical system.

2. Kant’s perspectival use of Objekt and Gegenstand
The best way to detect the easily missed contours in Kant’s transcendental idealism, while identifying strengths and weaknesses in the aforementioned interpretations, is to examine several key passages in which Kant states that an object can be viewed from two perspectives. He makes two different twofold distinctions, each with implications for the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction, and remains consistent in his use of these terms whenever he explicitly discusses these perspectival distinctions. One passage is in both versions; two others, Kant added in 1787. The first relates to the appearance/thing in itself distinction and the second to the phenomena/noumena distinction.

In the first passage, Kant says an appearance “always has two sides” (A38/B55). We take this to refer to two perspectives, or ways of viewing appearances (cf. Palmquist 1986 and Allison 2015, 380). When the appearance is viewed from one perspective, “the Objekt is considered in itself (without regard to the way in which it is to be intuited, the constitution of which however must for that very reason always remain problematic)” (A38/B55). Viewed from the other perspective, “the form of the intuition of this Gegenstand is considered, which must not be sought in the Gegenstand in itself but in the subject to which it appears, but which nevertheless really and necessarily pertains to the representation of this Gegenstand” (A38/B55). If we regard an appearance in itself (i.e., without considering the way it is intuited), then we treat it as an Objekt; if, by contrast, we consider an appearance in relation to our mode of intuition (i.e., as it is...
for us), then we treat it as a *Gegenstand*. Kant adopts the latter perspective when he describes appearance as “The undetermined *Gegenstand* of an empirical intuition” (A20/B34) and the former perspective when he writes that appearances are “*Objekt[e]* of sensible intuition” (Bxxvi) and “empirical *Objekte*” (A46/B63).

This first distinction relates to the empirical object. We have seen that Kant speaks of the *Objekt* as “that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united” (B137). This claim confirms our consistent observation that in Kant’s usage only *Gegenstände* are given in intuition. *Gegenstände* in intuition are then united to form the empirical *Objekt* through the process of determination effected by the schematized categories (see A145–146/B185). When we view an appearance as an *Objekt*, we regard it as the unified empirical object (without considering our mode of intuition), whereas when we view it as a *Gegenstand*, we regard it as the material for forming an *Objekt*, given our mode of intuition. Because this way of making the distinction lines up well with the way both Longuenesse and Allison interpret the Deduction, we believe they have rejected the distinction prematurely.

Kant reiterates this first distinction throughout the B Preface, applying it not merely to the empirical object (which can be viewed as either appearance or thing in itself), but also to the phenomena/noumena distinction. Kant’s main discussion of these latter notions comes in Chapter III of the Analytic of Principles, entitled “On the Ground of the Distinction of all *Gegenstände* in General into Phenomena and Noumena” (A235f/B294f). Throughout that chapter, Kant consistently portrays both notions as instances of *Gegenstände*. In 1781, he writes (A248–249):

> Appearances, to the extent that as *Gegenstände* they are thought in accordance with the unity of the categories, are called phaenomena. If, however, I suppose there to be things that are merely *Gegenstände* of the understanding and that, nevertheless, can be given to an intuition, although not to sensible intuition..., then such things would be called noumena...

A phenomenon, then, is an appearance (a *Gegenstand* of intuition) that has been processed by the categories, whereas a noumenon is a *Gegenstand* that is merely thought, not given in sensible intuition. The key difference between these two types of *Gegenstand* is that the former is connected to an actual *Objekt* that we can experience through the senses, whereas the latter is not, at least as far as theoretical reason is concerned—a qualification whose full importance will emerge in §4. Kant restates these points in 1787 (B306):

> if we call certain *Gegenstände*, as appearances, beings of sense (phaenomena), because we distinguish the way in which we intuit them from their constitution in itself, then it already follows from our concept that to these we as it were oppose, as *Gegenstände* thought merely through the understanding, either other *Gegenstände* conceived in accordance with the latter constitution, even though we do not intuit it in them, or else other possible things, which are not *Objekte* of our senses at all, and call these beings of understanding (noumena).

Phenomena, therefore, are appearances (*Gegenstände* given in intuition) that have been determined by the categories, whereas noumena are *Gegenstände* that are merely thought and not intuited, because they have no connection to *Objekte* that we experience through *Gegenstände* given in intuition.

