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Abstract

A number of contemporary philosophers of science and social science, as well as historians of ideas, philosophers of language and sociologists, endorse, more or less explicitly, Kantian roots in subscribing to some version or other of 'constructed' objectivity, yet without often necessarily renouncing a (qualified) realist position. How is this the case? In the epistemological literature a divide is normally acknowledged between ontological objectivity (firmly rooted in reality) and epistemological objectivity (relative to how reality appears to us), and Kant is often portrayed as the forerunner of the latter. Objectivity is either a subject of discovery (if you are a realist) or an invention (if you are an anti-realist), and Kant's idealism would seem to make him veer towards the latter. However, his idealism is far more complex than some or any of its caricatures. Besides, those who believe that objectivity can be a combination of discovery and invention can equally find inspiration and support from Kant's position. So what did Kant actually say about objectivity? If there is such a thing as a Kantian view of objectivity, what does this view consist of? What does Kant's idealism retain of the realist stance? In what follows I go back to Kant's text and try to extract a picture that might help answering these questions.

Preliminaries

In philosophical discussions about objectivity a fundamental distinction is often made, or assumed, between two versions of the concept – one ontological, and one epistemological. For example, here is how the two versions are summarised in the entry ‘Objectivity’ from the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*:

On the one hand, there is a straightforwardly ontological concept: something is objective if it exists, and is the way it is, independently of any knowledge, perception, conception or consciousness there may be of it. Obvious candidates here includes plants, rocks, atoms (...) Less obvious candidates include such things as numbers, sets, propositions, primary qualities, facts (...) Subjective entities, conversely, will be those which could not exist or be the way they are if they were not known, perceived or at least conceived (...), such things as sensations, dreams, memories, secondary qualities (...) There is, on the other hand, a notion of objectivity that belongs primarily within epistemology. According to this conception, the objective/subjective distinction is not intended to mark a split in reality (...) but serves rather to distinguish two grades of cognitive achievement. (...) here objectivity can be construed as a property of the contents of mental acts and states. (...) a belief that the speed of light is 187,000 miles per second (...) has an objective content; a judgement that rice pudding is disgusting (...) will be merely subjective.¹

The realist/anti-realist opposition is often drawn depending on what side of the objectivity divide (ontological/epistemological) one stands. The realist claims that for our beliefs to be objective we ought to assume the independent existence of determinate facts, objects, properties, events, etc. (i.e., an ‘objective’ ontology). The realist also normally assumes that ontological objectivity can be ‘captured’ by epistemological objectivity, in that the latter can represent, at different degrees of accuracy, ‘the way things really are’. In either case, epistemological objectivity cannot stand on its own grounds, as the anti-realist would instead claim. The objectivity of our beliefs can be established by reference to other beliefs in an anti-realist view, beliefs that can find support, for example, in the general consensus within a given community, or in the conformity to shared rules of reasoning. It is indeed on the basis of notions such as ‘the way reality appears to us’, or ‘the evidence available and shared at this present moment in time’ that epistemological objectivity can be at all ascertained.

Kant is normally considered the forerunner of epistemological objectivity. For him a judgement is objective if it possesses a content that may be presupposed to be valid for all men (valid “at every time” and for “everyone else”, *Prolegomena*, prg.19). It is the task of the Understanding (a faculty shared by all rational individuals) to create objective judgements by using the universal categories of thought that allow us to reason, judge and know. By endorsing this purportedly idealist construction of objectivity Kant is often aligned with the anti-realist camp (or sometimes even invoked when arguments of a constructivist nature need support): it is our concepts that make experience possible, not the other way around (as the empiricist philosophers before him argued). The ‘objectivity’ of knowledge

¹ Bell, D. (1994), ‘Objectivity’, *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. by J. Dancy and E. Sosa, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, pp. 310-13.

stands for the way in which necessary and universal concepts actively constitutes 'objects' of knowledge. This is the core of what Kant named the "Copernican Revolution", the new route he undertook in metaphysics.²

A number of contemporary philosophers of science and social science, as well as historians of ideas, philosophers of language and sociologists,³ endorse – more or less explicitly – Kantian roots in subscribing to some version or other of constructed objectivity, yet without renouncing a (qualified) realist position. Discovery and invention are not treated as two mutually exclusive approaches of reference- fixing. How is this the case?

If we look at Kantian scholarship, we find two broad interpretations of Kant's philosophy: the analytic, and the idealist. The analytic interpretation is famously exemplified by Strawson (1966). Here it is argued that "we could not conceive ourselves as subjects of experience if we did not have experience of a world of spatio-temporal particulars existing independently of our experiences" (Gardner 1999, p. 32). This, in transcendental terms (more on this later), means that experience must have certain features that accord with some form of realism, or – in Strawson's terms – "not any purported and grammatically permissible description of a possible kind of experience would be a truly intelligible description. There are limits to what we can conceive of" (Strawson 1966, p. 15). According to the idealist interpretation, the starting point is not experience (what is experienced) but the activity of experiencing that confers structure to its objects. In this sense, it is here said, "the operations of the mind give shape to the world" (Gardner 1966, p.33).⁴ It must be noted, however, that this is not a type of idealism that deals with the very existence of things (as, e.g., *a la* Berkeley), but only with the properties that we predicate of things and that allow us to have knowledge of them.

