



THE THING IN-ITSELF AND ITS ROLE
IN THE CONSTITUTION OF OBJECTIVITY.
A CRITICAL READING
OF ONOF'S RECONSTRUCTION
OF TRANSCENDENTAL AFFECTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

IN this paper I will discuss some of the premises and conclusions drawn by Christian Onof in a recent paper, in which the author analyzes the problem of «how to think the in-itself and its role in Transcendental idealism (TI)»,¹ offering an interesting reconstruction about what has often been characterized as the problem of *transcendental affection* (that is: the problem related to the affection of our sensible faculty by the thing-in-itself, an idea which was explicitly formulated by Kant in several important passages of his main critical works).² Although I share important conclusions formulated by Onof regarding the role played by the thing-in-itself in the frame of TI, I would like to discuss the position assumed by the author regarding Kant's confidence in the existence of something *external* which affects us, being thereby the cause of our empirical representations.³ Onof assumes that this confidence is ground-

¹ CHR. ONOF, *Thinking the In-itself and its Relation to Appearances*, in *Kant's Idealism. New Interpretation of a Controversial Doctrine*, ed. by Dennis Schulting, Jacco Verburgt, Dordrecht, Springer, 2010, pp. 211-235.

² According to Vaihinger (cf. H. VAIHINGER, *Commentar zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, II, Stuttgart, 1892, p. 53), the *problem of affection* concerns the metaphysical status of the affecting object: whether it is an *appearance*, a thing-in-itself, or perhaps both; this last possibility refers to the *double affection doctrine* suggested by Adickes (cf. E. ADICKES, *Kants Lehre von der doppelten Affektion unseres Ich*, Tübingen, 1929). As Allison emphasizes, this formulation of the problem «is based on the assumption that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is itself metaphysical in nature [...], once this assumption is repudiated, this way of stating the problem loses all meaning. But it does not follow that the problem itself disappears. It is still meaningful to ask whether Kant's statements about objects affecting the mind and producing sensations involve a reference to objects considered in their empirical character as appearances, or to these same objects considered as they are in themselves. If the former is the case, affection is to be construed in an empirical sense, and if the latter, in a transcendental sense» (H. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 66). Whereas some interpreters regard that nothing but the *empirical object* affects us (cf. G. PRAUSS, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1989, pp. 192-207), others claim that Kant has made references to affection both in an empirical and in a transcendental sense, and try to show that Kantian statements in the latter sense can be justified (cf. H. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, cit., p. 67). I will return to this important matter later. For now, I would like to emphasize that the so called *affection problem* is certainly one of the most controversial issues in the history of Kantian studies, which is probably due to the fact that many fundamental aspects of Kant's critical doctrine (such as the distinction between *appearances* and *things in themselves*, the question regarding the limits for a legitimate use of pure concepts of understanding, or the thesis of the *unknowability of things in themselves*) converge in this crucial point. Whatever position one may assume in regards to the problem of *transcendental affection*, no serious account of Kant's critical epistemology can be dispensed from its analysis.

³ The problem of *affection* obviously concerns the connection between *absolutely external* things (that is *things in themselves*) and our faculty of sensibility, since affection in an *empirical sense* is not particularly prob-



ed in a *metaphysical* assumption, that is: the existence of something real beyond the subject's mind. I will suggest, on the contrary, that Kant's confidence in the existence of a non-subjective reality should not be characterized a *metaphysical* assumption, and would not require, therefore, any particular justification: as we shall see, the affection of our sensibility by something *real* (that remains, however, absolutely unknown to us) is considered by Kant as a basic and unproblematic premise of his critical investigation. The strategy developed by Onof in order to show that Kant's alleged *metaphysical assumptions* regarding the existence of the *in-itself* is not *dogmatic*, is – as I will try to show – not only unnecessary, but also misleading.¹