With these definitions in hand, we turn to two further distinctions Kant makes in the B Preface. First, he says that when pure reason goes “beyond all boundaries of possible experience” (Bxviii), we must consider “the same *Gegenstände*…from two different sides” (Bxviii): either “as *Gegenstände* of the senses and the understanding for experience”, or as “*Gegenstände* that
are merely thought at most for isolated reason striving beyond the bounds of experience” (Bxviin). As stated in the Phenomena/Noumena chapter, we can consider the same Gegenstände as either phenomena or noumena. In explaining his rationale for this distinction, Kant appeals to his practical philosophy, a move whose legitimacy is guaranteed by the limits of theoretical cognition. In culminating this discussion, he speaks of “the distinction between things as Gegenstände of experience and the very same things as things in themselves” (Bxxvii). Here, he gives the example of “the human soul” (Bxxvii). Kant’s distinction between the soul as phenomenon (Gegenstand of experience) and as noumenon (a Gegenstand merely of thought, which would be an Objekt viewed as thing in itself) allows him to consider the soul in such a way “that its will is free and yet that it is simultaneously subject to natural necessity” (Bxxvii). He then explains this same distinction in explicitly perspectival terms: “the Objekt should be taken in a twofold meaning, namely as appearance or as thing in itself” (Bxxvii).

As we shall see when we turn to Kant’s practical philosophy in §4, this distinction is fully in line with Kant’s statement in CPrR (5:114):

one and the same acting being as appearance (even to his own inner sense) has a causality in the world of sense that always conforms to the mechanism of nature, but with respect to the same event, insofar as the acting person regards himself at the same time as noumenon (as pure intelligence, in his existence that cannot be temporally determined), he can contain a determining ground of that causality in accordance with the laws of nature which is itself free from all laws of nature.

One of the key factors in Kant’s philosophical system that justifies this twofold view of objects, whereby both Gegenstände and Objekte can be either phenomenal or noumenal, is that practical reason provides us with a direct awareness of a non-sensible Objekt that theoretical reason cannot reach: the highest good (see §4 for details).

Whereas Allison (who applied the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction solely to the Deduction) regarded “Objekt” as Kant’s term for an object in the broadest sense, the above-quoted passages assign this status goes to Gegenstände, not Objekte. Similarly, Kant writes (A290/B346):

The highest concept with which one is accustomed to begin a transcendental philosophy is usually the division between the possible and the impossible. But since every division presupposes a concept that is to be divided, a still higher one must be given, and this is the concept of a Gegenstand in general (taken problematically, leaving undecided whether it is something or nothing).

The highest logical concept in Kant’s philosophy, therefore, is this concept of “Gegenstand überhaupt”, which grounds the modal distinction between possibility and impossibility. This, as we shall see in §3, is an insight without which Kant’s strategy in the Refutation of Idealism cannot be fully understood. As we turn now to a consideration of that strategy, we must keep Kant’s perspectival use of “Objekt” and “Gegenstand” firmly in mind: (1) viewed transcendentally, appearances are either Gegenstände (in us) or Objekte (outside us), depending on whether we take our mode of intuition into account; (2) viewed empirically, all Gegenstände are either phenomena or noumena, depending on whether they are given in sensible intuition, thereby constituting an empirical Objekt, or given merely in thought, thereby constituting an (alleged) non-empirical Objekt; and (3) whereas phenomena are grounded in the Objekt through the processing of the categories, noumena stand in need of such a grounding being established by practical reason.

3. The role of Gegenstände in the Refutation of Idealism
As we noted in §1, the Refutation of Idealism was Kant’s response to Jacobi; as such, Kant’s focus would obviously be on responding effectively to Jacobi’s actual criticism. To reiterate: Jacobi rightly alleged that, in order to enter Kant’s system we must assume that Gegenstände, as objects of mental awareness, are what affect the mind whenever we perceive something, yet he wrongly inferred that interpreting Gegenstände in this way makes it impossible to demonstrate that what we believe is experience of an external world really is an experience of something outside us. Jacobi’s inference, if correct, would indeed cause anyone who is not a full-fledged idealist to be unable to remain in Kant’s system. Jacobi thought anyone who holds Kant’s view of the role of Gegenstände in intuition ought to come out of the closet and confess to being an out-and-out idealist. Now, armed with the nuanced, perspectival Objekt/Gegenstand distinction, introduced in §2, we can expose and resolve a previously unnoticed conundrum: as mentioned in §1, the word translated as “object” throughout the Refutation is always “Gegenstand”, never “Objekt”. This fact initially surprised us, for if Kant’s purpose in writing the Refutation was to persuade his early critics that his special form of transcendental idealism actually allows for empirical realism, then we would expect him to focus on the reality of the empirical Objekt as existing outside us.