Already from this sketchy description of the two interpretations, identifying a clear dividing line between realism and anti-realism in Kant is anything but straightforward, and this can only make one more curious to figure out how a possible agreement between the two perspectives can be achieved. A way to find this out is to go back to Kant himself. This of course is not to suggest that going back to primary sources automatically and indisputably reveals a philosopher's position. And if this is not the case in general, it is particularly not so for a philosopher like Kant, whose writing is renowned for being dense, ambiguous, and obscure (sometimes by his own admission). Nonetheless, what I propose in this paper is to dig into Kant's text enough to figure out some of the crucial elements that enter his concept of objectivity, and try to understand how Kant accommodates them in a coherent

² "Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, he [Copernicus] tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics, etc. etc." [CPR, Preface to the Second Ed., Bxvii]

³ I here refer to, for example, Hacking's reading of the constructivist argument, Putnam's internal realism, Cartwright's local realism, Daston's applied metaphysics, Searle's external realism, Giere's perspective realism. M. Massimi embraces an explicitly Kantian perspectival realism (inspired by Giere's). I also adopt a Kantian view of objectivity in my analysis of the 'objects' of social science. Further, there is the position that Devitt once defined 'fig-leaf realism', that he attributes to views such as the sociologist Knorr-Cetina's but whose roots he retraces in Kant. For all, see bibliographical refs at the end of the paper.

⁴ Gardner here refers to Hendrich's idealist interpretation as in Hendrich (1992).

framework that explains away purported tensions among perspectives.⁵ Hopefully this exercise will help putting Kant's position in a more balanced setting, and in particular to learn how to make use of the terms 'given' and 'constructed' when applied to the concept of objectivity - a lesson much needed in the light of the not so remote, bitter philosophical debates on this topic.

In what follows I will start by offering some background on the philosophical history of the terms 'object' and 'objectivity', and pinpoint the source of the difficulties that these terms created for traditional philosophical reflection. I will then proceed by showing how Kant tried to handle some of these difficulties by formulating his own conception of objectivity. I will finally discuss how this conception is neither fully anti-realist nor plainly adverse to a realist propensity. I believe that this 'conciliatory' conception is what makes a number of contemporary philosophers and historians of science, over and above any strict, contentious divide between realism and anti-realism, look at Kant with a sympathetic eye.⁶

1. 'Objects' and 'objective' in the history of philosophy

The word 'object' is not as old as philosophy. The idea of 'objects' as separate from, or opposed to 'subjects', as well as the connotation of 'objective' as used to refer to whatever activity is able to reproduce faithfully a world of external objects, both appear only with modern philosophy. In ancient Greece there is no word which stands for the concept of an 'object' as external to the mind of a 'subject', and to be represented as such by the mind itself (for instance, as an 'idea'). The Presocratics never raised the problem of how 'objects' are referents of knowledge, and even in Plato - to whom we owe, as we read in all introductory manuals of epistemology, the first formulation of the question of knowledge: 'is knowledge justified true belief?' - we cannot find any term which stands for the generic word 'object'.⁷

Similarly, the difference between object and subject, which can be inferred from Aristotle's writings, is far from resembling the modern one. On the one side, the equivalent of 'object' in the current sense (*ob-jectum*: 'what stands against') is used by Aristotle in the sense of an obstacle (*'antikeimenon'*: 'being opposite') - to refer, for instance, to an accusation, or to an objection [see for ex. *Metaphysics*, V, 10, 1018]. On the other side, the equivalent of 'subject' (*'hypokeimenon'*: 'what lies underneath') has in him two meanings - one ontological, and one logical. In the ontological sense it means 'substance': an unchangeable '*substratum*', or '*ousia*', which is the 'subject' of different forms. In the logical sense it means the 'subject' of a proposition, as distinct from the predicate(s). However, as is well known, in Greek philosophy logic is typically thought of in correspondence with ontology: the structure of language (*logos*) and the structure of reality are taken to be homogenous. The former is conceived of as a vehicle of expression for the latter. This is why Aristotle can

⁵ I should declare from the start that I am not a Kant scholar. My philosophical reconstruction of Kant is limited to building a reasonable picture in view of answering a specific question. Hopefully the picture I end up with here will not prove a disappointment to more accomplished readers.

⁶ In this paper I deliberately and as far as possible stay close to Kant's text, in view of offering readers interested in Kant's view the details of this view, using evidence from Kant's own writings.

⁷ All we can find are terms with a built-in reference to whatever an 'object' is an object of: '*aiothepa*' (objects of perception), or '*noeta*' (objects of thought).

claim that the subjects of propositions are the logical/linguistic mode of expression of real substances (i.e., the substances, which constitute reality). So it seems that, contrary to our current views, the 'subject', in Aristotelian terms, ends up capturing the modern sense of 'object', i.e. it is what has indeed 'objective' existence.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to notice that in Aristotle we also find hints to a different view, which to some extent paves the way to the modern distinction. If we set aside his metaphysics and look at his treatise on psychology (*De Anima*), we can see how one of the questions addressed by Aristotle concerns how sensible things 'presents' themselves to our intellectual faculties. When we come to the mental activity of 'receiving' things from the outside world there is a difference, he claims, between the faculty of perception on the one hand, and the faculty of the intellect on the other. The former requires the 'presence' of things, whereas the latter is able to receive things even in their absence (that is, it is able to re-present them). Absent things can be received by the intellect, since things emanate 'species' (or 'idola' in Democritus' terms), which imprint forms on the intellect when the material object is not there (and yet in such a way that it can be 'recalled' by the intellect).⁸

That Aristotle's view as presented in *De Anima* could be seen as a precursor of future developments becomes clear from what follows. The term '*objectum*' (literally, 'what stands against') was introduced into the philosophical vocabulary only by medieval scholastics to designate the content of an act of cognition.⁹ Interestingly, this very view will enter the modern conception of objects, as found among the rationalists on one side, and the empiricists on the other. In both cases, objects are taken to be what constitutes the content of our representations, and representations are the way by which our minds produce knowledge of external objects. Depending on how the mechanism of representational knowledge is conceived by either view, a different conception of 'object' will emerge. If, for example with Descartes, representations are taken to be the product of an active mind, then the object of knowledge is nothing but the idea that the mind represents, in accord with the forms projected onto the external world by the mind itself.¹⁰ If, as we find explained for example in Locke's *Essay*, representations are taken to be the passive reproduction of the objects as received by the senses from the external world, then the object of knowledge is to be the exact copy of the content the mind represents of it (what in fact 'causes' the mind to have that very representation of it).