The other main issue I will consider concerns the position adopted by Onof in relation to the current debate between interpreters who adhere to the so called *two-objects interpretation* and those who defend the *two-aspects interpretation* (usually described as well as the *epistemic interpretation*).² Although Onof attempts to go beyond this dichotomy, assuming a position «which denies both that things in themselves can be understood as the same objects as empirical ones, and that they can be understood

lematic (as it simply refers to the physical relation between sensibility and empirical objects, *i.e.* objects in space). Kant makes an important distinction between two different senses of the term *external* which we should keep in mind when discussing that problem: «But since the expression *outside us* carries with it an unavoidable ambiguity, since it sometimes signifies something that, *as a thing-in-itself*, exists distinct from us and sometimes merely something that belongs to outer *appearance*, then in order to escape uncertainty and use this concept in the latter significance – in which it is taken in the proper psychological question about the reality of our outer intuition – we will distinguish *empirically external* objects from those that might be called *external* in the transcendental sense, by directly calling them *things that are to be encountered in space*» (*KrV*, A 373). All quotations are from I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by Paul Guyer, Allen Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹ Through an analysis of the critical concept of *object* – as it is introduced in the preliminary section of the *Aesthetics* – Onof tries to argue from the conceptual indeterminacy of the appearance (*Erscheinung*) to the conceptual indeterminacy of the *in-itself* (conceived as the ground of appearances). His main objective is to justify Kant's claim that something *in-itself* affects us, being the *cause* of our empirical representations. However, I will try to show that *affection* works, in the frame of the transcendental reflection, as a simple *fact* or *starting moment*, which remains unexplained, even when the entirely critical investigation depends on it.

² Like many other interpreters, Onof distinguishes between these two main lines of interpretation of τ_1 (which are related not only to the question about how to think the *in-itself* in the doctrinal context supplied by the critical doctrine, but also to the matter of how this doctrine must be properly understood) and he sets the *metaphysical* interpretation (proposed by Ameriks, Walker, Walsh, Langton, Allais and Van Cleve) against the *epistemic* interpretation (held by Matthews, Prauss and Allison, among others). Although the interpreters who adhere to the *metaphysical* interpretation of τ_1 disagree in many important issues, they generally agree in considering Kant's statements about the existence of things in themselves as metaphysical (or ontological) theses. Epistemological interpretations usually state that the distinction between the thing in-itself and the appearance arises from the nature of our particular faculties, which makes the distinction merely epistemic (cf. CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 212). Although the debate concerning these two lines of interpretation has been usually characterized as a discussion between the 'two worlds' and the 'two-aspects' (or 'one world') interpretations (cf. L. ALLAIS, *Kant's One World: Interpreting Transcendental Idealism*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XII, 4, 2004, pp. 655-684), recent accounts of this endless debate demonstrate that the picture is not that simple, and it is a difficult task to outline the different positions defended by Kantian scholars in the last decades: in fact, that many *metaphysical interpretations* have been recently articulated with some versions of the two-aspects reading makes the initial dichotomy *two worlds*/*two-aspects* readings no longer valid (cf. D. SCHULTING, *Kant's Idealism: the Current Debate*, in *Kant's Idealism. New Interpretations of a Controversial Doctrine*, cit., pp. 1-35; D. HEIDEMANN, *Appearance, Thing-in-itself, and the Problem of the Skeptical Hypothesis*, *ibidem*, pp. 195-210). In other words, it has become clear that the two-aspects interpretations of τ_1 are not necessarily linked with *epistemic* interpretations, but can also be coordinated with some versions of metaphysical readings of τ_1 (as that which has, for instance, been proposed by Onof himself).

as different objects»,¹ I consider that many of his statements about the thing-in-itself and *affection* are not incompatible with some conclusions drawn in the frame of the *epistemic interpretation*, which Onof, however, explicitly rejects (even when he describes his interpretation of T1 as a *metaphysical* one, trying to distance himself from the *epistemic reading*, his conclusions about the specific sense of the concept of the *in-itself* in the frame of T1 are not as far removed from those drawn by the two-aspects interpreters as he assumes).