Instead of making any appeal to Objekte, Kant argues in the Refutation that, in order for us to become aware of our sense of “I”, experience of Gegenstände—i.e., objects viewed as intuited appearances, precisely the feature of transcendental idealism Jacobi had found so intolerable—is absolutely necessary. The problem this poses, in short, is this: if Kant’s argument in the Refutation is only that we must have representations of objects in order to gain any awareness of ourselves as a subject—given that Kant defines representations as “inner determinations of our mind” (A197/B242)—then how does this not make Kant an out-and-out idealist? Surely, it might seem, what Kant needs to establish is that these Gegenstände are and must be empirical Objekte in order for them to exist in our mind at all! Should not Kant have hammered home the externality of the empirical Objekt in this new Refutation? The aforementioned fact that Jacobi’s actual criticism focused only on the status of Gegenstände is the reason Kant had to limit his attention to this term. The view of Kant’s distinction that we have defended in §2 offers insight into how Kant could reach his intended goal without reference to Objekte.

In the pages of the Postulates of Empirical Thought that come just before the place where he inserted the new Refutation, Kant explicitly states that “the cognition of Objekte” requires a “synthesis” (of intuitions and concepts) that agrees with “the objective form of experience in general” (A220/B267). That form is what he had demonstrated to be space and time as forms of intuition (in the Aesthetic) and the categories as forms of conception (in the Deduction). Thus, he goes on to explain that if a concept “includes its own synthesis in it”, then “it is held to be empty, and does not relate to any Gegenstand”, because a concept (if it is empirical) must be synthesized with a Gegenstand in intuition in order to confirm its actuality. Even a “pure concept”, he clarifies, attains objectivity only because and insofar as “its Objekt can be encountered only in [experience in general]” (A220/B267). He then asks a rhetorical question: “For whence will one derive the character of the possibility of a Gegenstand that is thought by means of a synthetic a priori concept, if not from the synthesis that constitutes the form of the empirical cognition of Objekte?” Kant takes the answer to be self-evident, given his argument in the foregoing sections of the Critique: only in experience do we meet actual (empirical) Objekte, so if we wish to know how specific Gegenstände that are components of a particular, cognized
**Objekt** are possible, then we must look at the *formal conditions* that undergird our experience of empirical **Objekte**.

For the purposes of elucidating Kant’s use of terms in the Refutation, the important point to note here is that Kant took the externality (or actuality) of empirical (cognized) **Objekte** to have been sufficiently established by his foregoing arguments in the Aesthetic and Deduction. The latter section’s arguments in particular, being *conceptual* (i.e., being inextricably linked to the question of how the categories, through the activity of transcendental apperception, impart *unity* to empirical objects), were primarily about how the human mind modulates from being the (more or less) passive recipient of **Gegenstände** in intuition to being the active *cognizer* of external **Objekte**. As such, the actuality of that **Objekt** was not at issue for Kant at this point. Indeed, if Kant were merely to reiterate that argument in the Refutation, he would be begging the question posed by Jacobi’s challenge, because Jacobi did not focus on the status of **Objekte** in Kant’s theory. Jacobi recognized that Kant wanted **Objekte** to be external; he just did not think this would be possible, given the representational status of **Gegenstände**. So Kant’s goal in the Refutation, in order to be effective, must be to show that his allegedly paradoxical view of the status of **Gegenstände** is actually itself a necessary requirement for us ever to become aware of the “I” of apperception, the very feature of the mind, as shown in the Deduction, is responsible for our awareness that the **Objekte** we experience actually are external to us. The details of that argument are well known, so our attention to that passage can remain at this general level. The key insight here is that the Refutation’s strategy is not to prove we must have experience of external objects (whether **Objekte** or **Gegenstände**) in order for us ever to be aware of our own self–identity; rather, Kant argues that, whatever it may be that *impacts* our mind, it must do so in such a way that we gain representational awareness of it (i.e., it must be *given* to us in the *form* of a **Gegenstand**), otherwise the unity of apperception itself, the agency through which we *cognize** Objekte** to be external, would be impossible.