Both conceptions, however, run against the same challenging problem: how can the correspondence between external objects and their mental representations be justified? If, as we evince from Descartes, the actual object is an idea, how do we guarantee that external objects correspond to the ideas of those objects? If, as in the case of the empiricists, the actual object is a perception, how do we guarantee that the cause of our perception (the external object) is the same as the content of our perception (the perceived

⁸ "Visions appear to us even when our eyes are shut", *De Anima* 428a16. This is how Aristotle explains what 'species' of things are, that is what belongs to things and can be received by the intellect, i.e. their 'formal' aspects.

⁹ The main 'ingredient' of the newly introduced term can indeed be traced back to the Aristotelian doctrine of species – a doctrine, that for example St Thomas explicitly derives from Aristotle (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.85, a.2), and which is further developed by William of Occam in terms of the idea of species as 'representations' (species as being there in the mind 'in stead of' the actual object).

¹⁰ E.g., for Descartes the mathematical forms of figure, extension and movement.

object)? Descartes' solution, as is well and controversially known, resorts to God as the guarantor of the truth of our representations.¹¹ Hume's skeptical response is, equally famously, habit. It is a "gross illusion", says Hume, to assume that there is such a correspondence, and yet this is an illusion that everybody is prepared to follow, because there is nothing better we can use in order to shield our doubts [*Treatise*, 1.I, Part IV, sect. II, prgs 12-16].

So it seems that, once a separation has occurred, philosophically speaking, between subject and object, between representation and content of representation, between objects as given and objects as thought of or as perceived, then the problem of any representational type of knowledge becomes that of securing a perfect match between those very objects and how our minds feature them (or what our minds feature of them). In other words, the problem of representational knowledge consists of setting out standards for how 'objective' representations are, or can be.

On what standards, or grounds can then objective knowledge be founded? Can a quest for objective knowledge be founded at all? Kant inherits these central questions – crucial to any epistemological projects up to his days – and suggests a different solution from the two described above.

2. Kant's solution to the problem of objective knowledge

In his *Letter to Hertz* (21 February 1772) Kant asks himself the following question: "What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call 'representation' [*Vorstellung*]?"¹² in addressing this question Kant laments the fact that his predecessors failed to pay adequate attention to it – or even worse, they suggested solutions, such as that of a *deus ex machina*, that are patently absurd.

Kant suggests an alternative picture, a summary of which can be found in CPR [B75/A51]. Our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources: one is the capacity of receiving representations (sensibility), the other is the power of knowing an object through these representations (understanding). In the first case, objects are 'given' to us, in the second they are 'thought' by us. So, *intuitions* and *concepts* are the two elements of our knowledge, and we need them both in order to know. Without intuitions, we could not 'receive' objects, without concepts objects could not be 'thought'. And here comes Kant's famous sentence: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." (CPR, B75)

So, given that "the understanding cannot intuit anything, the senses can think nothing" [*idem.*], then it is only through their union that knowledge can arise. This union, or agreement, between the two obtains because of some specific conditions: this is precisely the task of Kant's transcendental logic – studying the conditions under which the agreement between sensibility and understanding produces true knowledge. Finding out what these conditions are implies asking questions about both the origin of knowledge, and about its scope.

¹¹ See Descartes' famous ontological proof for God's existence, Fifth Meditation.

¹² Representation in Kant is similar (at least in scope) to the empiricist and rationalist notion of 'idea', namely anything in the mind that enters a knowledge claim.

As to the origin of knowledge, Kant has mainly in mind the empiricist solution offered by Locke: the origin of knowledge is experience, and experience is the necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge. Kant is critical of the Lockean view in at least two ways: first, he says, it is not true that all knowledge derives from experience (some of our concepts are clearly a priori, independent of any experience); second, even admitting that in one way or another all our knowledge starts from experience (experience is the triggering factor for knowledge), this does not imply that all knowledge derives from experience. And this is, for Kant, precisely the mistake made by the empiricists: to turn what might be just a contingent psychological starting point for knowledge into its necessary and sufficient condition.

As to the scope of knowledge, Kant's main critical target is the rationalist Christian Wolff,¹³ who believed – like all rationalists of his inclination – that knowledge is only conceptual, and therefore it can be dogmatically pursued. To the contrary, knowledge for Kant can only be *knowledge of objects* - which means that concepts are only one of its conditions, the other coming from the side of the objects themselves.

But what does Kant mean by 'knowledge of objects'? The meaning of 'object' in Kant's philosophical approach is particularly controversial – and yet part of the problem for Kant's predecessors is, according to him, that they did not distinguish appropriately among the different meanings of it.

3. Objekt and Gegenstand

A first distinction to keep in mind upon entering Kant's philosophical framework is that between *Objekt* and *Gegenstand*. With the first term Kant refers to either objects in general (in the first edition of *CPR* sometimes called "transcendental objects",¹⁴ "the wholly indeterminate concept of something as such", A253) or (more specifically in the second edition) to the object in itself (*Ding an Sich*, a purely intelligible object). With the second term he refers to objects for us, or objects of possible experience. In Chapter 3 of *Analytic of Principles* Kant clarifies that the realm of 'objects for us' includes *phenomena* (*Erscheinung*), whereas 'objects in themselves' refer to *noumena*.