As I have pointed out, my main goal here is to provide a critical analysis of some particular premises and conclusions formulated by Onof in his account of *transcendental affection*. I will try in particular to show that Kant's references to the *affecting object* in the preliminary instances of his transcendental investigation are not based – contrary to what Onof suggests – in a *metaphysical* assumption, but rather in a *non philosophical* (or *common sense*) assumption, that is: external objects (in an *absolute sense*)² really *exist* and *affect* our faculty of sensibility. I think it is only as long as the critical investigation unfolds that it becomes necessary to raise the question of how this *affecting object* must be properly *thought of* in the frame of transcendental reflection. As I will suggest, that object can be properly characterized as something in itself only once the ideal character of space and time has been established and once Kant has come to the conclusion that things are to be considered from two different *points of view*: as they *appear to us* and as they are *in themselves*. It is only at this point of the critical research that the *thing* which affects us (but remains at the same time absolutely unknown to us) becomes a *concept* of an unknown and unknowable thing, that is: it becomes a specific philosophical *notion*, which allows us to conceive things independently of any relation with the *a priori* formal conditions of representation. It is this *concept* (of something *in itself*) which demands, strictly speaking, an explanation or doctrinal justification, since it becomes necessary to show that it is not a *dogmatic* (or illegitimate) concept, insofar as it plays a necessary and fundamental role in critical idealism. However, Kant's initial statements regarding those things that affect us do not require – as I will attempt to show – any doctrinal justification, since they are based in a fundamental confidence in the existence of a non-subjective reality, which remains unquestionable in Kant's critical thought.

Before I begin, it is important to note that I will not discuss in detail important issues connected with the *affectio problem*, such as the problematic connection between *transcendental affection* and the critical thesis which states the unknowability of things in themselves.³ Neither will I discuss the issues concerning the epistemologi-

¹ Cf. CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

² Cf. *supra*, p. 000, note 3.

³ As many interpreters have pointed out, Kant's use of the categories of *existence* and *cause* in reference to *things in themselves* seems highly problematic, for it seems to trespass the limits established in T1 regarding the legitimate use of the pure concepts of understanding. Cf. L. FALKENSTEIN, *Kant's Intuitionism. A Commentary on the Transcendental Aesthetic*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp. 330ff. I will discuss later some of the complex difficulties implied in Kant's use of the concept of *cause* regarding the thing-in-itself. Suffice it for now to notice that T1 leaves open the possibility of *thinking* – but not, of course, *knowing* – the *in-itself* as a *cause* of empirical intuitions. As Kemp Smith states, Kant's distinction between *knowledge* and *thought* makes it possible to affirm that we can represent (in a merely indeterminate way) the *thing in-itself* through pure (*nonschematized*) categories (as those of *existence* or *causality*): «since according to Critical teaching the limits of sense-experience are the limits of knowledge, the term knowledge has for Kant a very limited denotation, and leaves open a proportionately wide field for what he entitles thought. Though things in themselves are un-

cal *status* of Kant's references to the thing-in-itself,¹ or the specific relationship between the critical concepts of *thing-in-itself* and *appearance*. Even if these problems are obviously unavoidable in a comprehensive analysis of Kant's conception of the thing-in-itself, I will focus here on particular aspects directly related to Kant's initial assumption regarding the existence of something *absolutely external* which affects us, being thereby the *cause* or *ground* of our empirical representations.

2. THE EXISTENCE OF THE THING-IN-ITSELF AS AN UNPROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTION OF THE CRITICAL INVESTIGATION

My first concern here is to discuss Onof's interpretation of TI as a *metaphysical* position; more specifically: Onof's thesis that Kant's assumption regarding the existence of an external reality beyond the mind is a *metaphysical* one.² To achieve this goal, it is important to consider, in the first place, the meaning that the author attributes to the word *metaphysical*: «I understand a philosophical position to be metaphysical insofar as it involves claims about the nature of reality».³ This is obviously a controversial way of understanding the term 'metaphysical': in effect, we could say, for example, that many empirical sciences «involve claims about the nature of reality», but we would not necessarily describe them, however, as *metaphysical* disciplines: even if we agreed to interpret the word *nature* – in expressions such as the «*nature* of reality» –

