I. Introduction

At the core of Kant’s transcendental idealism lies the distinction between things in themselves and appearances. Interpretations of this distinction are often divided into epistemic interpretations and metaphysical interpretations. On the former, the distinction between things in themselves and appearances is construed epistemically. For instance, on Allison’s (2004) influential version of this interpretation, appearances are objects considered under our forms of sensibility (viz. space and time), whereas things in themselves are those very same objects considered in abstraction from our forms of sensibility. While there is both textual and philosophical support for epistemic interpretations, my aim in this paper is to address the internecine dispute between proponents of different metaphysical interpretations of transcendental idealism. One of the main issues dividing proponents of metaphysical interpretations concerns the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances. Some hold that things in themselves and appearances correspond to two metaphysical aspects of the very same object (proponents of metaphysical one-object interpretations), whereas others hold that things in themselves and appearances correspond to distinct objects (proponents of metaphysical two-object interpretations). For instance, the traditional two-object interpretation holds that things in themselves are causes of (distinct) appearances. By contrast, on Langton’s (1998) one-object interpretation, appearances are identified with the relational properties of substances, and things in themselves are identified with the intrinsic properties of those very same substances.

Despite their differences, proponents of metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations alike claim that appearances are grounded in

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things in themselves. Call this claim the transcendental grounding thesis. Textual support for the transcendental grounding thesis can be found in many passages, such as the following:

If, on the other hand, appearances do not count for any more than they are in fact, namely, not for things in themselves but only for mere representations connected in accordance with empirical laws, then they themselves must have grounds [Gründe] that are not appearances. (A537/B565)

Indeed, in several passages, Kant suggests that we can know that the transcendental grounding thesis is true. For instance, at A696/B724, Kant says that there are transcendental grounds of appearances “without a doubt” [ohne Zweifel]. Knowing that the transcendental grounding thesis holds is important for Kant, in part because it provides a way of knowing that there are things in themselves at all.

Nonetheless, proponents of metaphysical interpretations disagree about how appearances are grounded in things in themselves. Metaphysical one-object interpretations generally hold that we can know that things in themselves and appearances are related by some kind(s) of one-object grounding relation(s). These are grounding relations through which the grounding and grounded relata are different aspects of the same object. Metaphysical two-object interpretations, by contrast, generally hold that we can know that things in themselves and appearances are related by some kind(s) of two-object grounding relation(s). These are grounding relations through which the grounding and grounded relata involve distinct objects.

4. Cf. Langton (1998), Marshall (2013a), and Allais (2015). Langton suggests this knowledge claim as follows: “we do have some knowledge of the things that have an intrinsic nature. We know that such things exist. Moreover, we are acquainted with some of the properties of the things that have an intrinsic nature — we are acquainted with their relational properties, which make up phenomenal appearances” (22).
5. Cf. Van Cleve (1999), Stang (2014), and McDaniel (2015). However, McDaniel

A significant difficulty in making sense of the transcendental grounding thesis is that it is prima facie unclear how to characterize Kant’s account of grounding — an account which has yet to be systematically explored in the secondary literature. My strategy in this paper is to begin by elucidating some core features of this account. This will enable us to understand some of the conditions under which different specific kinds of grounding relations obtain. This will, in turn, help to adjudicate the issue of which specific kind of grounding relation obtains between things in themselves and appearances, as well as the dispute concerning the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances.

As we will see, Kant broadly divides all grounding relations into logical and real grounding relations. Put in terms that are not alien to either Kant or contemporary metaphysics, real grounding relations are relations of metaphysical determination. That is, a real ground (e.g. a substance) metaphysically determines something non-identical to it (e.g. an accident of a substance). The critical Kant further divides all real grounding relations into formal and material grounding relations (at AK 11:36 — quoted below). Formal grounds encompass grounds of the possibility of appearances (e.g. space and time). By contrast, material grounds encompass grounds of the existence of something (whether it is an appearance or not). As we will see below, Kant is plausibly read on metaphysical interpretations as maintaining that things in themselves are material grounds of appearances.

But Kant countenances many specific kinds of material grounding relations. For instance, all of the categories of relation — the substance-accident relation, causation, and reciprocal causation — express specific kinds of material grounding relations. The multitude of specific kinds of material grounding relations brings us back to our original maintains that things in themselves are (in some sense) the hidden side of appearances, so his view does not fall neatly into the category of two-object interpretations.

6. Although not the main topic of their works, Kant’s account of grounding is discussed by (among others) Langton (1998), Longuenesse (2005), Watkins (2005), Proops (2010), Anderson (2015), Kreines (2016), and Stang (2016a).
question: Which specific kind(s) of material grounding relation(s) does Kant have in mind in maintaining that things in themselves ground appearances? I will argue that Kant is in fact committed to denying that we can know the features needed to ascertain which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it. This follows from certain aspects of Kant’s doctrine of noumenal ignorance, the thesis that we lack cognition [Erkenntnis] and specific knowledge [Wissen] of things in themselves. Kant is therefore committed to (what I will call) noumenal-grounding ignorance, the thesis that we are ignorant of, for each appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it, which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between them. The upshot is that noumenal-grounding ignorance rules out metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations which assert that we can know that the relationship between things in themselves and appearances involves one specific kind of material grounding relation, e.g., Langton’s (1998) view.

To be sure, there are some metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations that are compatible with noumenal-grounding ignorance. Specifically, a proponent of a one-object interpretation may allow for multiple kinds of one-object grounding relations to obtain between things in themselves and appearances. Likewise, a proponent of a two-object interpretation may allow for multiple kinds of two-object grounding relations to obtain between them. Yet I will argue that the most plausible metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism compatible with noumenal-grounding ignorance is the generic grounding interpretation. On this interpretation, we can know that there are things in themselves grounding appearances, but not which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object grounding relation(s) obtain(s) between them. Our ignorance of things in themselves therefore extends to their distinctness from appearances — pace both metaphysical one-object interpretations and metaphysical two-object interpretations. In short, we can know that appearances have things in themselves as their material grounds, but not how the former are grounded in the latter.

In section II, I briefly trace Kant’s broad distinction between logical and real grounding relations back to his early works, as well as how the critical Kant develops his view further by dividing real grounding relations into formal and material grounding relations. In section III, we will explore how Kant differentiates specific kinds of material grounding relations, and what it would take to know which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it. In section IV, I argue that Kant’s doctrine of noumenal ignorance rules out knowing which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it, per noumenal-grounding ignorance. In section V, I contend that the generic grounding interpretation is the most plausible metaphysical interpretation of transcendental idealism that can accommodate noumenal-grounding ignorance. Several worries about noumenal-grounding ignorance and the generic grounding interpretation that it is a part of are addressed in section VI. In section VII, I conclude.

II. Getting Grounded in Kant’s Account of Grounding

Kant’s discussion of grounding dates back to his early works. He draws a crucial distinction between logical and real grounds in the early 1760s, which carries over to his critical works in the 1780s (as we will see below). Consider the following passage from the Herder transcripts (from the early 1760s):

A ground is thus something by which, having been posited, something else is posited. […] Every ground is either logical, through [durch] which the consequence [Folge], which is identical to it, is posited as a predicate according to the rule of identity, or real, through which the consequence, which is not identical to it, is not posited according to the rule of identity. (AK 28:11)
Kant first describes grounding in terms of positing: given that a ground is posited, what it grounds (its “consequence”) is likewise posited. For something to be posited is for it to exist.7 He then divides all grounds into logical grounds and real grounds. Kant indicates that the relata of a logical grounding relation are (at least partially) identical to one another, since they are related by “the rule of identity”.