Shortly after the end of the Refutation, when Kant resumes the text that had also been included in the first edition, we read (A234/B286) that the concern of the overall section of the *Critique* in which the Refutation appears—i.e., the Postulates of Empirical Thought—has been to demonstrate that the modal postulates:

add to the concept of a thing (the real), about which they do not otherwise say anything, the cognitive power whence it arises and has its seat, so that, if it is merely connected in the understanding with the formal conditions of experience, its **Gegenstand** is called possible; if it is in connection with perception (sensation, as the matter of the senses), and through this determined by means of the understanding, then the **Objekt** is actual; and if it is determined through the connection of perceptions in accordance with concepts, then the **Gegenstand** is called necessary.

Accordingly, intuitions are *possible* cognitions because we initially become aware of them as **Gegenstände** (i.e., initially they have the status of *appearances*, which are indeed problematic, precisely because they are only *possible* cognitions); *actual* cognitions are always of **Objekte**, because they are processed via the categories, thus confirming a real, empirical basis in *perception*; *necessary* cognitions arise only when we abstract from intuitions and regard **Objekte** as unified things (via the “I”), a process that takes us back to the level of **Gegenstände**, and leads human beings into the realm of the noumenal, where we think the abstract thoughts of metaphysics.
In a footnote to the B Preface (Bxxxixn), Kant describes the new Refutation of Idealism section as refutating “psychological idealism”; he claims it offers “a strict proof…of the objective reality of outer intuition.” He famously continues:

No matter how innocent idealism may be held to be as regards the essential ends of metaphysics (though in fact it is not so innocent), it always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us (from which we after all get the whole matter of our cognitions, even for our inner sense) should have to be assumed merely on faith, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof.

This bold statement is normally taken as Kant’s claim to have overcome the objections of Jacobi and other early critics (see e.g., Palmquist 1993, 391f). However, our study of Kant’s Objekt/Gegenstand distinction suggests that something more subtle may be going on, given that Kant’s new proof says nothing about the objective reality of Objekte, but explicitly focuses only on Gegenstände, the latter being what give rise to the threat of “psychological idealism”.

Unveiling this often-neglected contour of Kant’s strategy suggests that here in the B Preface Kant may be wryly admitting to his reader—after having acknowledged a few pages earlier that, even without having the benefit of the Critical philosophy, “the scandal” of needing to rely on faith “sooner or later has to be noticed” (Bxxxiv)—that fully overcoming the scandal requires relocating the arena of “faith” (moving it from intuited Gegenstände to the noumenal [see Palmquist 1984]), rather than by straightforwardly replacing faith with apodictic certainty. With this in mind, we turn our attention now to the second Critique, where (as Kant states in CPR 5:16) distinctions in the first Critique sometimes have to be reversed, if we are to understand morality aright.

4. Objekt and Gegenstand in the second Critique: Toward a comprehensive distinction

In the third Critique’s Introduction, Kant concisely explains how the transition from theoretical to practical reason entails a subtle reversal in his use of the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction: “the concept of nature certainly makes its Gegenstände representable in intuition, but not as things in themselves, rather as appearances, while the concept of freedom in its Objekt makes a thing representable in itself but not in intuition” (CPJ 5:175). Here, Kant modifies the distinction as laid out in the first Critique (see §2, above), in line with the reversal of standpoint from theoretical to practical: Gegenstände, as objects of intuition that play a necessary role in the cognition of empirical Objekte, constitute what we can know about nature, from the standpoint of theoretical reason; the Objekt of freedom, by contrast, provides human beings with access to the noumenal (to the “in itself”) in a way that enables us to overcome the limits of theoretical reason. Such overcoming, however, occurs through our access to freedom, which, as practical, is the focus of the second Critique; it therefore refers not primarily to empirical Objekte (as it did in CPR), but to the Objekt (which here also carries the sense of goal or objective) toward the realization of which all philosophizing ultimately aims.

We have already seen (in §2) a hint of the transition from theoretical to practical reason, in the form of Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction. Kant goes to great lengths to ensure that readers do not lose track of the notion that, while the use of practical reason is distinct from the use of theoretical (or speculative) reason, nonetheless these are still the workings of one and the same pure reason. For example, he says (CPrR 5:89): “practical reason has as its basis the same cognitive faculty as does speculative reason so far as both are pure reason.” He even claims that
“the concept of freedom”, obviously central to his moral philosophy, “constitutes the keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason” (3).