knowable, their existence may still be recognized in thought» (N. KEMP SMITH, *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, New York, Humanities Press, 1962, p. 25). It is evident that Kant allows a *non-empirical* use of the pure concepts of understanding (cf. A 247 B 304), and that is, precisely, all we need to represent (in an indeterminate way) the thing which affects our sensibility as something *in itself*. I agree with Allison when he emphasizes that in order to consider things *as they are in themselves* it is necessary to use pure categories, *i.e.*, without any corresponding *schemata* (cf. H. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, *cit.*, p. 56). Allison also points out that the non-empirical use of categories can only yield analytical judgments (cf. *ibidem*, p. 56): when we state that things in themselves are not in space (or are not subjected to any temporal relation), we are simply denying that we can ascribe to things *considered as they are in themselves* those features that belong only to the thing *considered as an appearance*. «These expressions, however [as Kant points out] do not give us cognition of what kind of object it is, but only that, since it is considered in itself without relation to outer sense, it is such that these predicates of outer appearances cannot be applied to it» (A 358). Kant's statements regarding the super-sensible character of the thing-in-itself are, therefore, nothing but mere *negative* statements: «Thus if one assumes an object of a non-sensible intuition as given, one can certainly represent it through all of the predicates that already lie in the presupposition that nothing belonging to sensible intuition pertains to it: thus it is not extended, or in space, that its duration is not a time, that no alteration (sequence of determinations in time) is to be encountered in it, etc. But it is not yet a genuine cognition if merely indicate what the intuition of the object' is not, without being able to say what is then contained in it; for then I have not represented the possibility of an object for my pure concept of the understanding at all, since I cannot give any intuition that would correspond to it, but could only say that ours is not valid for it» (B 149). For a detailed discussion of the problem of *transcendental affection* in connection with the critical doctrine of the unknowability of *things in themselves*, see: I. BEADE, *Acerca de la cosa en sí como causa de la afeción sensible*, «Signos Filosóficos», XXII, 2010, pp. 9-37; L. FALKENSTEIN, *Kant's Argument for the Non-spatiotemporality of Things in Themselves*, «Kant-Studien», LXXX, 1989, pp. 265-283.

¹ For a detailed account of this problem, see I. BEADE, *Acerca del estatus epistemológico de las observaciones kantianas referidas a la existencia de las cosas en sí*, «Revista de Filosofía» (Madrid), XXXV, 2, 2010, pp. 43-57.

² Onof begins his reconstruction of *transcendental affection* stating that his interpretation of TI is not merely *epistemic* but also a *metaphysical* research «rests upon the following three claims. TI is metaphysical in the assumptions it makes. It is metaphysical in its methodology. It is metaphysical in the kind of conclusions it draws» (CH. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 212). Onof considers that the 'metaphysical assumptions' underlying TI are related in particular to Kant's conviction about the existence of some reality external to the mind (*i.e.*, not produced by it) which affects us (cf. *ibidem*, p. 213).

³ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

as a synonym of *essence*, this would not compel us to conclude that the *nature* of reality is *non-physical*, for we could still regard this *nature* as an *empirical* one. On the other hand, even if one accepts Onof's definition of the term 'metaphysical', I do not consider it convenient to characterize Kant's confidence in the existence of something that exists outside our minds as a *metaphysical* assumption, given that – as we shall see – this confidence works, from the very outset of the transcendental investigation, not only as a sort of *common sense* or pre-philosophical assumption,¹ but also – as many interpreters have pointed out – as a *starting point* of such an investigation (since it works as an initial and unproblematic premise of the critical analysis of the *a priori* conditions of human knowledge).² I therefore consider Onof's statement that «Kant's enterprise is inherently metaphysical insofar as his epistemological investigation is inextricably bound up with a metaphysical investigation into the nature of the objects of our knowledge»³ is misleading: an investigation into the *nature* of objects of knowledge may still be an *epistemic* investigation (specially insofar as those objects are regarded as *objects of knowledge*, that is, as *represented* objects).⁴ Even if Onof is right in remarking the metaphysical character of the conclusions drawn by Kant on the basis of his epistemic inquiry, it is not convenient to consider this inquiry as a *metaphysical enterprise* (unless, of course, one considers T1 as a metaphysical doctrine only in the *minimal sense*, as many of the *two-object* interpreters suggest to do). To be sure, an investigation about the necessary conditions of *a priori* knowledge is – as Kant understood it – not a «metaphysical investigation» in the traditional sense of the expression: although T1 may certainly lead to metaphysical or *ontological* conclusions (regarding the *status* of reality *in itself*), one of the main goals of Kant's critical investigation is to uncover the dogmatic character of traditional Metaphysics (or classic Ontology). To characterize T1 as a *metaphysical doctrine* would possibly imply that Kant has made the same mistakes that he has ascribed to his predecessors. On the basis of such a characterization, one would be forced to justify many critical statements in order to show that they are not *dogmatic* (despite their alleged *metaphysical* charac-

¹ In his account of the preliminary passages of the *Aesthetics*, Paton states: «We are able to intuit only so far as an object is given to us, and an object is given to us only so far as it affects our minds and produces a sensation. This statement is difficult because of the ambiguity of the word 'object'. The simplest interpretation is to suppose that Kant is speaking on the common-sense level» (H. J. PATON, *A Commentary on the First Half of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1970, I, p. 95).