One standard line of interpretation maintains that conceptual containment is closely tied to logical grounding. That is, something is a logical ground of something else if the concept of the former contains the concept of the latter. To borrow Kant’s example from Negative Magnitudes (1763), the property having a finite mind is a logical ground of the property being fallible because analysis of the concept <finite mind> reveals that it contains the concept <fallibility>. Accordingly, “fallibility is identical with what is contained in the concept of a [finite — JS] mind” (AK 2:202).8

Kant says above that the relata of a real grounding relation, by contrast, are not related by the rule of identity. He thereby indicates that real grounding is irreflexive — a point he makes explicit a bit later, at AK 28:13.9 Later in the Herder transcripts, Kant further clarifies the nature of real grounding as follows:

Every determination of things, however, which demands [heischt] a real ground, is posited through something else, and the connection [nexus] of a real ground with the real consequence is thus not comprehended [eingesehen] from the rule of identity, also cannot be expressed through a judgment, but is rather a simple concept. (AK 28:24)

9. Cf. AK 1:394. For the critical Kant’s affirmation of the irreflexivity of real grounding, see AK 8:198, AK 28:549, and AK 29:810.

As in the previous passage, Kant describes a real consequence as something that is posited through positing a real ground and as non-identical with the latter. It therefore seems that the relationship of positing between a real ground and its consequence is one of (what we might call) metaphysical determination. That is, a real ground generates or gives rise to what it grounds.10

Kant clarifies later in the Herder transcripts that there are several specific kinds of real grounding relations. For instance, a substance is a real ground of any accidents inhering in it: “The substantial contains the first real ground of all inhering accidents” (AK 28:25). He likewise claims that a cause is a real ground of its effect.11 In both cases, what is grounded is posited as a result of positing its real ground(s). We will explore how these specific kinds of real grounding relations are characterized in Kant’s critical works further below.12

Kant’s broad distinction between logical and real grounding carries over to his critical works. He also still frames grounding partly in terms of positing in his critical discussion of grounding. For instance, in Metaphysik Mrongovius, a transcript of some of his critical metaphysics lectures, he says that “ground consists just in this, that which, having been posited, another is posited determinately” (AK 29:819).13

12. The notion of grounding has been the subject of renewed interest in contemporary metaphysics. Cf. Fine (2001), Schaffer (2009), and Rosen (2010). Like many contemporary construals of grounding, Kant’s notion of real grounding concerns what metaphysically generates what and is irreflexive. Nonetheless, Kant’s notion of real grounding differs from contemporary construals of grounding in several ways. Perhaps most notably, Kant claims that causation is a kind of real grounding relation in both his early and critical works, whereas many contemporary proponents of grounding deny this—though see Bennett (2017). Systematically comparing Kant’s account of grounding to contemporary accounts of grounding must await another occasion.
However, the critical Kant further divides all real grounds into formal and material grounds. As he explains in a letter to Carl Leonhard Reinhold in 1789:

As an aside, I note (in order to be able to better attend to Eberhard’s treatment later) that the real ground is in turn twofold, either formal (the intuition of the object), as in, e.g., the sides of the triangle containing the ground of the angles, or the material (of the existence of things), which makes that which contains the ground to be called cause [Ursache]. (AK 11:36, my translation)

Kant claims here that formal grounding concerns “the intuition of the object”. He claims that material grounding, by contrast, concerns “the existence of things”. By this, I take him to mean that material grounds typically determine the existence of something, where something could be a thing, a property, a state of affairs, etc.14

Unlike material grounds, it therefore seems that formal grounds can never ground the existence of something by themselves. For

14. Kant means several different things in saying that what is grounded is posited determinately by its ground above at AK 29:819. For one, determinately means that a ground has some particular consequence. By contrast, positing a consequence involves positing a ground indeterminately (AK 29:808). That is, a particular consequence is not necessarily linked to one ground in particular; there may be many potential (but individually sufficient) grounds of it. Another thing that Kant means by determinately is that what is grounded follows from its ground according to a general rule. As he puts it: “Determinately means according to a general rule. Every ground gives a rule; therefore the connection of the ground and the consequence is necessary” (AK 29:808). Kant suggests here that the fact that a consequence is posited as a result of positing some ground(s) according to a general rule entails that the latter necessitates the former. Cf. AK 28:548–549 and AK 29:816—though see Hogan (2013) for complications pertaining to free actions. Nonetheless, the connection of a ground with what it grounds is finer-grained than mere necessitation. This is highlighted by Kant’s above example at AK 11:36 that the sides of a triangle are the ground of its angles. The properties being trilateral and being triangular necessitate one another, even though the former is an asymmetric ground of the latter. Cf. Stang (2016a, 208–209). Since nothing below hinges on these particular features of grounding, I will leave them for further discussion elsewhere.

instance, Kant describes space and time (our forms of intuition) as formal grounds of appearances.15 And he denies that space by itself can ever determine the existence of things: “Thus space absolutely (by itself alone [für sich allein]) cannot occur as a determiner of the existence of things [nicht als etwas Bestimmendes in dem Dasein der Dinge vorkommen], because it is not an object at all, but only the form of possible objects” (A431/B459, translation modified). Nonetheless, space and time are still real grounds of the possibility of appearances. That is, to be possible, appearances have to meet the constraints imposed on them by space and time.16 Space and time are therefore partial grounds of appearances — albeit plausibly only insofar as they ground the possibility of appearances.17

By contrast, Kant maintains that things in themselves ground the (actual) existence of appearances. As he suggests in his response to Eberhard in 1790: “It [the Kritik – JS] posits this ground of the material [Grund des Stoffes] of sensory representations not once again in things, as objects of the senses, but in something super-sensible, which grounds the latter, and of which we can have no cognition” (AK 8:215). Kant is plausibly read here as implying that things in themselves ground the existence of appearances. For he describes things in themselves here as grounds of the material of sensory representations, rather than as grounds of the possibility of the material of sensory representations. He likewise describes things in themselves as grounds of appearances in his other statements of the transcendental grounding thesis (e.g. those cited in footnote 3), rather than as grounds of the

15. Cf. A93/B125 and AK 8:222.
16. Among many other passages, see A34/B51, B67, A93/B125, A99, B265, and B293. For further discussion of how space and time ground the possibility of appearances, see Stang (2016a) and Messina (2017).
17. Kant’s notion of a partial ground is expressed by (what he calls) an insufficient ground. In Metaphysik Mrongovius, Kant says, “An insufficient ground is […] a part of the sufficient” (AK 29:817). That is, an insufficient ground is a member of some collection of grounds which are jointly sufficient to ground something else, even though an insufficient ground is never by itself sufficient to do so. Cf. AK 29:819.
posibility of appearances (unlike how he describes space and time). Things in themselves are therefore plausibly material grounds of appearances.¹⁸

Now proponents of metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations generally agree (albeit often implicitly) that Kant holds that things in themselves are material grounds of appearances. But they disagree about which specific kind(s) of material grounding relation(s) obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances. Specifically, they disagree about whether this relationship involves some kind(s) of one-object relation(s) or some kind(s) of two-object relation(s). To adjudicate this dispute, let’s begin by sketching some specific kinds of material grounding relations that Kant countenances.¹⁹

¹⁸. Here are two points of clarification: First, things in themselves qua material grounds are merely partial real grounds of appearances. For things in themselves qua material grounds do not ground appearances and their properties by themselves; minimally, appearances and their properties also presuppose the formal grounds of space and time. Second, although all kinds of grounds that determine the existence of something seem to be material grounds, the converse is not true. For Kant discusses the idea of a material ground of the possibility of things in general—he describes God in this way (A576/B604). See Stang (2016a) for extensive discussion.