The significance of the term (and concept of) *noumena* in Kant's philosophy vis a vis *phenomena* has been widely debated.¹⁵ There is however an almost canonical distinction in this debate between what is called the 'two aspect' reading and the 'two-world' reading. According to the two-aspect reading the distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena* is between two types of *concepts of* an object rather than two *kinds of* objects (two-world reading). The one concept (object of appearance) refers to the necessary conditions for perception and cognition, the other concept abstracts from those conditions.

¹³ Christian Wolff (1679–1754) was one of the most influential philosophers and mathematicians of the German Enlightenment after Leibniz, and he had almost undisputed fame in German academic circles till Kant. In the "Preface" to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (2nd ed), Kant refers to him as "the greatest of all dogmatic philosophers."

¹⁴ The notion of a transcendental object appears first in the 'Deduction' at A109, and it is marginalised in the second edition.

¹⁵ Two seminal books are E Adickes (1924) and G. Prauss (1974) – the first stressing a realist interpretation of the *ding an sich*, the second suggesting a non-metaphysical interpretation of it, later subscribed, in the Anglophone tradition, by H. Allison's equally 'deontologized' reading of it (1983; 2004).

However, the two-aspect reading is not necessarily an exclusively epistemological reading. It could be described also in ontological terms: “appearances are the things as they appear to us, and things in themselves are the very same things as they do not appear to us, i.e. as they would be in abstraction from the way we experience them.” (Schulting 2011, p.2)¹⁶ Attempts have been made to combine an epistemological and an ontological interpretation of the two-aspect reading. For ex. Allais (2007) claims that Kant is not only interested in “how we construct experience but also to argue that there must actually be substance that endures through time and is not created or destroyed” (p. 461 n.10). This type of interpretation is interesting because it allows us to grasp the meaning of Kantian *phenomenon* in the double sense of referring to a mind-independent object that exists for us quite separately from the way it exists in itself. In order to understand how this comes to be the case we need to interrogate Kant’s text again. A relevant distinction ought to be kept in mind when Kant refers to the object-for-us: a distinction between an *object of intuition* and an *object of the intellect*.

4. Object of intuition and object of understanding

There are two fundamental questions that seem to occupy Kant in the first part of the *Critique*. The first is: what constitutes sensible knowledge? What needs to be figured out here is what we *actually know* of the objects of experience via intuition and sensibility, or what we immediately experience of these objects when we perceive them, and how they relate to the objects that do not exist ‘for us’.

‘Our mode of intuition is dependent upon the existence of the object, and is therefore possible only if the subject’s faculty of representation is affected by that object.’ [B72]

However, this also means that the object is present in our mode of intuition only as far as this mode is able to ‘represent’ it for us. And a ‘represented object’ is no guarantee that it is a perfect copy of whatever object is the object of our representation; that is, whatever ‘thing’ is for us is not necessarily the same as the ‘thing in itself’.

‘What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them – a mode which is peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared in by every being, though, certainly by every human being. With this alone have we any concern.’ [B59/A42]

In other words, what we call ‘the world’ is not the sum of things in themselves, but the sum of things as we represent them.

Given this, here is a second important question that Kant tries to answer in the course of *Aesthetics*: given that sensible knowledge is knowledge of phenomena, what are the conditions by virtue of which sensible knowledge is possible? This second question is specifically critical (in a Kantian sense): it is a transcendental question in that it asks for the conditions that make knowledge of appearances possible. These conditions are for Kant

¹⁶ In Kant’s text we find grounds to support both readings. See for ex. Bxxvii; and A288/B344, A 372, A249.

space and time. Space and time “belong only to the form of intuition, and therefore to the subjective constitution of our mind, apart from which they could not be ascribed to anything whatsoever.” [B38] They are then pure forms for all intuitions, contributed by our faculty of sensibility, and therefore forms of which we can have a priori knowledge.

How does Kant keep this picture (partly empirical and partly apriori) together? Let’s start from spelling out how he refers to an object of intuition in his *Aesthetics*.

‘In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, intuition is that through which it is in immediate relation to them, and to which all thought as a means is directed. But intuition takes place only in so far as the object is given to us. This again is only possible, to man at least, in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way. The capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects, is entitled sensibility. (...) The effect of an object upon the faculty of representation, so far as we are affected by it, is sensation. (...) The undetermined object of an empirical intuition is entitled appearance.’ [B34/A20]

Intuition, Kant is here saying, is a representation, the way in which our mind relates to objects, directly, or the way in which it directs the mind towards the objects. Sensibility is instead the capacity for receiving representations through “the mode in which we are affected by objects”. So objects appear here to be given to us by means of sensibility, sensibility yields us intuitions, and intuitions are the way in which objects can be given to us.¹⁷ Sensation is then the end product of this process, “the effect of an object upon the faculty of representation.” As a consequence, intuitions – which relate to objects via sensations – are “empirical” (though not in the sense that they are themselves part of experience, but in the sense that they are forms of representation of experience). Finally, appearance, “the undetermined object of an empirical intuition”, is a combination of matter and form: ‘matter’ is what corresponds to sensation (and, because of this, given to us a posteriori), ‘form’ is what allows for the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations (this is not contributed by sensation but by our mind, and because of this it is apriori). But this means that intuitions relate to objects not only via sensations, but also, and most importantly, apart from all sensations: intuitions of this sort, says Kant, are ‘pure’ (in the transcendental sense of being those conditions which make it possible for the objects to be intuited by sensibility).