If we are correct in assuming that Kant intended to distinguish sharply between “Objekt” and “Gegenstand”, and that this distinction is as important to the second Critique as it is to the first, then it is no accident that Chapter II of the Analytic (in CPrR) is entitled: “On the Concept of a Gegenstand of Pure Practical Reason” (5:57). While his explanation of the role of Gegenstände in moral cognition is quite complex and therefore potentially confusing, the following passage provides one of the clearest and most explicit statements of the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction in Kant’s entire corpus. He begins (57):

By a concept of a Gegenstand of practical reason I understand the representation of an Objekt as an effect possible through freedom. To be a Gegenstand of practical cognition so understood signifies, therefore, only the relation of the will to the action by which it or its opposite would be made real, and to appraise whether or not something is a Gegenstand of pure practical reason is only to distinguish the possibility or impossibility of willing the action by which, if we had the ability to do so (and experience must judge about this), a certain Objekt would be made real.

In Kant’s theoretical philosophy, Gegenstände given in intuition are taken up and determined by the categories, resulting in an empirical Objekt that we cognize as existing “outside us” (i.e., independently of our mind). Similarly, here in his practical philosophy, a Gegenstand (when employed properly) serves to bring about an Objekt. (Just what that Objekt is will become evident shortly.) Kant says the concept of a Gegenstand of practical reason is the representation of an Objekt as an effect of freedom. Such Gegenstände of practical cognition arise out of the relationship between the will and the action that is produced by the will. To determine whether something is a Gegenstand of pure practical reason is to determine the possibility (or impossibility) of willing an action that would bring about a desired Objekt. The Objekt is the effect of our willing, whereas the Gegenstand is the relationship between the will (as cause) and the effect of the will.

This brings us to one of the primary meanings of “Objekt” in Kant’s practical philosophy—namely, Objekt as moral goal (or objective). In this instance, the goal of willing is to produce a certain effect, an Objekt, as the objective of one’s choice in willing an action. Kant continues his explanation, offering different scenarios for the Objekt/Gegenstand relationship in willing an effect, as follows (CPrR 5:57–58):

If the Objekt is taken as the determining ground of our faculty of desire, the physical possibility of it by the free use of our powers must precede our appraisal of whether it is a Gegenstand of practical reason or not. On the other hand, if the a priori law can be regarded as the determining ground of the action, and this, accordingly, can be regarded as determined by pure practical reason, then the judgment whether or not something is a Gegenstand of pure practical reason is quite independent of this comparison with our physical ability, and the question is only whether we could will an action which is directed to the existence of an Objekt if the object [literally, “if it”] were within our power; hence the moral possibility of the action must come first, since in this case the determining ground of the will is not the Gegenstand but the law of the will.

If a person regards the willed action (the Objekt) as the determining ground of the will, this would require considering whether achieving it is physically possible before we can ask whether it is a Gegenstand of practical reason. But if the moral law is the determining ground of the action, then the questions of physical possibility and whether the action is a Gegenstand of
practical reason are mutually independent. In this latter case, the question is whether we could will an action that is aimed at bringing about an Objekt (i.e., at achieving a certain effect as the action’s goal), if it is within our power. For an action to be free, the moral possibility must precede (and be independent of) the physical possibility. The determining ground is therefore the moral law instead of the Gegenstand (i.e., the relationship between the willing and its effect).

Putting the complexities of this passage aside, we can see that the effect of willing is not identical to the relationship between the will and the action. The former is the Objekt and the latter, the Gegenstand, of practical reason. Accordingly, Kant continues (CPrR 5:58): “The only Objekte of a practical reason are therefore those of the good and the evil. For by the first is understood a necessary Gegenstand of the faculty of desire, by the second, of the faculty of aversion, both, however, in accordance with a principle of reason.” For practical reason, in other words, the sole Objekte are good and evil, the basis for principled moral choice. Good is a Gegenstand of the faculty of desire in so far as good is the relationship of the will to an action, the same applying for evil and the faculty of aversion. This means that the proper goal (Objekt) of practical reason is bringing about good as the effect of the will, good (as the Gegenstand of desire) consisting of the will’s function as grounding the action, since moral goodness has its sole basis in the will.

Kant goes on to elucidate this point still further (CPrR 5:60):

Well-being or ill-being always signifies only a reference to our state of agreeableness or disagreeableness, of gratification or pain, and if we desire or avoid an Objekt on this account we do so only insofar as it is referred to our sensibility… But good or evil always signifies a reference to the will insofar as it is determined by the law of reason to make something its Objekt; for, it is never determined directly by the Objekt and the representation of it, but is instead a faculty of making a rule of reason the motive of an action (by which an Objekt can become real).