¹⁹. One might wonder whether a proponent of a metaphysical one-object interpretation could maintain that appearances and the things in themselves grounding them are not merely two metaphysical aspects of the same object (per my above characterization of this interpretation), but rather are numerically identical to one another. This view would be incompatible with holding that things in themselves are real grounds of appearances, since real grounding is irreflexive. Nonetheless, I concede that proponents of one-object interpretations could interpret Kant’s claim that things in themselves ground appearances as the claim that things in themselves are logical (rather than real) grounds of appearances, in regarding the latter as being (at least partially) identical to the former. While it is worth exploring elsewhere, I will bracket this sort of interpretation for purposes of this paper. For it is not clear that this sort of interpretation constitutes a distinct metaphysical one-object interpretation. Proponents of epistemic interpretations of transcendent al idealism might also interpret Kant’s claim that things in themselves ground appearances in this way. Moreover, as a sociological point, most proponents of metaphysical one-object interpretations do opt (at least implicitly) for a real grounding reading of the transcendent grounding thesis. What I say below therefore addresses the great bulk of metaphysical interpretations that have been advanced in the secondary literature.

All of the categories of relation (viz. the substance-accident relation, causation, and reciprocal causation) express specific kinds of material grounding relations, since they all involve the determination of the existence of something.²⁰ The substance-accident relation is an asymmetric material grounding relation through which an accident of a substance is grounded in that substance via an inherence relation. It is a one-object material grounding relation, in that an accident is not an entirely distinct thing from the substance in which it inheres. For accidents are properties that are merely particular ways for a substance to exist: “The determinations of a substance that are nothing other than particular ways for it to exist are called accidents” (A186/B229).

Now one might already worry whether there really are many specific kinds of material grounding relations, including the substance-accident relation. For the acute reader will have noticed that Kant seems to identify the notion of a material ground with the notion of a cause [Ursache] above at AK 11:36. However, I think Kant is using ‘cause’ in a broader sense at AK 11:36 to include grounds that determine the existence of something, rather than in the narrower sense of the grounding relation of causation. For Kant does appeal to other specific kinds of material grounding relations (beyond causation) through which something determines the existence of something else. The substance-accident relation is just one example.²¹ Moreover, Kant holds that there are

²⁰. Kant uses some variant of the phrase ‘determination of existence’ to describe what occurs through the categories of relation in a number of places. Cf. B201n, A177/B219, A182/B225, A186–187/B229–230, A194/B239, A212/B259, A215/B262, AK 29:770–771, and AK 29:822–823. Note that this phrase often has a more technical meaning in the Analogies of Experience, viz. involving the determination of a property or state of a substance. Cf. Watkins (2005). But I will continue to use this phrase in its more generic meaning, which also encompasses (for instance) the determination of the existence of a thing itself (rather than merely one of its properties).

²¹. For instance, Kant maintains that the real essence of a thing has two metaphysical parts: its attributes and its essential properties. The attributes of a thing are grounded in the essential properties of a thing. Cf. AK 8:829, AK 28:553, and Stang (2016a). Moreover, Kant claims that, by standing in reciprocal causal relations to one another, objects can ground the existence of a whole composed of them. The world (considered dynamically) is an
causal relations beyond causation proper. For instance, Kant suggests that a substance is causally responsible for the accidents that inhere in it.\textsuperscript{22} These points help to explain why Kant uses the term ‘cause’ to describe material grounds at AK 11:36, even though (on my reading) the notion of a material ground extends beyond the notion of a cause in the narrower sense.\textsuperscript{23}

None of this is to deny that (efficient) causation is a specific kind of material grounding relation, through which a cause determines the existence of an effect. On Watkins’ (2005) meticulous analysis, substances act as causes. In empirical instances of causation, a substance does not determine the existence of another substance itself, but only the state of another substance. As Kant puts this point in the Second Analogy: “This arising concerns [...] not the substance (for that does not arise), but its state. It is therefore merely alteration, and not an origination out of nothing” (A206/B251). In the same passage, however, Kant leaves open that non-empirical substances (e.g. God) can causally create other substances. In any case, unlike the substance-accident relation, causation is a two-object relation, in that an instance of causation involves (at least) two distinct substances. Kant nicely articulates this point in saying that the concept of a cause “signifies a particular kind of synthesis, in which given something A something entirely different \textit{[ganz verschiedenes]} B is posited according to a rule” (A90/B122).\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{23} As a historiographical note, distinguishing between ground or cause in a broad sense (encompassing many kinds of grounds) and ground or cause in a narrow sense (encompassing efficient causes) was not uncommon in the German philosophical tradition preceding Kant. For instance, Crusius draws this distinction in §34 of his \textit{Entwurf der nothwendigen Vernunft-Wahrheiten} (1745).

\textsuperscript{24} See Hennig (2011) for an alternative event-based interpretation of the relata of causation. I will assume Watkins’ account of the relata of causation for the purposes of this paper — though nothing about my position below hinges on his account being correct.

properties. This relation plays a central role on Langton’s (1998) metaphysical one-object interpretation. Langton holds that appearances are the relational properties of substances. They are grounded in things in themselves, which she identifies with the intrinsic properties of those very same substances. Since the relational properties of a substance are grounded in the intrinsic properties of that very same substance, this relation counts as a one-object grounding relation.\textsuperscript{25} One distinctive feature of Langton’s view is that this relation is supposed to be non-causal; intrinsic properties do not ground relational properties causally. For although relational properties are causally efficacious on Langton’s view, the intrinsic properties constituting things in themselves are causally inert. Below, I will assume Langton’s interpretation of this relation in Kant’s works, even though I will ultimately reject her application of it to characterizing the relationship between things in themselves and appearances.

\textbf{III. Differentiating Material Grounding Relations}

The above discussion by no means covers all the specific kinds of material grounding relations that Kant employs. Nor is the use of grounding claims more generally restricted to Kant’s theoretical philosophy. For instance, Kant famously claims in the second \textit{Critique} (AK 5:4n) that freedom is the ground of being \textit{[ratio essendi]} of the moral law.\textsuperscript{26} But now that we have explored a few specific kinds of material grounding relations that he employs, we can identify some of the ways in which specific kinds of material grounding relations are differentiated from the general notion of material grounding. This will, in turn, allow us to

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. A284/B340. In more recent work, Langton (2006) clarifies that she really means to identify appearances with (what we would call) extrinsic properties, rather than relational properties — despite mostly speaking in terms of the latter in her (1998) book. Nothing hinges on this point in this paper.

\textsuperscript{26} Elsewhere in the same passage (AK 5:4n), Kant claims that the moral law provides a ground for cognizing \textit{[ratio cognoscendi]} the moral law. This illustrates that the distinction between logical and real grounds (and the kinds of grounds falling under them) is not exhaustive of all the kinds of grounds that Kant countenances. For instance, Kant also makes use of \textit{grounds of cognition} (as in this passage) and \textit{grounds of assent}. Cf. Chignell (2007).
identify some necessary conditions for knowing which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it.

As we saw above, the general notion of material grounding that Kant describes at AK 11:36 (quoted above) encompasses several specific kinds of relations through which something determines the existence of something else. This notion also reflects the various features of the even more general notion of real grounding, e.g. irreflexivity. However, this notion is undetermined with respect to certain features, i.e. it leaves open whether the kinds of relations satisfying it have those features or not. For instance, it is undetermined with respect to being a one-object relation and being a two-object relation. For some specific kinds of material grounding relations are one-object relations, whereas others are two-object relations. The specific kinds of material grounding relations explored above are differentiated (in part) on this basis. As we saw above, Kant thinks that accidents are not entirely distinct from the substances in which they inhere. By contrast, a cause is entirely distinct from its effect, in that they correspond to two entirely distinct substances.27

In light of the above discussion, the following sorts of features are also necessary (although by no means sufficient) for (fully) differentiating specific kinds of material grounding relations from the general notion of material grounding:

\[(C1) \text{ Numerical Differentiation:}\] the possible numerical relation of the relata (one-one, one/many-one, etc.);

\[(C2) \text{ Kind Differentiation:}\] the possible kind of relata, i.e. the ontological category to which the relata belong (substance, accident, relational property, etc.)