What are then these pure forms of sensibility? How can we find out what they are? Here is what Kant seems to suggest: isolate sensibility, take away everything that belongs to sensation (whatever we perceive via our senses – colours, hardness, etc. etc.), finally we are left with the mere form of appearances. This is what sensibility can supply on its own, “even

¹⁷ In intuitions objects are ‘given’ to us, says Kant; instead, for the objects to be ‘thought’ by us we need a different kind of representation, namely concepts, and concepts arise from the understanding – as we will see later. But here is Kant for now: “there are two stems of human knowledge, which perhaps arise from a common, but to us unknown, root, namely sensibility and understanding, through the first of which objects are given to us, through the second of which they are thought.” [A15/B29]

without any actual objects of the senses or of sensation”, something which “exists in the mind a priori as a mere form of sensibility”. For Kant these two pure forms of sensibility are, notoriously, space and time.

It is not the place to analyse the arguments that Kant puts forward to establish that space and time are those pure intuitions. I will here only draw one interim consequence from his way of describing objects of sensation and our ‘intuitive’ way of relating to them that appears relevant to the idea of objectivity we are in search for. Holding that space and time are pure a priori forms of all intuitions brings Kant to argue that what we call sensible experience is in fact objective: its objectivity does not depend on the fact that appearances conform to the things in themselves (of which they are supposedly appearances) but rather on the fact that the forms which regulate our intuitive representations of objects are constitutive of the human mind, and therefore they are identical for all human beings: we all objectively perceive appearances in the same way. But more on this later.

What about the object of the intellect? There are two main tasks that are set out in the *Analytic of Concepts*:

- 1) to give a complete and systematic list of the pure a priori concepts of the understanding, and show how they function as forms of judgement;
- 2) to show how these concepts, or categories, in conjunction with experience (and exclusively by means of this conjunction) produce real knowledge.

The move of deriving the categories from the forms of judgment has been variously criticized. It has been objected that there is no reason why forms of inference belonging to pure logic should have anything in common with the concepts we use to think of the objects of experience. It is also contentious whether for Kant it is only by means of concepts that an agreement (necessary and universal) between experience and understanding can be reached.¹⁸ In what follows I will try to tread a line between these opposite and controversial positions without engaging directly with current debates on different interpretations of these specific aspects of Kant’s view, and by keeping focus on the main objective of this paper. In my reading particular attention will be given, as will become clear in the next section, to the mediatory role of Kant’s idea of schematism.

4.1 Pure a priori concepts in conjunction with experience

For Kant the understanding, as a faculty of thought, is essentially a faculty of judgement. ‘Thinking’ – which is the typical activity of the understanding – is basically, and essentially, ‘judging:

“we can reduce all acts of the understanding to judgments, and the *understanding* may therefore be represented as a *faculty of judgement*.” [B94]

¹⁸ See the recent debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists about Kantian intuitions (as for example discussed by Land 2011), or that between the supporters or detractors of a judgmentalist reading of Kant’s position (using a concept is making a judgment). Among non judgmentalists (concepts as rules guiding sensibility) see Ginsborg (2008), McDowell (2009), Rosenberg (2005).

So, how does the understanding produce thoughts? By creating judgements by means of categories. (A68-B93) We can explain how with an example. When we say: fire is the cause of smoke, the category 'cause' is a 'pure' concept, in that it can be applied to many sensible representations (it is universal), and it conjoins sensible representations in an a priori manner (it is necessary). 'Cause' is a category, the function of which is to create a necessary conjunction between two intuitive representations in the form of a judgment (S is P). The type of judgment produced by the use of categories illustrates how real knowledge can be achieved for Kant: it is a judgement which, on one side, is empirical (as it conjoins representations), and on the other a priori (as it conjoins these representations in a way which is both necessary and universal). In other words, the way in which we achieve real knowledge is by means of what Kant famously named 'synthetic a priori judgments'.

An open question in *Aesthetics* concerns the essential, and substantial, difference between sensible representations and conceptual representations (between intuitions and concepts).¹⁹ Kant reformulates the problem of the heterogeneous nature of intuitions and concepts also in the *Analytic of Concepts*, where we read, for example:

"pure concepts of understanding being quite heterogeneous from empirical intuitions, and indeed from all sensible intuitions, can never be met with in any intuition. For no one will say that a category, such as that of causality, can be intuited through sense and is itself contained in appearance. How, then, is the subsumption of a category to appearances, possible?" [B177/A138]

A solution suggested by Kant to this question consists of introducing "some third thing", which is homogeneous with both the category and the appearance and which, therefore, makes the former applicable to the latter. This 'third thing' is offered by the faculty of imagination, and is called by Kant "schema".

It has been pointed out that Kant offers here no more than a psychological solution to the problem of the applicability of categories to appearances. Schemas are a product of imagination. Imagination works in such a way that it 'prepares' in the mind, and for the mind, those connections which the understanding is then to establish among intuitive representations. So, imagination 'prefigures' these connections by pre-organizing our intuitive representations of objects to fit certain categories according to patterns of orderly relations. It then offers these pre-organized representations to the understanding, which – at this point – only needs to substitute the schemas with its own categories (i.e. it ratifies, and confirms the connections anticipated by the schemas).

These schemas, though, are not merely psychological tricks. They also, and more specifically, perform a transcendental function. (Borutti 1991) Or better, they are part of the more general transcendental task of figuring out how to apply the categories of the understanding to the objects of intuition. This is a problem that Kant clearly formulates in the *Analytic of Principles*: it is a problem which concerns not the pure possibility of categories, but rather the rules according to which the categories apply to appearances –

¹⁹ Kant has been criticized for this substantial dualism between the two 'stems' of human cognition, sensibility and understanding. On how to address the problem of Kant's dualism see for ex. Engstrom (2006).

rules that Kant calls “principles”, or “rules of the objective use of categories” [*Analytic of Principles*; ch. II, sect. III].