Kant is saying that, if we merely desire or feel aversion toward an empirical Objekt (as a phenomenal effect), then we are always dealing only with matters of sensibility, rather than morality proper. Good and evil themselves, as genuine moral principles, always signify the relationship of the will to the moral law, the goal being to make a noumenal Objekt real. The will, when functioning morally, cannot be determined by the Objekt; rather, the will relates to the motive for performing an action, the Objekt being the effect of willing. This is simply the (familiar) claim that consequentialism cannot serve as the basis of morality, though the fine contours of his claim become more readily apparent when his Objekt/Gegenstand distinction is made explicit. Indeed, he goes on to clarify his understanding of moral good and evil still further, noting (61): “What we are to call good must be a Gegenstand of the faculty of desire in the judgment of every reasonable human being, and evil a Gegenstand of aversion in the eyes of everyone; hence for this appraisal reason is needed, in addition to sense.” Good and evil therefore refer to how the will and the action are prioritized, not to the action’s effect.

Previously, Kant had emphasized the importance of the order of priority even more clearly (CPrR 5:21):

By “the matter of the faculty of desire” I understand a Gegenstand whose reality is desired. Now, when desire for this Gegenstand precedes the practical rule and is the condition of its becoming a principle, then I say (first) that this principle is in that case always empirical. For, the determining ground of choice is then the representation of an Objekt and that relation of the representation to the subject by which the faculty of desire is determined to realize the object [literally, “it”]. Such a relation to the subject, however,
is called *pleasure* in the reality of the *Gegenstand*. This would therefore have to be presupposed as a condition of the possibility of the determination of choice. But it cannot be cognized a priori of any representation of a *Gegenstand*… Hence in such a case the determining ground of choice must always be empirical, and so too must be the practical material principle that presupposes it as a condition.

Without making the *Objekt/Gegenstand* distinction, one might read Kant as claiming in this passage that the matter of the faculty of desire is an effect of an action; however, Kant’s use of “*Gegenstand*” (rather than “*Objekt*”) signals his concern for prioritizing between the will and the action. The matter of the faculty of desire is the desired relationship between the will and an action, not its effect. When we allow something empirical to determine our desire, we are not choosing to will freely. In this case, the determining ground of the choice is the empirical *Objekt*, and the relationship of the *Objekt* to the subject (this relationship being the *Gegenstand*). In moral cognition, the relationship of the *Objekt* to the subject is also pleasure in the reality of the *Gegenstand*. This pleasure cannot be cognized *a priori* for any representation of the relationship itself (the *Gegenstand*), no matter what the relationship may be; but the determining ground must be the moral law as *Objekt*.

If the foregoing were the full extent of the added insight we can gain into the contours of Kant’s argument, by taking Kant’s *Objekt/Gegenstand* distinction seriously, this would already justify a call to English–speaking Kant scholars around the world to make a concerted effort to search for a new way of translating one or the other of these terms, so that future English readers of Kant will be able to detect the nuances he built into his theory. Yet, the potential insights this distinction contributes to a deeper understanding of Kant’s philosophy do not stop here. The implications of Kant’s distinction reach their apex once we discover that Kant identifies the ultimate *Objekt* of the practical philosophy (if not for metaphysics, and hence for all philosophizing whatsoever) as none other than the *highest good*. He consistently portrays “the promotion of the highest good” as “an a priori necessary *Objekt* of our will” (*CPrR* 5:114)—never as its *Gegenstand*. Thus, we read (122): “The production of the highest good in the world is a necessary *Objekt* of a will determined by the moral law.”

While the vast majority of Kant’s uses of “*Objekt*” and “*Gegenstand*” in *CPrR* fit the above description quite well, in a few passages he *appears* to use the wrong term. But in such cases, if we take his usage seriously, instead of simply assuming that he was being careless (or that his usage is merely random), then we stand to gain insights about the contours of his theory that would otherwise remain entirely hidden from the English reader’s view. For example, in an earlier passage (5:109), Kant writes:

> though the highest good may be the whole *Gegenstand* of a pure practical reason, that is, of a pure will, it is not on that account to be taken as its determining ground, and the moral law alone must be viewed as the ground for making the highest good and its realization or promotion the *Objekt*.