² Perhaps Kant's conviction about the existence of an external world is characterized by Onof as *metaphysical assumption* because the author assumes that, once idealistic doubts about the existence of the external world have taken place in the history of philosophy, every assumption regarding the existence of an external world involves adopting a philosophical position in the current debate between *realism* and *idealism*. However, for reasons that will be produced below, I believe that Kant's references to the existence of unknowable things that affect us (causing thereby our sensations, which provide the *matter* of appearances) cannot be interpreted as references grounded in a *metaphysical assumption*.

³ CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁴ I agree with Allison on the epistemological character of Kant's statements related to the thing-in-itself (especially in the case of those statements specifically related to the affection problem). As he points out, «the significance of the considerations of things as they are in themselves [...] is directly methodological rather than metaphysical, even though [...] it provides the only means for avoiding the metaphysical errors associated with transcendental realism» (H. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, cit., p. 57). Even if T1 attempts to provide an alternative to the position defended by *transcendental realists*, it may not be fair to characterize the former as a *metaphysical* alternative, insofar as Kant has precisely attempted to abandon all traditional metaphysical pretensions concerning the knowledge of the super-sensible.



ter). Although many fundamental critical thesis actually demand such justification,¹ I think that we are dealing here with a very peculiar statement (*something external really exists and affects us*), which Kant – as we shall see – clearly did not consider in need of justification (or demonstration). In short, even when T1 deals with non-empirical issues (as the determination of *a priori* forms which make knowledge possible) or leads to metaphysical conclusions (such as the super-sensible character of reality *in itself*), I think that Kant does not deserve the charge of being a *dogmatic* thinker² (and even if Onof is indeed trying to defend Kant from such an accusation, his characterization of the critical doctrine as a *metaphysical enterprise* suggests that the critical epistemology should have provided – but did not provide – doctrinal justifications regarding its *metaphysical contents*).

In the first place, it is important to remark that, at the beginning of the *Aesthetics*, Kant makes an explicit reference to *objects* which must affect us for an empirical intuition to occur. Once the critical investigation has begun to unfold (and the distinction between *appearances/things in themselves* has been established, as well as the fundamental thesis of the unknowability of *things in themselves*), the *affecting object* or *thing* (which Kant declares unknowable) becomes a mere *concept*, which means that it is no longer a *thing* in the strict sense of the word.³ It is this *concept* that definitely demands an explanation: insofar as the critical epistemology denies the possibility of knowing *things in themselves*, one would expect Kant to make no further references to them, and yet, such references are abundant in his main critical works. But his confidence in the existence of *something* which must affect us for our empirical representations to take place remains entirely unproblematic for Kant, who – significantly – provides no further explanations about the ontological *status* of this affecting object. At this preliminary stage of the critical investigation, Kant simply assumes the existence of non-subjective objects (which will only be further characterized as *things in themselves*).

¹ To be sure, Kant's doctrine has frequently been considered by many of his critics as a inconsistent philosophical enterprise, insofar as it seems to repeat the very same mistakes that it was supposed to avoid. I believe that many of Kant's most controversial theses can nevertheless be defended against such criticisms. The *transcendental affection* thesis is, as I will try to show, a significant example of the unjustified character of many of the criticisms which have been raised against T1.

² It is noteworthy that the term *dogmatic* is used here in reference to traditional metaphysics, which was characterized by Kant as *dogmatic* insofar as it tried to reach knowledge through pure concepts, without inquiring first the limits and scope of *a priori* cognition: «Criticism is not opposed to the dogmatic procedure of reason in its pure cognition as science (for science must always be dogmatic, *i.e.*, it must prove its conclusions strictly *a priori* from secure principles); rather, it is opposed only to dogmatism, *i.e.*, to the presumption of getting on solely with pure cognition from (philosophical) concepts according to principles, which reason has been using for a long time without first inquiring in what way and by what right it has obtained them. Dogmatism is therefore the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, without an antecedent critique of its own capacity» (*KrV*, B xxxv). As Kant points out, the critical doctrine does not oppose, however, to «the dogmatic procedure of reason», a necessary and unavoidable procedure for both science and philosophy (cf. *KrV*, B xxxv; *FM*, AA xx 274, 285, 292, 295).