We know already that the way in which the categories apply to appearances is by means of judgments (fire is the cause of smoke). Judging is then “subsuming under rules; that is, distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule”. [B171/A132] General logic does not contain any rule of judgment (it abstracts from any content). This is why we need *transcendental* logic, says Kant, the only type of logic that can carry out the peculiar task of “correcting and securing (...) judgement, by means of determinate rules, in the use of pure understanding.” [A135] In other words, transcendental logic is to specify a priori (it has to give the conditions for) the instance to which the rule is to be applied [B175].

Besides being a psychological and a transcendental problem, the relation between categories and appearances also entails a problem of meaning (that is, it concerns the content of the categories):

“the schemata of the pure concepts of understanding are thus the true and sole conditions under which these concepts obtain relation to objects and so possess significance.” [A146]

Knowledge for Kant, as we know by now, is always knowledge of objects: there is no knowledge without some relation between objects and concepts. It is precisely this relation that gives content to concepts, or makes them meaningful. However, what are the criteria followed by the understanding in applying the categories to intuitive representations? Why does the understanding put sometimes together certain representations under one category, say causality, and other times other representations under another category? What guides the understanding in this procedure? Schemas mediate between categories and objects by paving the way for assigning objects to the *relevant categories*. How do they do this? How do they actually work?

The first thing that Kant says about schemas is that they are not images – in the sense of copies of whatever intuitive representation of objects we have. They are rather “the representation of a universal procedure of imagination in providing an image for a concept.” [B180] So for example, if we think of five points one after the other, we get the image of the number five. However, when we try to think of a number in general (five, or five hundred, or whatever) what I think of is the way in which a certain multiplicity can be represented according to a certain image. In other words, a schema is the method, or principle by means of which we construct (form) the image itself.

That a schema is not an image can be shown by means of the following argument [A141]. Take the case, first, of a pure sensible concept, such as a triangle. An image of a triangle could never attain the universality of a concept, which is meant to apply to all sorts of triangles (right-angles, obtuse-angles, acute-angled). The schema of a triangle, concludes Kant, exists only in our thought. So, the schema of a triangle applies to triangles not because it is similar to them (a copy, or image of all possible triangles), but rather because it contains

the rule of construction of our image of a triangle.²⁰ The same argument (schema are not images) applies, Kant says, in the case of empirical concepts:

“The concept ‘dog’ signifies a rule according to which my imagination can delineate the figure of a four-footed animal in a general manner, without limitation to any single determinate figure such as experience, or any possible image that I can represent in concreto, actually presents.” [A141]

So, the actual difference between schemas and images is that images are the product of *reproductive imagination*, whereas schemas are the result of *productive imagination*, that is of “pure a priori imagination, through which, and in accordance with which, images themselves become possible. These images can be connected with the concept only by means of the schema to which they belong.” [B181-A142] Ultimately, schemas make it possible to unify forms of intuitions and forms of thought by making knowledge possible as knowledge of objects.

There is still one problem concerning the categories. All categories, I said, are a priori, and they all have the same function (making judgements possible). Categories are diverse, and still their diversity is not irreducible. There are general features, which they all have in common (they are categories because they are a priori and because they have the same function). Given this, is there any underlying unity that can account for these equally shared features? In sect.12 of the *Analytic of Concepts* Kant says that this ‘unity’ can be thought of in analogy with “the unity of the theme in a play, a speech, or a story.” [B114] It is a unity not in the sense of being the sum of all the categories, and not even in the sense of an aggregate of some sort.

This unity is rather to be conceived as the origin, the root, or the foundation which turns the whole set of categories into a unitary system. As such, it cannot be itself a category. It must rather be there before any category, and every time we represent something, without being part of anything that we represent, or anything that constitutes the representations themselves. This unity for Kant cannot but be the ‘I think’ which comes with any and all representations, or – to use Kant’s own expression – “pure apperception”, that sense of self-consciousness that accompanies all representations, and makes me aware that they are *mine*.

We need to understand what Kant means by ‘mine’, and ‘I’ here. They are not indexicals, which can be filled in, contextually, by means of reference to the identity of various empirical individuals. It is not a psychological ‘I’, nor even an empirical ‘I’, derived intuitively by our sensible experience. It is for Kant a transcendental ‘I’, namely that universal and necessary principle which makes ‘thinking’ possible: it is synthetic, because it unifies all

²⁰ Incidentally, Berkeley, in the Introduction to his *Principles of Human Knowledge* used the same example of the triangle in dealing with the same problem of the applicability of concepts to objects (Kant is well aware of this). There Berkeley had concluded that concepts are a logical impossibility, as well as a psychological impossibility: a concept of a triangle cannot be at the same time a concept of all possible kinds of triangles, and none of them in particular.

representations, but also a priori, because it is what gives foundation to all representations as being representations for someone.

The understanding can only 'think'. In order to be able to say that 'I think', I need to be able to refer my thoughts to a consciousness which gives unity to these thoughts, and makes them be my thoughts. The 'I' in the 'I think' formula is, in one word, the Subject of knowledge.²¹

4.2 Attaining objective knowledge

Here we come to the ultimate aim of the *Analytic of Concepts*: given that the fundamental unity of the categories is subjective, can we have at all objective knowledge? In Kant's own words, "how subjective conditions of thought can have objective validity, that is can furnish conditions of the possibility of all knowledge of objects." [A90] How is it possible for the categories to produce an agreement between subjective conditions and objects, such that we can claim that we 'know the objects'? This is the question that Kant tries to solve in the *Transcendental Deduction* of the categories.