The mere fact that Kant first uses “*Gegenstand*” and then changes to “*Objekt*” could, admittedly, be taken as evidence that the terms are interchangeable. But if, instead, we ask what Kant must mean in this passage, assuming he intentionally distinguished them, a significant insight emerges. Kant’s point is, as usual, perspectival: even though from the perspective of our feeling about the highest good, we may experience it as not only a *Gegenstand* (a relation between our will and action), but as the sum-total of all desires that practical reason regards as legitimate, only by attaching this feeling to the moral law do we succeed in making the highest good a genuine *Objekt* (goal), which we must pursue if we are to be fully rational.
We have shown that Kant’s Objekt/Gegenstand distinction persists throughout his philosophical system, though its features change along with the system’s perspectival shifts. In theoretical philosophy Gegenstände are given in intuition, as transcendentally ideal components of appearances, while in practical philosophy they are given in thought (through the concept of freedom), as representations of the relationship between moral actions and the will. Likewise, Objekte require categorial determination in order to be cognized empirically, thus barring us from access to noumena when viewed theoretically; yet they make the noumenal actual when viewed practically, as expressing the highest good.

While our defence of Kant’s Object/Gegenstand distinction aims to be comprehensive, we fully recognize that this chapter has merely illuminated the contours of its implications for Kant’s response to Jacobi: Gegenstände in intuition can be viewed as empirically real, despite the key role they play in Kant’s transcendental idealism; and this robust realism requires Critical philosophers to shift the focus of faith from the phenomenal to the noumenal, thereby transforming faith from being a philosophical scandal for cognition to being the mantle that metaphysics proudly wears. A fully comprehensive defence of this distinction, however, will require a book-length work, where we will explain various important additional features, including: (1) mathematics, being grounded on pure intuition, involves non-empirical objects that are apodictically necessary;12 (2) in contexts referring to the subject, Kant contrasts it with “Objekt”, not “Gegenstand”;13 (3) the ideas of reason (God, freedom, and immortality) are Gegenstände (and thus merely possible) when viewed theoretically, yet are legitimately regarded as actual, as “Objekte of pure practical reason” (CPrR 5:5), when properly related to the highest good:14 and (4) explaining Kant’s denial of intellectual intuition in terms of the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction will provide a clear understanding of why the affirmations of practical philosophy are sufficient even though they do not amount to full-fledged intellectual intuition.

Our hope, then, is that in this first published attempt to defend the range of radical claims we believe can be made about Kant’s highly neglected distinction, we have at least demonstrated that interpreters of Kant should henceforth make a point of inquiring whether Kant is using “Objekt” or “Gegenstand”, especially when seeking to understand how his transcendental idealism relies on a complex theory of intuition. This chapter’s introductory quote shows that Kant sought to avoid randomly using terms synonymously. Our comprehensive interpretation of his Objekt/Gegenstand distinction exonerates Kant from what would otherwise be a “prodigal” use of terminology. We aim “to preserve” Kant’s words “carefully in [their] proper meaning”, just as Kant himself says is “advisable” (A312–313/B369). Consistently applying the distinction renders some passages strange, but this may signal that the full depths of Kant’s thought have not yet been plumbed, and the distinction may illuminate such strangeness rather than cause it (cf. Ertl 2013, 438–439). If we are to take Kant’s thought seriously, we must take it on his own terms. In a word, Kant’s application of his Objekt/Gegenstand distinction overcomes the scandal of philosophy by pointing the metaphysician’s attention firmly and necessarily toward the moral standpoint, in order to ground the Gegenstände of our experiences as citizens of the phenomenal world in an Objekt that transcends the operations of our own mental capacities: the highest good.

References


Notes

1 Kant uses both “Object” and “Objekt” in various works. For consistency, and to avoid possible confusion with the English, “object”, we always use “Objekt”. Moreover, both “Objekt” and “Gegenstand” are spelled differently, depending on whether they are singular or plural and on what grammatical role they play in the sentence. To avoid perplexing English readers who may not be familiar with German grammar, we adopt the following convention: when “object” or “objects” appears in a quote, we simply replace it with the German term (adjusting the English article, “a/an”, if needed); whenever it is singular, we use either “Objekt” or “Gegenstand”; whenever it is plural, we use “Objekte” or “Gegenstände”.

2 For an excellent account of this interpretation of Jacobi’s challenge, see Karin de Boer (2014, 221–260), though she distinguishes between Objekt and Gegenstand only linguistically, not in meaning.

3 Two interpreters who explicitly follow Allison’s 1983 distinction are Zammito (1992) and Kim (2015). Zammito ties the distinction to the scholastic res/lens distinction (1992, 362n; see also 54 and 72). Kim (2015, 129n) relates the distinction to two conceptions of the categorical imperative in GMM.