(C1) concerns the possible range of numerical relations between a grounded entity and its (immediate, non-transitive) ground(s). For causation to obtain between a grounded entity and the entities immediately grounding it, it must be true that this grounded entity bears a relation to its ground(s) through which something can have one or several grounds by that kind of relation, since causation is a relation through which an effect can have one or more causes. By contrast, the causal composition relation (described in footnote 21) does not admit of this flexibility. That is, if an object is grounded via this kind of relation, it must have multiple grounds via this kind of relation. For the grounding relata of this relation involve several objects standing in reciprocal causal relations to one another. The general notion of material grounding is undetermined with respect to (C1); it encompasses relations that can be one/many-one, relations that can only be many-one, etc.

That (C2) is necessary for differentiating specific kinds of material grounding relations from the general notion of material grounding should be clear. For instance, the relationship between intrinsic properties and relational properties described in the previous section can only have intrinsic properties and relational properties as its relata. Mutatis mutandis for the substance-accident relation and causation. The general notion of material grounding is undetermined with respect to the kind of relata that it can take, e.g. substances, accidents, relational properties, etc.28

27. Whether the general notion of material grounding is strongly unified for Kant (e.g. in the sense of being a genus under which specific kinds of material grounding fall as species) is a difficult issue, but one that we can remain neutral on here. Moreover, it is an interesting question as to how to understand the unschematized category of a cause (and the corresponding unschematized relation of causation) in this context. Kant says of this unschematized category that “it is something that allows an inference to the existence of something else” (A243/B301). On the one hand, Kant might mean to identify the unschematized relation of causation with some general notion of grounding. Cf. Allais (2015, 69). On the other hand, he might still hold that it involves causation in the narrower sense, thereby implicating two entirely distinct substances, etc. We can remain neutral on this issue here.

28. Given that all the specific kinds of material grounding relations explored above involve (in some way) some substance(s) as their grounding relatum, one might wonder whether there are any specific kinds of material grounding that do not involve a substance as their grounding relatum. We will see
How specific kinds of material grounding relations are differentiated from the general notion of material grounding has immediate ramifications for the conditions under which we could know which specific kind of material grounding relation immediately obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it. To know that a specific kind of material grounding relation R obtains with respect to an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it, it is necessary that we know the features pertaining to (C1) and (C2) differentiating R from the general notion of material grounding. With respect to (C1), we would need to know the possible range of numerical relations that obtain between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it in order to know which specific kind of relation obtains between them. This constraint still applies to numerically flexible relations (e.g. causation). For in that case, we would need to know that the relation that obtains has this much flexibility, i.e. that an appearance in question stands in a kind of relation to things in themselves through which it can have one or more grounds by that kind of relation. With respect to (C2), we would likewise need to know the possible kind of relata involved in the relation in order to know which specific kind of relation obtains. For instance, knowing that the relationship between relational properties and intrinsic properties described by Langton (1998) obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself immediately grounding it requires knowing that the former is some relational property of a substance and that the latter is some intrinsic property of a substance.

Note that our focus here is on the relationship between appearances and the things in themselves immediately grounding them, rather than on any things in themselves that may transitively ground appearances — this should be assumed below whenever it is not made explicit. For it is the nature of the immediate grounding relationship (viz. whether it involves a one- or two-object relation) that settles whether the relationship between things in themselves and appearances involves two aspects of the same object (per one-object interpretations) or two entirely distinct objects (per two-object interpretations). Even a proponent of a one-object interpretation could concede the existence of transitive grounds of appearances that are entirely distinct from appearances. For instance, a proponent of a one-object interpretation could concede that God is both a ground of appearances and entirely distinct from appearances. She could do so by maintaining that God grounds appearances transitively, e.g. by creating things in themselves that in turn immediately ground appearances by a kind of one-object relation.

IV. Numerical Ignorance and Kind Ignorance

Now that we have laid out some of the necessary conditions for knowing which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it, the crucial question now becomes whether or not Kant thinks that we can satisfy these conditions. To ascertain whether we can satisfy these necessary conditions, we need to consider more closely Kant’s views concerning our knowledge of things in themselves.

Kant famously takes a dim view of our epistemic access to things in themselves. He is committed to noumenal ignorance, the thesis that we have neither cognition nor specific knowledge of things in themselves.\(^{29}\) Note that this thesis is framed in terms of two different notions: cognition [Erkenntnis] and knowledge [Wissen]. Although I cannot explore all of the differences between these two notions here, one crucial difference between them is that cognition involves a givenness constraint, for Kant. That is, an object must be given to us in some way for cognition to be had of it. For human agents, the way in which objects

are given to us is via our forms of intuition, viz. space and time. One common line of interpretation maintains that the givenness constraint helps to explain why Kant thinks we lack cognition of things in themselves. Things in themselves are not given to us because they are non-spatio-temporal, by Kant’s lights. Hence, we lack cognition of things in themselves because the givenness constraint on cognition is not satisfied.

Kant’s notion of knowledge, in comparison with his notion of cognition, is more like our contemporary notion of propositional knowledge. Crucially, knowledge plausibly does not involve a givenness constraint, for Kant. For, as noted in the introduction, he holds that we can have some general knowledge about things in themselves, even though they are not given to us, e.g. that things in themselves are non-spatio-temporal and that appearances are grounded in things in themselves. I will focus on knowledge (rather than cognition) here, because knowledge is less demanding than cognition in that it does not involve a givenness constraint and in that Kant thinks we can still achieve knowledge with respect to certain substantive propositions about things in themselves (e.g. regarding their existence).

However, there are strong reasons for thinking that our ignorance of things in themselves rules out being able to know which features pertaining to (C1) and (C2) obtain with respect to the relationship between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it. This, in turn, rules out knowing which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between them. It will help to put labels on these ignorance theses. Corresponding to (C1), numerical ignorance says that we lack knowledge of whether, for each appearance, it immediately stands to things in themselves by a kind of one-one relation, or by a kind of one/many-one relation, etc. Corresponding to (C2), kind ignorance says that we lack knowledge of which kinds of things in themselves immediately ground appearances, i.e. which particular ontological category such things in themselves belong to (e.g. substance, accident, etc.).

While there is admittedly no short argument for attributing either numerical ignorance or kind ignorance to Kant, the textual evidence strongly suggests that he endorses them. Starting with numerical ignorance, Kant explicitly claims that we cannot know whether, for each appearance, there is a composite thing in itself grounding it or a simple thing in itself grounding it. As he puts it in his response to Eberhard: “nobody can have the least knowledge [kann niemand im mind- esten wissen] of whether the super-sensible which underlies that appearance as substrate is, as thing in itself, either composite or simple [...]” (AK 8:209n). Now, by itself, this claim does not entail numerical ignorance, or even entail that we lack knowledge of the total number of things in themselves grounding each appearance. For a composite thing in itself is a single thing in itself, just as ordinary composite things (e.g. tables and chairs) are single things.

But, given some auxiliary assumptions that Kant is plausibly committed to, ignorance of the total number of things in themselves grounding each appearance (immediately or transitively) does follow. First, it is at the very least possible (for all we know) that a composite thing in itself is grounded in its proper parts. Second, it seems, at the very least, possible (for all we know) that material grounding is transitive across different specific kinds of material grounding relations.