³ Vaihinger points out that, whereas at the beginning of the *Aesthetics* *things in themselves* are a foundation, at the end of the *Aesthetics* they become only a *limit* (cf. H. VAIHINGER, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 472-473). We could affirm, in a similar sense, that in the preliminary stages of the critical investigation *things in themselves* (as those entities which affect our sensibility) are *things* (in the proper sense of the word), but they become a mere *concept*, once their unknowability have been established. That is to say: insofar as we can have no *knowledge* of them, we can only *think* of them, and they thus become – within the framework of the transcendental reflection – something we can *conceive*, but not actually *experience*.



These *transcendent objects* are characterized, as we know, as the *cause of affection*. However – as Vaihinger points out – Kant is not asserting there that the *affection* is caused by the thing-in-itself: all he is saying is, literally, that those *things* which affect our sensibility remain absolutely unknown for us as they are *in themselves* (for we can only represent them *as they appear* to us).¹ A *non-subjective reality* is here – and perhaps *only here* – openly referred by Kant, and this is why some interpreters consider the *Aesthetics* as a *realistic moment* in the critical investigation, stressing that in this section of the *Critique* Kant's statements reveal a realistic *starting point* which we should recognize as a fundamental ground of critical Idealism.²

Kant's confidence in the existence of something real *in-itself* (i.e. independent of any subjective condition of human knowledge) becomes apparent not only in the *Aesthetics*, but also in many passages of his main critical works,³ many of which explicitly refer to these real (but unknowable) things which affect us, being thereby characterized as the *cause* or *ground* of our empirical intuitions.⁴ It is remarkable that in all those passages Kant gives no reasons to justify his statements about the existence of this non-subjective entity that affects us: in effect, he just seems to assume *transcendental affection* as a simple *fact*, which demands no particular philosophical explanation. No explanations are given either in the first paragraph of the *Aesthetics*, when Kant defines the term *intuition* as a certain kind of representation that can only occur insofar as an *object* is *given* to us or (that is: insofar as an object *affects* our mind in a certain manner).⁵ The fact that Kant provides no explanations regarding the ontological *status* of this *affecting object* shows that his initial references to *intuition* (and *affection*) should be understood – as many interpreters have pointed out – as assertions that take place in a common sense (i.e. non-philosophical) level. This basically means that this initial event recorded in Kant's critical reconstruction of the constitution of objectivity was regarded by him as a sort of axiomatic starting point, which must remain unexplained, insofar as that reconstruction cannot provide a doctrinal explanation regarding our contact with absolutely external things (or things in themselves).

¹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 163. We can reach no knowledge of things as they are *in themselves* because human representation is only possible under subjective conditions that, even when they make objective representations possible, also make it impossible for us to know things beyond those conditions, insofar as they confer to objects as represented certain *a priori* determinations (cf. *Prol.*, § 36, AA IV 318).

² Cf. H. VAIHINGER, *op. cit.*, p. 163. This realistic *ground* of Kantian Idealism was emphasized by Adickes in his classical work on the thing-in-itself. Through a precise and detailed analysis of several passages of the first *Critique* and *Prolegomena*, Adickes attempts to show that this deep realistic tendency in Kant's theoretical philosophy sets the limit and scope of critical idealism (cf. E. ADICKES, *Kant und das Ding an sich*, Berlin, Pan Verlag Rolf Heise, 1924, p. 16). Kant's confidence about the existence of real things beyond the sphere of human representations is characterized by the author as a *self-evident* assumption: «Nach meiner Überzeugung ist für Kant in seiner ganzen kritischen Zeit die transsubjektive Existenz einer Vielheit von Dingen an sich, die unser Ich affizieren, eine nie bezweifelte, absolute Selbstverständlichkeit gewesen» (*ibidem*, p. 4). «Es liegt eben, was die Existenz der Dinge an sich betrifft, für Kant überhaupt kein problem vor. Sie ist eine unbewiesene Prämisse, von der er ausgeht, als sei sie so sicher wie der sicherst bewiesene Gundsatz. [...] In unserem Fall beweisen sie (the passages quoted above), wie stark die realistische Tendenz in Kant war, und wie fern ihm deshalb jeder extreme Idealismus liegen musste» (*ibidem*, p. 9). Kant does not need to justify (or demonstrate) the existence of the thing-in-itself, for it is simply assumed as an unproblematic and pre-philosophical premise of his critical investigation.