4 A detailed account of the Allison–Longuenesse debate on this issue is irrelevant to our concern in this chapter, as it centers on how to interpret the Deduction. Indeed, Allison’s exclusive focus on the Deduction may be what led him to adopt an untenable version of the distinction; as we will see in §2, the key features of the distinction relate as much (if not more) to Kant’s theory of intuition as to his theory of the categories. For the debate itself, see Longuenesse (1998, 70, 110–111) and Allison (2012a, 35 and 2012b, 43–44).

5 Interestingly, Caygill does not acknowledge other versions of the distinction, yet Allison had not yet abandoned his position when Caygill advanced his alternative.

6 Caygill’s brackets. By “knowledge”, Caygill seems to mean “cognition”. On this issue of the determination of objects, in relation to the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction, Makkreel’s distinction is virtually the reverse of both ours and Caygill’s.

7 Many interpreters treat these two distinctions as synonymous. For a detailed explanation of their different functions in Kant’s theory, see Palmquist 1986. While we are broadly in agreement with systematic features of the interpretation presented there, that article did not distinguish between Objekt and Gegenstand and thus overlooked various nuances that would have given its interpretation further support and clarity. Moreover, Palmquist 1986 remained silent on how Kant’s treatment of object–terms in the second Critique relates to that in the first.

8 In the process of examining every use of Objekt and Gegenstand in the first Critique, in order to classify them into different types of usage (a study the results of which we intend to publish later), we discovered that when Kant refers to an object being exhibited “in intuition”, he consistently uses “Gegenstand”. On the relatively few occasions where “Objekt” appears in such contexts, the statement is either counterfactual or else makes a claim that falls short of committing Kant to the view that an Objekt can be exhibited in intuition. For an excellent discussion of Kant’s theory that objects are given in intuition, see Allais 2015, though she does not point out that Kant’s concern here is exclusively with Gegenstände.

9 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between the phenomena/noumena and appearances/things in themselves, see Stang (2016, 182–183). He demonstrates that, while all things in themselves are noumena, not all noumena are things in themselves. This explains why Kant speaks of the soul as a thing in itself to illustrate the phenomena/noumena distinction.

10 While it may be tempting to interpret Kant’s various references to an “object in general” as synonymous to his references to a “transcendental object”, we regard these as distinct terms. On the latter, see Sherover (1982), who makes a valiant attempt to distinguish between Kant’s use of “transcendental Objekt” and “transcendental Gegenstand”; see also Love (2017, 203–204n and 193n). We plan to weigh in on this aspect of Kant’s distinction in a subsequent publication.

11 For example, di Giovanni (2010, xxxvi), in translating Hegel, describes the project of translating Gegenstand and Objekt as “a translator’s nightmare…” Yet, his explanation of the distinction is remarkably similar to the one we find in Kant. Interestingly, he uses “subject matter” as the standard translation for “Gegenstand”.

12 For a detailed discussion of Kant’s theory of pure intuition as it pertains to mathematics, but without relating it to the Objekt/Gegenstand distinction, see Palmquist 1987.

13 A statistical analysis of Kant’s usage in CPR overwhelmingly supports this claim; in the few cases where “Gegenstand” occurs in the same context as “Subjekt”, the two terms are not directly opposed. The reason for Kant’s consistent use is not (merely) grammatical; rather, it is because transcendental apperception is the function whereby the subject (the “I”) first enters Kant’s system; Gegenstände in intuition come before that entry, whereas empirical Objekte assume the activity of the Subjekt.
Kant says (A798/B826): “The final aim” of speculative reason “concerns three *Gegenstände*: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God.” In *CPrR*, these become “*Objekte* of pure speculative reason” (5:134). The transition from the ideas as *Gegenstände* to *Objekte* is an essential feature of practical reason, in which “those concepts, otherwise problematic…for [speculative reason], are now declared assertorically to be concepts to which real *Objekte* belong, because practical reason unavoidably requires the existence of them for the possibility of its *Objekt*, the highest good” (134). Theoretical reason allows us to “grant that there are such *Gegenstände*, though it cannot determine them more closely and so cannot itself extend this cognition of the *Objekte* (which have now been given to it on practical grounds…)” (135). Kant continues: “for this increment…pure theoretical reason, for which all those ideas are…without *Objekte*, has to thank its practical capacity only.” Practical reason has its own *Objekt*, the highest good, by which the *Gegenstände* of theoretical reason obtain objective reality as *Objekte*. 

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