30. Among many other passages, see A50/B74, A92/B125, A286/B342, and AK 20:273.
31. For a recent discussion of this line of thought, see Watkins and Willaschek (2017a).
33. Although I will not explicitly argue for this below, the considerations below would also act as considerations against thinking that we can have cognition of which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it.
34. Kant is plausibly read as making a similar (albeit narrower) point in the second paralogism with respect to thoughts: we cannot know that thoughts are immediately grounded in a simple (rather than a composite) thing in itself. Cf. A351–361 and A683/B711.
35. Cf. AK 8:208 and AK 28:565–566.
for both things in themselves and appearances, i.e. if \( xR_y \) and \( yR_z \) (where \( R_1 \) and \( R_2 \) are instances of different specific kinds of material grounding relations), then \( x \) grounds \( z \). Given these two auxiliary assumptions, the following is an epistemic possibility: Supposing that a composite thing in itself grounds an appearance (which, per AK 8:209n, is an epistemic possibility), all of the proper parts of the composite thing in itself could (for all we know) ground that appearance transitively by grounding the composite thing in itself—regardless of whether the specific kinds of grounding relations are different across these relations. It follows that we lack knowledge of whether, for each appearance, there are multiple things in themselves grounding it (e.g. a composite thing in itself and each of its proper parts) or a single thing in itself grounding it (e.g. a simple thing in itself).

Two conclusions can be immediately drawn from this. First, we are ignorant of the total number of things in themselves grounding each appearance. Second, we are ignorant, to some extent, of the possible numerical relations that the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding an appearance stands in to any of its further grounds at the level of things in themselves. For if the thing in itself immediately grounding an appearance is composite, it may in turn be grounded by a many-one composition relation, viz. which it bears to its proper parts. By contrast, if the thing in itself immediately grounding an appearance is simple, it cannot stand in a many-one composition relation to any grounds that it may have (this is trivial, given its simplicity). Admittedly, these conclusions still do not logically entail numerical ignorance (as it is characterized above). But they strongly support attributing numerical ignorance to Kant. For it is difficult to see how or why Kant would maintain these two conclusions, while denying numerical ignorance. I will say a bit more in defense of numerical ignorance below.

There are also many passages that support attributing kind ignorance to Kant. Consider the following passage from Metaphysik K: “We know nothing of the substrate of the matter (of the noumenon), whether it is of the same kind as the thinking principle in us” (AK 28:761). Kant suggests here that even if we could know what kind of entity “the thinking principle in us” is (i.e. what kind of entity grounds our thoughts at the level of things in themselves), it does not follow that we can know anything about what kind(s) of entities underlie other appearances. Admittedly, it is somewhat unclear what Kant means here by ‘the same kind’. He could mean that we cannot know whether the things in themselves grounding appearances (other than thoughts) are non-mental entities or mental entities. Or he could mean “kind” in the way that I am using the term, i.e. as concerning the ontological category (substance, accident, etc.) to which these things in themselves belong.

In support of the latter reading (although not to the exclusion of the former), Kant is plausibly read in the Paralogisms as also denying that we can know the kind of things in themselves which (immediately) grounds thoughts, where kind is understood as which ontological category these things in themselves belong to. As he suggests there: “But it is obvious that the subject of inference is designated only transcendentally through the I that is appended to thoughts, without noting the least property of it, or cognizing or knowing [wissen] anything at all [überhaupt] about it” (A355). Kant indicates that we lack both cognition and knowledge of the kind of entity underlying thoughts, in saying here that we cannot cognize or know “anything at all about” this entity. This suggests that other (admittedly more ambiguous) passages from the Paralogisms should also be read as ruling out both cognition and knowledge of the kind of entity underlying thoughts. For instance, Kant claims in the B edition of the Paralogisms that, through self-consciousness, one cannot “determine the way I exist [as a thing in itself—JS], whether as substance or as accident” (B420). Similar

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36. There is some textual evidence that Kant holds the stronger position that real grounding is in fact generally transitive. Cf. AK 28:552 and AK 29:817.

37. Many commentators (e.g. Marshall 2013a, Stang 2014, Allais 2015, and McDaniel 2015) accept this conclusion, even if they do not provide as explicit an argument for it as I have provided here.
Kant, Grounding, and Things in Themselves

remarks can be found throughout the Paralogisms and elsewhere. It is plausible to conclude from such passages that Kant thinks that we lack knowledge (and not merely cognition) of which ontological category the things in themselves grounding thoughts belong to.

Kant’s position in the Paralogisms supports the idea that he endorses kind ignorance about things in themselves more generally. For it seems that if kind ignorance holds in the specific case of the things in themselves immediately grounding thoughts, it also holds more generally with respect to the things in themselves immediately grounding appearances. Any considerations that weigh in favor of (and lead Kant to accept) kind ignorance of the former will plausibly also weigh in favor of kind ignorance of the latter.

In addition to the above textual basis for ascribing numerical and kind ignorance to Kant, there is a plausible philosophical story explaining Kant’s endorsement of these claims. With respect to numerical ignorance, it seems that a kind of one-one relation (for instance) is just as apt to characterize the relationship between things in themselves and appearances as a kind of one/many-one relation or a kind of one-one/many relation. Nothing seems special (for all we know) about any of these sorts of possible numerical relations that would either suggest that appearances cannot be immediately related to things in themselves by a certain range of numerical relations or suggest that appearances must be immediately related to things in themselves by that range of numerical relations. Accordingly, it seems that we have no reason to rule out (as epistemic possibilities) any of these options.

In certain passages, Kant more or less speaks in this way. For instance, regarding the properties associated with the soul (e.g. having thoughts), he says, “That simplicity of substance, etc., ought to be only the schema for this regulative principle, and it is not presupposed as if it were the actual ground [wirkliche Grund] of properties of the soul. For these properties could rest on entirely different grounds, with which we are not acquainted at all […]” (A683/B711, translation modified).

Nonetheless, there are a few complications worth signposting here. First, one might interpret Kant above at A355 as asserting that there is some sort of inherence relation obtaining between thoughts and the subject at the level of things in themselves, even if we cannot know whether the subject involves a substance, an accident, etc. Second, Kant does make suggestions about the kinds of things in themselves there are in certain passages. I will address these complications in section VI.


41. In certain passages, Kant more or less speaks in this way. For instance, regarding the properties associated with the soul (e.g. having thoughts), he says, “That simplicity of substance, etc., ought to be only the schema for this regulative principle, and it is not presupposed as if it were the actual ground [wirkliche Grund] of properties of the soul. For these properties could rest on entirely different grounds, with which we are not acquainted at all […]” (A683/B711, translation modified).

42. Of course, Langton’s position also rests on textual evidence for thinking that things in themselves are intrinsic properties. I will discuss these passages further in section VI.
Nonetheless, one might appeal to analytic truths to defend the claim that the things in themselves immediately grounding appearances must belong to some particular ontological category. For instance, recall that Kant claims at A186/B229 that accidents are ways for a substance to exist. On a natural reading of this passage, Kant is presenting this as analytically true of what an accident is. So supposing that we could know that appearances are accidents, it seems that there is an analytic path to concluding that every appearance must be grounded in some substance or other at the level of things in themselves via the substance-accident relation.

In response, even if it is analytically true that an accident must be grounded in some substance, it is not analytically true that positive properties more generally (which Kant sometimes calls “realities”) have to be grounded in a substance. That is, the concept of a positive property (unlike the concept of an accident) does not entail that anything falling under this concept must be grounded in a substance. Now the crucial question is this: how exactly could we know that appearances are accidents, rather than positive properties (or collections thereof) more generally? For we would need to know that appearances are accidents (rather than merely positive properties) to draw the conclusion (via the above analytic truth) that appearances are grounded in substances at the level of things in themselves. It is difficult to see on what basis we could know (either a priori or a posteriori) that appearances are accidents, even assuming that we can know that appearances are not genuine substances.\(^{43}\) We certainly cannot infer merely from the supposition that appearances are positive properties that they are accidents. Hence, in the absence of some further story, this attempt (and others) to undermine kind ignorance by appealing to analytic truths about appearances fail.\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) And this assumption is also not uncontroversial. Against Langton (1998), some commentators take empirical substances to be genuine substances. Cf. Watkins (2005). For discussion of the various phenomenalist and non-phenomenalist options available regarding the ontological status of appearances, see Stang (2016b).