³ Cf. *KrV*, B xx, B 164; *Prol.*, AA IV 289; 315; *GMS*, AA IV 451.

⁴ Cf. *KrV*, A 143 B 182, A 42 B 59, A 38 B 55, A 190 235, B 72, A 393, A 44 B 61; *Prol.*, AA IV 286, 289; *ÜE*, AA VIII 215, 220.

⁵ Cf. *KrV*, A 19 B 33.



The significant absence of any explanation in those passages where Kant refers to the thing-in-itself as the affecting object shows, in short, that he regarded his statements on affection as unproblematic ones.

Many texts could be quoted in support of this interpretation. In a letter to J. S. Beck (November 11th 1791), Kant refers to intuition as a fact which cannot be properly explained in the preliminary stages of the transcendental investigation. Beck, who was asked by Kant to write a popular exposition of the first *Critique*, had consulted the philosopher about the specific meaning of the word intuition, which means that he was perhaps the first of his readers to call attention to the problem of the status of the «given object» as it was referred at the beginning of the Aesthetic. Kant replied there that it was difficult at the beginning of the investigation to explain in a more consistent way concepts such as intuition or *sensibility* (a reply which was entirely coherent with his position concerning the special features of the philosophical method, which usually demand that we postpone the definition of a concept until the investigation has reached an advanced level). Just as Kant suggested to Beck to understand intuition as a simple fact, *affection* should be understood, as well, as an initial *fact* or *event* that cannot be justified (neither in the preliminary instances of the investigation, nor once Kant's conception of sensibility has been expounded). In effect, this original fact must remain unexplained (even once the critical conception of sensible intuition becomes properly expounded).

This unproblematic character of Kant's assumption regarding the existence of something external that affects us is revealed in the following passage of *Prolegomena*:

For the fact that I have myself given to this theory of mine the name of transcendental idealism cannot justify anyone in confusing it with the empirical idealism of Descartes [...] or with the mystical and visionary idealism of Berkeley (against which, along with other similar fantasies, our Critique, on the contrary, contains the proper antidote). For what I called idealism did not concern the existence of things (the doubting of which, however, properly constitutes idealism according to the received meaning), for it never came into my mind to doubt that, but only the sensory representation of things, to which space and time above all belong; and about these last, hence in general about all appearances, I have only shown: that they are not things (but mere ways of representing), nor are they determinations that belong to things in themselves. The word transcendental, however, which with me never signifies a relation of our cognition to things, but only to the faculty of cognition, was intended to prevent this misinterpretation.

(Prol, AA iv 293)

Kant states here that it *never came into his mind* to doubt about the *existence of things*, and emphasizes that his T1 only questions the *absolute* existence of things *outside us* (i.e. things given in space and time). By showing the *transcendental ideality* of appearances, Kant does not put into question the existence of *absolute external things*.¹ Actually, the existence of non-subjective *things* was never a philosophical *problem* for Kant, neither a problem which he considered T1 had to solve.² Kant never doubted the ex-

¹ Cf. *supra*, note 3.