A transcendental deduction of categories is what demonstrates the legitimacy²² of the categories' claim to have objective validity, that is to turn experience into objects of knowledge within the limits set by experience. To demonstrate the objective validity of the categories is a problem that concerns only the categories: at the level of sensibility, we know that sensations directly relate to their objects (intuitive representations of them). On the contrary, at the level of the understanding, we need to show that there is a necessary connection between the categories and the multiplicity of experience.

How does this deduction proceed? In sect.14 Kant reminds us that it is only through representations that it is possible to know anything as an object. [B125]. As we know, there are two kinds of representations: intuitions (through which an object is given, though only as appearance), and concepts (through which an object is thought of as complying to its intuition). Now, in the same sense in which we can say that the formal conditions of sensibility make the appearance of objects possible, can we say that a priori concepts are the antecedent conditions under which anything can be thought of as an 'object in general'? If we can claim this, then immediately we would conclude that all empirical knowledge of these objects would conform to these concepts, since only by presupposing them anything can become a possible object of experience. [B126].

Experience does indeed contain, besides the intuition of the senses, a concept of an object that is given in what appears to us. This means, says Kant, that "concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as its a priori conditions." [B126] So, Kant concludes:

²¹ Kantian interpreters discuss and debate whether the 'I think' is only an epistemological condition for knowledge, which fulfills the need to give some origin, or starting point for knowledge, or whether it has the status of a metaphysical entity.

²² Kant borrows a XVIII century legal term - e.g., A84-B117.

“The objective validity of the categories as a priori concepts rests, therefore, on the fact that, so far as the form of thought is concerned, through them alone does experience become possible. They relate of necessity and a priori to objects of experience, for the reason that only by means of them can any object whatsoever of experience be thought.” [B126]

So, in a sense, transcendental deduction expresses, philosophically, what Kant had suggested by means of the metaphor of the ‘Copernican revolution’ we encountered at the beginning of this paper: without a priori concepts we could not have objects. It is only because of the transcendental function of the Subject that objects become what they are not in sensibility: they become objects of knowledge. For that reason Kant can claim that it is the object that requires (necessitates) the activity of a Subject of knowledge, and therefore it is in the Subject that we find the foundation of the very possibility of objectivity. It is a transcendental Subject that constitutes ‘objects’, and with them, the orderly system of objects which we call, in its totality, the system of experience.

This, though, also means that objective knowledge has limits, which are the very same ones imposed by the way in which objective knowledge is constituted: objective knowledge cannot go beyond the limits of possible experience (it cannot go beyond the conditions which make experience possible). Any attempt to do this will inevitably fall into illusion, as Kant will then proceed to show in *Dialectic*.

Constructed Objectivity and Realist Features

Let’s take stock and summarise the main points of the analysis conducted so far:

- 1) Kant does not deny that there is a problem with the relation between our intellect and a reality independent to it; what he denies is that our intellect has a passive disposition towards this reality.
- 2) The relation between intellect and reality (subject and object) obtains thanks to the fact that our representations conform to an object that is external to the intellect but which, at the same time, the intellect has attributed a form to.
- 3) Knowledge is not acquired by a process of ‘mirroring’ on the part of the intellect but via an active pursuit of an agreement between experience (intuitions, sensations) and intellect (concepts, categories) led by the latter (Copernican revolution).
- 4) Concepts become responsible for the possibility of experience – not in the sense that they ‘invent’ experience, but in the sense that they submit experience to an order and form that make it knowable.
- 5) Experience requires then a mutual and balanced combination (composition) of sensibility and understanding. There is heterogeneity between things and concepts, but Kant insists on their unity rather than, arguably, their dualism.
- 6) Empirical objects (phenomena) as objects of knowledge are not given but ‘constructed’ in the specific sense of being empirical material disciplined under a form provided by the intellect (and prepared for it by schemas).

The last point has two important consequences for understanding the realm of objects. First, the object of experience in the empiricist sense is not both necessary and sufficient,

but only necessary to achieve knowledge. Second, this object does not correspond to the object of knowledge. A represented object (through intuition and concept) is not a copy of whatever object exists independently of our representation. What we call 'world' is not a sum of things in themselves, but a sum of things as we represent them. We know (we can only know) a world of phenomena, objects for us. The connections (or 'rules'), which relate otherwise scattered perceptions within a consistent form, cannot themselves be received via our sensations (should it be the case, objects would not appear as orderly, consistent entities). Experience provides material to our senses, but it does not provide the forms by which this material is configured. These forms can then only come from the universal structure of the human intellect.

In such a way, Kant can claim that the object of knowledge is not created as far as its 'reality' is concerned (the 'material' is indeed received from experience via our sensations). It is only created as to its form (the intellect provides for concepts, or categories, which transform scattered perceptions into consistent objects). The object of knowledge is then both independent and universal/necessary: independent not so much from the intellect, but from individual minds; universal/necessary not in the sense of being given as such in the external world, but in that of being constructed out of an external world according to the universally shared forms of human apprehension.

So, in what ontological perspective can we inscribe Kant's view of objectivity? It is certainly not a straightforward idealism (assuming that there is such a thing). What type, if any, of realist presuppositions inform Kant's view?