\(^{44}\) The task remains to show why Kant holds that our knowledge is limited in such a way that things in themselves from various ontological categories and that stand in various numerical relations are equally apt (for all we know) for grounding appearances. I leave this task for further discussion elsewhere. Below, I will focus on investigating the consequences of this commitment for the one-object versus two-object debate. However, one upshot of the discussion here for this further task is that kind ignorance and numerical ignorance plausibly should be taken as data to be accommodated by any general account of why Kant thinks we are ignorant of things in themselves.

V. From Noumenal-Grounding Ignorance to the Generic Grounding Interpretation

Numerical and kind ignorance entail that we lack knowledge of which features pertaining to (C1) and (C2) obtain between each appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it. But, as I argued in section III, such knowledge is necessary for knowing which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between an appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) grounding it. It follows that we are ignorant of, for each appearance and the thing in itself (or things in themselves) immediately grounding it, which specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between them. This consequence just is noumenal-grounding ignorance. Yet there are many metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations that suppose that we can know that one specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between things in themselves and appearances. But since knowing this is ruled out by noumenal-grounding ignorance, these metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations fail. For instance, noumenal-grounding ignorance rules out Langton’s (1998) one-object interpretation, since she claims that we can know that one specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between things in themselves and appearances, viz. the non-causal relation between intrinsic and relational properties described at the end of section II. The same goes for a kind of two-object interpretation on which noumenal substances are causes of appearances.

With that said, there are versions of metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations that are compatible with noumenal-grounding ignorance. We can call such interpretations *austere one-object principle* in such a way that things in themselves from various ontological categories and that stand in various numerical relations are equally apt (for all we know) for grounding appearances. I leave this task for further discussion elsewhere. Below, I will focus on investigating the consequences of this commitment for the one-object versus two-object debate. However, one upshot of the discussion here for this further task is that kind ignorance and numerical ignorance plausibly should be taken as data to be accommodated by any general account of why Kant thinks we are ignorant of things in themselves.
interpretations and austere two-object interpretations, respectively. The proponent of an austere one-object interpretation holds that we can know that some kind(s) of one-object material grounding relation(s) obtain between each appearance and the things in themselves grounding it; we just cannot know the specific kind of one-object relation obtaining between any individual appearance and its ground(s) among things in themselves. Mutatis mutandis for austere two-object interpretations. These austere interpretations make no claim about whether the kind(s) of relation(s) immediately obtaining between things in themselves and appearances is one-one, one/many-one, etc. They therefore do not violate numerical ignorance. These austere interpretations likewise make no claims about the kind(s) of things in themselves that immediately ground appearances (i.e. whether they are substances, accidents, etc.). They therefore do not violate kind ignorance. For instance, a proponent of an austere two-object interpretation might maintain that we can know that there is some specific kind of material constitution relation or other obtaining between things in themselves and appearances, i.e. one relating intrinsic properties and relational properties, and/or one relating relational properties and relational properties, and so on.45

To be sure, austere one- and two-object interpretations have the significant advantage over non-austere interpretations of being compatible with noumenal-grounding ignorance. However, their plausibility is undercut by the fact that it is unclear what could philosophically justify any austere one-object interpretation over any austere two-object interpretation (or vice versa). As we saw in the previous section, entities from various ontological categories and standing in various numerical relations to appearances seem to be equally apt (for all we know) for grounding appearances, for Kant. Similarly here, it seems that kinds of one- and two-object material grounding relations which are constitution-based, inherence-based, causation-based, etc. are all apt (for all we know) for being the kinds of relations through which things in themselves ground appearances. For they are all kinds of material grounding relations through which the existence of something is determined. It is difficult to see what kind of story could allow proponents of austere one-object interpretations to rule out the epistemic possibility that some kind of two-object relation obtains between (at least some) things in themselves and appearances, and similarly for proponents of austere two-object interpretations to rule out the epistemic possibility that some kind of one-object relation obtains between (at least some) things in themselves and appearances. In the absence of such a story, both austere one-object interpretations and austere two-object interpretations fail. Of course, one might fall back on the textual evidence here to support an austere one-object interpretation or an austere two-object interpretation. But I will argue in the next section that the textual evidence can be read in a way that remains entirely neutral between one- and two-object interpretations.46

Fortunately, there is a metaphysical interpretation that does not face any of the difficulties associated with the various metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations explored above: the generic grounding interpretation. The generic grounding interpretation is the conjunction of the claims that (1) we can know that appearances are (somehow) materially grounded in one or more things in themselves, and (2) we cannot know by which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object material grounding relation(s) they are immediately related.47 The ge-

46. Another sort of metaphysical interpretation (which is slightly different from the ones discussed above and my own preferred interpretation discussed below) is one that claims that we can know that certain appearances are immediately related to things in themselves by a one-object relation and that other appearances are immediately related to things in themselves by a two-object relation. But whatever kinds of appearances this interpretation would say are related to things in themselves by a one-object relation, it would have to be explained on what basis we can rule out the possibility that a two-object relation obtains instead (and vice versa). Although this sort of interpretation would need to be investigated more carefully elsewhere, it is not clear how such an explanation would go.

47. I restrict (2) to pertain to ignorance of the relationship between appearances and the things in themselves immediately grounding them. I want to leave open whether or not Kant thinks, for instance, that we can know that things
The generic grounding interpretation avoids the problems associated with the above (non-austere and austere) one- and two-object interpretations, since it simply concedes that we have no basis for knowing which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object material grounding relation(s) immediately obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances. The fact that the generic grounding interpretation avoids these problems strongly supports attributing it to Kant. Indeed, some commentators have already expressed sympathy for something like the generic grounding interpretation. Yet my case here provides a basis for it in specific aspects of Kant’s doctrine of noumenal ignorance and his account of grounding.

Admittedly, Kant never states the generic grounding interpretation explicitly. But if he were committed to the generic grounding interpretation and therefore not committed to either a metaphysical one- or two-object view, one would reasonably expect him to be ambiguous about whether we can know that things in themselves immediately ground appearances via a one-object relation or via a two-object relation. And Kant is indeed ambiguous about this, even though he repeatedly asserts the more general claim that things in themselves ground appearances. The proponent of the generic grounding interpretation has a plausible explanation for this ambiguity: Kant does not think that we can know which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object relation(s) obtain between things in themselves and appearances. In other words, the textual ambiguity concerning whether Kant holds a one- or two-object view is explained by the hypothesis that he thinks we can know only that appearances are materially grounded in things in themselves, but not more specific claims about how appearances are materially grounded in things in themselves.49

With that said, the generic grounding interpretation does not claim that there are no knowable constraints on which specific kinds of material grounding relations can obtain between things in themselves and appearances. For instance, in his response to Eberhard, Kant emphatically denies that things in themselves could ever ground appearances by being proper parts of appearances.50 Nonetheless, according to the generic grounding interpretation, our epistemic default should be to take any specific kind of material grounding relation as a prima facie live option for characterizing the relationship between things in themselves and appearances. That is, it should be taken as a live option until other Kantian commitments show why that option has to be ruled out. But what remains doubtful (given the above considerations against one- and two-object interpretations) is that (a) we can narrow down the range of live options to only kinds of one-object relations or to only kinds of two-object relations, and that (b) we can ascertain which specific kind(s) of material grounding relation(s) immediately obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances.51


49. One might alternatively suggest that Kant simply regards it as obvious which specific kind(s) of material grounding relation(s) obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances. But part of my project here has been precisely to undermine the assumption that this is obvious, given how many specific kinds of material grounding relations Kant countenances, as well as the various noumenal ignorance theses he endorses. This supports thinking that Kant also does not take this to be obvious.

50. Cf. AK 8:207–209. In short, Kant thinks that appearances are only ever divisible into further appearances – never into things in themselves. Cf. A523–530/ B551–558. This point illustrates that we cannot simply read off the kinds of grounding relations that obtain between things in themselves and appearances from the kinds of grounding relations that obtain among appearances (e.g., proper parthood).

51. A further development of the generic grounding interpretation (one that I will leave for exploration elsewhere) would be to show why Kant thinks that
VI. Two Worries Addressed

So far, I have presented a case for ascribing both noumenal-grounding ignorance and the generic grounding interpretation to Kant. In this section, I want to consider two worries about these claims. The first worry is that the components of the generic grounding interpretation stand in tension with each other; our lack of knowledge of which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object grounding relation(s) obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances undermines our knowledge that there are things in themselves grounding appearances at all (per the transcendental grounding thesis). Compounding this worry is the fact that some of Kant’s arguments for the transcendental grounding thesis are often taken to support a one-object interpretation. To help alleviate this worry, I will sketch how one of Kant’s arguments for this thesis is compatible with the generic grounding interpretation — one that is usually taken to support a one-object interpretation. In doing so, we will also see how Kant is still in a position to defend the claim that appearances are grounded in things in themselves, even if we lack knowledge of how appearances are grounded in things in themselves.

Kant says in the B edition Preface to the *Kritik* that there must be things in themselves, lest “there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears” (Bxxvi–Bxxvii). This highly condensed argument is often taken to support a one-object interpretation, in part because Kant says that appearances are appearances *of something that appears*.52 However, this argument can be read in a way that remains neutral on the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances, as follows: Kant can be read above as claiming that (1) an appearance is, by nature, always an appearance of something (albeit perhaps not just of a single something). But (2) given that an appearance is an appearance of something, its existence must somehow be grounded in whatever it is an appearance of. From here, the final premise is that (3) something that appears ultimately itself is (or at least implicates) one or more things in themselves. In effect, there cannot just be appearances of further appearances *ad infinitum*. It follows from (1)–(3) that every appearance must ultimately be grounded in one or more things in themselves.

Some form of premises (1) and (3) will plausibly also have to be adopted by proponents of metaphysical one-object interpretations in their reconstruction of this argument. And nothing about premises (1) and (3) forces us to take a stance on the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances. Crucially, however, premise (2) on the above reconstruction simply leaves open whether appearances are grounded in what they are appearances of by a one-object relation or by a two-object relation. But many proponents of metaphysical one-object interpretations will take issue with this, since they see Kant’s argument above as asserting that a one-object relation obtains between appearances and their grounds among things in themselves.

Yet premise (2) seems quite plausible, philosophically speaking. Consider two other classes of entities involving a distinction between appearances and what they are appearances of: shadows and holes. Intuitively, shadows are appearances of something else, and holes likewise *appear in* something else. The fact that both shadows and holes are appearances of (or in) something provides support for thinking that they must be somehow grounded in what they are appearances of. But are shadows and holes a different metaphysical aspect of what they are appearances of, or are they entirely distinct entities altogether? This is a contentious issue.53 Yet this further issue plausibly is not settled by the mere fact that shadows and holes are appearances of (or in) something, and hence grounded in the latter.


53. See Casati and Varzi (2014) for an overview of the contemporary literature on the ontology of holes. And, of course, there are other positions one might take on the ontology of shadows and holes.
The case of shadows and holes supports a parallel conclusion for appearances. The fact that appearances are appearances of something supports the modest (but substantive) conclusion that they must be grounded in whatever they are appearances of. Yet, as in the former two cases, this simply leaves unsettled the further issue of how appearances are grounded, i.e., whether by some kind(s) of one-object relation(s) or by some kind(s) of two-object relation(s). Hence, Kant’s argument at Bxxvi–Bxxvii can plausibly be read as not addressing the one- or two-object issue at all; he is simply providing an argument for the more general conclusion that appearances are grounded in things in themselves. To be sure, a full defense of the premises of this argument still needs to be provided. But the upshot is that explaining our knowledge of the transcendental grounding thesis given our ignorance of the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances seems promising, as we have seen how one of Kant’s arguments for this thesis can plausibly be read as remaining entirely neutral regarding the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances.\[^{54}\]

A second worry about the generic grounding interpretation is that there are passages in which Kant might be read as transgressing the very epistemic limits that the generic grounding interpretation claims he adheres to. For instance, Marshall (2013b) argues for a metaphysical one-object interpretation of transcendental idealism on the basis that Kant repeatedly suggests that every human agent is constituted by one self (i.e., one subject) with two characters, viz., an empirical character and a noumenal character—rather than by two distinct selves. Marshall cites many passages throughout Kant’s corpus articulating this point, such as the following:

> for a subject of the world of sense we would have first an empirical character [... ] one would also have to allow [einträumen müssen] this subject an intelligible character, through which it is indeed the cause of those actions as appearances, but which does not stand under any conditions of sensibility and is not itself appearance. The first one could call the character of such a thing in appearance, the second its character as a thing in itself. (A539/B567)

In this passage, Kant says that we have to allow (i.e., in the sense of concede) that the self is constituted by an empirical character and a noumenal (intelligible) character. On this basis, one might be tempted to conclude that Kant holds that we can know that this claim holds. But this would entail that we can know, in at least some cases, that a one-object relation obtains between things in themselves and appearances—pace the generic grounding interpretation.

In response, however, note that Kant does not explicitly claim in the above passage that we can know that every human agent is constituted by one self that has a noumenal character and an empirical character. He only says that we must concede that this is true. This sort of phrasing can be contrasted with the phrasing he uses in paradigmatic articulations of the transcendental grounding thesis. Kant does not merely say at A537/B565 (quotèd above in section I) that things in themselves must be conceded as grounds of appearances, but rather that appearances must have things in themselves as grounds. At A696/B724, Kant asserts even more strongly that it is “without a doubt” [ohne Zweifel] that appearances have at least one transcendental ground. Kant’s weaker phrasing in the passages cited by Marshall can therefore be read as

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54. One might still have reservations about the plausibility of this reconstruction of Kant’s argument, since he also describes the distinction between things in themselves and appearances in the same passage as follows: “Now if we were to assume that the distinction between things as objects of experience and the very same things as things in themselves, which our critique has made necessary [...]” (Bxxvii). This description of objects of experience as “the very same things” as things in themselves appears to support a one-object interpretation. Van Cleve (1999, 143–146) offers an interesting alternative reading of this sort of locution that does not require a one-object interpretation. For instance, he notes that Kant’s predecessors (e.g., Locke and Berkeley) use similar locutions in certain cases, despite not obviously endorsing a one-object view in those cases. Moreover, I will argue below that Kant often makes claims about things in themselves that do not amount to knowledge claims, and which are therefore compatible with the generic grounding interpretation. This strategy can also be applied to this passage. For Kant explicitly talks here in terms of assuming that things in themselves are the very same things as objects of experience, rather than knowing this.
indicating that the positive propositional attitude that Kant endorses with respect to the above italicized proposition about the self falls short of knowledge. While this is not a knockdown argument that Kant is not making knowledge claims in such passages, it does show that he need not be interpreted in this stronger way.

Supposing that Kant is not making knowledge claims in such passages, what weaker propositional attitude could he think is permissible to bear towards the above italicized proposition about the self? Given that Kant describes this proposition as one that we have to concede above, one weaker propositional attitude he might have in mind is assumption [Annehmung]. For Kant, certain propositions should be assumed by rational agents as true—even if they lack knowledge of them. So it may be that we should assume that the two-character view of the self is correct, rather than assuming that there are coordinated but distinct noumenal and empirical selves.