In criticizing the empiricist model of knowledge (e.g. in *Letter to Hertz 1772*) Kant claims that the only reason offered by the empiricist to believe in the existence of a relation between reality and representation is the very belief that we represent this reality. However, the belief itself is without foundation. Kant, as remarked earlier, does not outright deny the existence of such a relation; he denies that his predecessors offered, or indeed even looked for, an adequate explanation or a justification for this relation. So in a sense Kant invites us to 'suspend' our realist intuition that there is a world which we are related to, but this is not equivalent to reject *eo ipso* any realist presupposition. All that Kant seems to deny at this point is that the simple admission of such a presupposition is sufficient to account for a relation between reality and representation, or to explain what this relation consists of. To presuppose a *background realism* is not a sufficient or satisfactory philosophical explanation.

Nonetheless, the problem of realism reappears as a side effect of the Copernican revolution. The explanation of how to conceive of the relation between experience and intellect (as heterogeneous entities) is couched in terms of the latter. The agreement between the two, which is responsible for attaining objective knowledge, depends on the way the intellect orders reality. Conceptually representing the phenomena of experience does not entail denying the objectivity of knowledge. It rather means that knowledge is to be thought of in terms of a complex and articulated relation wherein the intellect is affected by things which it cannot produce itself. And this is to be taken as a realist claim – as for example we read in prg 13, A90: "For appearances can certainly be given in intuition independently of functions of the understanding". Equally, it is a mistake to consider representations as something

enveloped by the intellect, born from within, and separate from what they represent. Representations are of a *relational nature* – partly empirical and partly conceptual. On a par with sensations, concepts are necessary conditions of experience, but not also sufficient.

So it would seem that the only admissible form of realism for Kant is of an empirical kind. However, even this claim is in order of some qualification. To answer the question ‘do objects external to me (*außer mir*) exist?’ we need first to clarify what ‘external to me’ means. In an empirical sense it means ‘outside’ or ‘beside’ my mind. But there is also a transcendental sense according to which ‘external to me’ means ‘independent of my representations’. Both meanings are necessary to answer the question above – with the result that Kant can declare to be a transcendental idealist while at the same time accepting to be an empirical realist, that is admitting that there are things external to the mind that exist independently of my representing them. (Paltrinieri 2001) Empirical realism becomes the necessary presupposition to understand Kant’s idealism in an appropriate, non-banal sense.

Yet, what the intellect relates to, or represents, are not things in themselves. This would push us towards unjustifiably endorsing a type of absolute realism, based on the assumption of a type of object of which we can say nothing.²³ This type of realist presupposition is conceivable but, in the absence of any possible justification for it, we would end up accepting the idea of a world so remote from the things we are used to, and able to think and talk about, that it becomes uninteresting, or even useless in terms of explanation or knowledge – a world endorsing a view “from nowhere”, to use a well known expression.²⁴ So ultimately, we could say, Kant admits both types of realism (empirical and metaphysical) but he justifies only one (empirical) – that which he can use in building his idea of knowledge.

Finally, what kind of consequences do Kant’s realist presuppositions have on his view of constructed objectivity? To be ‘objective’, within the Kantian context, ceases to mean ‘to represent’, or ‘correspond to’, a given object, existing externally to the mind. It means instead ‘to be constructed’ according to the rules of the intellect, which allow for the constitution of objects. To avoid facile misunderstandings the meaning of ‘constructed’ requires some qualifications. In a Kantian framework to construct (*Bauen*) is more akin to *Bilden* (to form, to make something visible through a form). As paradoxical as it may sound, the ‘possibility’ of the object of knowledge constitutes its objectivity. Objects, as remarked several times by now, are not ‘given’; they are rather made ‘possible’ by the conceptual forms furnished by the intellect (and before that, prepared for proper intellectual grasp by schemas). These forms, rather than experience on its own, are the necessary conditions of objective knowledge.²⁵ Knowledge is objective not because it produces perfect

²³ This is a strong metaphysical position, which still some interpreters attributed to Kant. One is Westphal (2004). Another is Strawson (1966), where he argues that, even if things in themselves cannot be known, Kant is not denying their existence. Further, he claims that things in themselves have an effect on the way the subject knows (that is, the way the subject represents them as a sort of ineffable cause of representations).

²⁴ See Nagel (1989). In this sense also, for example, R. Rorty once provocatively claimed that an independent world of things in themselves with these characteristics is for a realist of this type, more than an intuition, an obsession.

²⁵ The neo-kantians will subscribe to this view, and develop it further, by reflecting on the intellectual procedures, which are responsible for the constitutions of the objects of knowledge. In Cassirer, for example, the

representations of the objects of experience (given outside the intellect), but rather because it reveals the conditions that lead to the constitution of the objects of (= out of) experience. In a Kantian framework, we cannot question objectivity starting directly from objects, but only from the conditions that make those objects knowable for/to us. Those conditions do not invent the empirical content of objects. They produce the forms that make us experience that content.

It might be illustratively useful, in conclusion, to borrow an Aristotelian expression, and adapt it to the Kantian framework: objectivity is a ‘hylomorphic’ concept.²⁶ It points at an essential compound of matter (ύλη, hyle) and form (μορφή, morphē) that is constitutive of any object of knowledge, and whose coexistence in the object is made possible thanks to the constructive capacity of the intellect. It is this lasting result of Kant’s Copernican revolution that – far from being a retreat from ontology to epistemology (Pollok 2017, p.14)²⁷ – still intrigues, and arguably survives in, some of the contemporary versions of qualified scientific and social scientific realism.

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idea of a universally shared structure of the intellect is rethought in terms of the symbolic forms that each culture adopts to refer to its objects of knowledge. Within the post-kantian tradition, another interesting development of the reflection on the notion of object is due to Husserl. See Mohanty (1934).

²⁶ K. Pollok recently draws attention to Kant’s ‘transcendental hylomorphism’ in his (2017), part II.

²⁷ On the use of the idea of hylomorphism in Kant’s context see also Engstrom (2006).

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