Indeed, the former model of the self does seem to enjoy certain theoretical virtues over the latter model. For instance, the latter model posits more distinct selves than the former, and hence is less parsimonious. The latter model is also less attractive in that it must posit some mechanism through which the noumenal self is coordinated with a distinct empirical self. Perhaps these theoretical virtues of the former model warrant assuming that it is correct, for Kant. But such theoretical virtues plausibly do not enable us to know that the former model is correct. For Kant suggests (e.g., at A682–684/B710–712) that they likewise do not enable us to know that the self involves a simple rather than composite) substance. Moreover, as Marshall rightly notes, Kant also claims that the two-character view of the self is important for making sense of certain moral duties (e.g., at AK 6:418–419). Yet whatever propositions about the metaphysical constitution of the self we should assume for practical reasons will likewise fall short of being known to be true.

The upshot here is that Kant may reasonably be interpreted in the above passages cited by Marshall as holding that every human agent is constituted by one self that has a noumenal character and an empirical character is a proposition that we should assume as being true, even though we lack knowledge of it. And crucially, the generic grounding interpretation merely entails that we lack knowledge of which specific kind(s) of material grounding relation(s) immediately obtain(s) between things in themselves and appearances. It says nothing about whether or not it is permissible to bear some positive propositional attitude falling short of knowledge towards such claims. Hence, assuming that at least some appearances are related to things in themselves by a kind of one-object relation is entirely compatible with the generic grounding interpretation. This extends to the self. It is just that we cannot rule out (as an epistemic possibility) that human agents are instead constituted by coordinated but distinct noumenal and empirical selves.

55. Indeed, the above passage is one of the more favorable passages for Marshall’s interpretation. Some of the other passages which Marshall cite are more open to other readings, e.g., Bxxvi–Bxxvii (see my alternative reading above). And yet other passages occur in the context of Kant’s practical philosophy, where it is doubtful that knowledge is at stake to begin with, e.g., AK 5:161–162 and AK 6:418–419. More generally, Kant does not explicitly claim in any of the passages cited by Marshall that we can know that human agents are each constituted by one self with two characters.

56. See Chignell (2007) and Stang (2016a) for further discussion of Kant’s notion of assumption (also translated as ‘acceptance’), as well as other kinds of propositional attitudes falling short of knowledge that Kant employs.

57. The one exception here among the ideas of speculative reason (which Kant explicitly identifies as an exception) is freedom. Kant claims in the second Critique at AK 5:4 that we can know [wissen] the possibility of freedom a priori. But this claim involves practical (rather than theoretical) knowledge. For Kant’s justification for this claim involves the claim that freedom is the ground [ratio essendi] of the moral law. The generic grounding interpretation should be seen as concerning theoretical knowledge, rather than practical knowledge. For further discussion of Kant on practical knowledge of freedom, see Hogan (2013).

58. Note that Kant’s statement that “it is obvious that the subject of inherence is designated only transcendentially through the I that is appended to thoughts, without noting the least property of it, or cognizing or knowing [wissen] anything at all [überhaupt] about it” (A355) likewise need not be read as claiming we can know that some inherence relation obtains between thoughts and their ground(s). This passage may rather be read as presupposing that we are warranted in assuming that the relation is one of inherence (which, recall, is a
Now, admittedly, Kant makes other claims concerning the nature of things in themselves that may seem to be incompatible with noumenal-grounding ignorance. To take one other example: he claims in many of his metaphysics lectures that the **noumenal world** consists of many noumenal substances standing in causal relations to one another.\(^{59}\) If Kant is really asserting that we can **know** that things in themselves meet this description, this would cast some doubt on the idea that he endorses noumenal-grounding ignorance. For if he re-ally allows that we can know which specific kinds of grounding re-lations things in themselves stand in to one another (e.g. reciprocal causal relations), it is not a stretch of the imagination to think that he would also allow that we can also know the specific kind(s) of mate-rial grounding relation(s) immediately obtaining between things in themselves and appearances. Fortunately, it is not necessary to inter-pret passages in which Kant makes such claims as asserting that we can **know** that things in themselves are characterized in these ways. I will briefly sketch out two alternative ways of interpreting these sorts of claims here.

One strategy is to concede that Kant is indeed putting forth existential claims about things in themselves in some of these passages, but nonetheless to insist that the propositional attitude he thinks that we should bear towards these propositions falls short of knowledge. We just saw how this strategy can be employed with respect to Kant’s views on the self.

Another strategy is to interpret Kant as simply providing conceptual clarification in certain passages, rather than as making existential one-object relation), for reasons similar to those just discussed above. Moreover, Kant might be speaking in terms of a **subject of inherence** here because, within this context, he is engaging with the traditional metaphysician, who accepts the claim that there is such a subject. He might therefore just be presupposing this claim to level a further criticism, viz. that even if there is a subject of inherence, we cannot know whether it is a substance, rather than an accident.


claims. Along these lines, Kant can be interpreted above as just clarifying what our concept of the **noumenal world** consists in, without claiming that we can know that something corresponds to this concept. To take another example, consider Kant’s remark in the Amphiboly that if I “restrict myself solely to the concept of a thing in general, then I abstract from every outer relation, and yet there must remain a concept of it, that signifies no relation but merely inner determinations” (A282/B338). This passage is taken by Langton (1998) and Allais (2015) to support the view that things in themselves are the intrinsic properties (“inner determinations”) of substances. While this passage may provide prima facie textual evidence for their view, it can be plausibly read in a different way. First, this passage comes from the Amphiboly, where it is not always clear where Kant is expressing his own view and where he is merely reporting on the commitments of the Leibnizian view that he is criticizing. More importantly, note that Kant is first and foremost explicating the concept of a **thing in general** in this passage. It is by no means clear that the concept of a **thing in general** (as Kant characterizes it here) is the same as (or bears an analytic relationship to) the concept of a **thing in itself**. Indeed, Kant never similarly characterizes the concept of a **thing in itself** as something consisting of merely inner determinations. Kant therefore need not be interpreted in this passage (and others like it) as asserting that there exists anything corresponding to the concept of a **thing in general**. Rather, he can be interpreted as merely explicating the concept of a **thing in general**.60 And given the textual and systematic reasons in favor of attributing kind ignorance to Kant laid out in section IV, this interpretation seems to be more plausible.

In short, there seem to be (at least) two viable strategies for interpreting Kant’s claims about things in themselves that may otherwise appear to violate the generic grounding interpretation. The first strategy is to interpret the propositional attitude that we should bear towards such claims as falling short of knowledge. The second strategy

60. For Kant’s discussion of the regulative use of this concept, see A670–671/B698–699.
is to interpret such claims as primarily providing conceptual clarification. Deciding which of these two strategies to apply will come down to the specifics of the individual claim in question. But these two strategies, it seems, should be exhausted before ascribing to Kant the very strong position that we can know claims that violate the generic grounding interpretation. For not only would ascribing such knowledge claims conflict with other passages where Kant seems to deny that such knowledge is available to us, but it would also raise the difficult question of what could possibly justify such knowledge claims.

**VII. Conclusion**

Many proponents of metaphysical one- and two-object interpretations of transcendental idealism claim that we can know that one specific kind of material grounding relation obtains between things in themselves and appearances. But upon closer investigation of Kant’s overarching account of grounding, we have seen that he is plausibly taken to deny this claim. In light of this commitment, I have argued that an interpretation on which we can know that appearances are grounded in things in themselves but not which specific kind(s) of one- or two-object material grounding relation(s) obtain(s) between them proves to be the most plausible metaphysical interpretation regarding the distinctness of things in themselves and appearances. Given that this is correct, both prevailing kinds of metaphysical interpretations regarding their distinctness — viz. one-object interpretations and two-object interpretations — should be rejected as transgressing the limits of our knowledge of things in themselves.

**Works Cited**