² Although many interpreters consider that in the *Refutation of idealism* (Cf. KrV, B 274-279) Kant tries to demonstrate the existence of things in themselves (see, for example: F. KAULBACH, *Kants Beweis des Daseins der Gegenstände im Raum außer mir*, «Kant-Studien», L, 1958-1959, pp. 323-347; A. BROOKE, *Realism in the Refutation*



istence of things beyond the sphere of subjective representations: his only concern was to show that we do not know those things as they are *in themselves*, but only as they *appear* to us. T1 allows us, therefore, to affirm that *absolutely external things exist*, a statement that expresses the *realistic* premises on which Kant's critical idealism is grounded.¹

As I have pointed out, *affection* works, in this specific doctrinal frame, as a simple *fact* or *starting moment*, which remains unexplained, even when the entirely critical investigation depends on it. In effect, we can have no knowledge about *affection* in itself, and yet, this initial *fact* works as a basic and fundamental premise of the transcendental reconstruction of objective knowledge. Kant's thesis of *transcendental affection* is not, however, a dogmatic or unjustified premise, for it is directly connected with Kant's conception of sensibility, since it is the passive nature of our sensibility that *demand*s that the matter of appearances come from something completely external to the subject.² I think, therefore, Onof is wrong in interpreting Kant's reference to affection as a *metaphysical* statement, and I believe he is also wrong in stating this alleged *metaphysical claim* emerges as an *outcome* of transcendental reflection.³⁸ Kant's statements regarding the non-subjective *status* of the object that affects us neither are *metaphysical* statements nor do they demand a philosophical justification. Even if we

of Idealism, in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress*, ed. by H. Robinson, Memphis, 1995, pp. 313-320), I believe that there are enough reasons to conclude that this is not the case: it is the existence of *spatial* things – i.e., things *outside us* in a merely *empirical* sense – what is there at issue. For a detailed analysis of this problem, see I. BEADE, *Acerca de la solución kantiana al problema de la existencia del mundo externo*, «Cuadernos Filosóficos», v, 2008, pp. 59-81.

¹ The existence of *absolute external things* that affect us is assumed, in the frame of T1, as a sort of *starting point*, which seems to demand no doctrinal explanation. As Caimi stresses, «the whole development of the Transcendental Aesthetic may be said to originate at a sort of Big Bang, at a zero moment, a starting point beyond which it is not possible to reach. This point – that is, affection – defies all explanation. It is recorded in the first paragraph of the *Aesthetic*, and thereafter no revert to it is made. The whole sequence of thoughts stems from this unexplained first moment onwards [...]. Affection starts once and for ever Kant's sequence of thought in the *Aesthetic* and even in the entire *Critique*, as it introduces a sort of miracle: the sensible representation. Kant cannot avail himself of a way to explain this sensible representation; but he depends upon acknowledgement of it as a starting point of his thinking» (M. CAIMI, *About the Argumentative Structure of the Transcendental Aesthetic*, «Studi kantiani», ix, 1996, pp. 27-46, p. 29). Cf. H. VAHINGER, *op. cit.*, pp. 472-473; G. BUCHDAHL, *op. cit.*, p. 86; CH. PARSONS, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

² The characterization of this *initial fact* as a 'starting moment' is suggested by Caimi, who points out that the reference of knowledge to its transcendent object «would be irrelevant for the development that follows in the *Critique*: no matter the ways and means by which our knowledge relates to objects, what does matter is that we are furnished with such representations that relate to objects, the intuition. Intuition occurs in us whenever that inexplicable contact with the object (the affection) happens; an event which we have already compared with the Big Bang in Astronomy» (M. CAIMI, *About the argumentative structure*, *cit.*, p. 30). Many interpreters have connected Kant's references to the thing-in-itself as the *cause* or *ground* of affection with his conception of sensibility as a *passive* – or *mere receptive* – faculty (cf. B 71-72). If our sensibility cannot provide itself the *matter of appearances* (and thus something must *affect* it for sensations to occur), it seems necessary that there be something which exists *beyond all subjective conditions of sensibility*, something that will be characterized, within the framework of T1, as a *thing in itself* (cf. H. J. PATON, *op. cit.*, pp. 139 ff.; N. KEMP SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82; M. WESTPHAL, *In Defense of the Thing-in-itself*, «Kant-Studien», lxx, 1968, pp. 118-141: 122 sg.; S. RÁBADE ROMEO, *Problemas gnoseológicos de la Crítica de la Razón Pura*, Madrid, Gredos, 1969, p. 94; H. ALLISON, *Kant's concept of the transcendental object*, «Kant-Studien», 59, 1968, pp. 165-186: 182 f.

³ Cf. CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 216. The fact of *affection* is not a *result*, but – once again – a *starting point* of the transcendental investigation, that is: an initial premise of Kant's critical reconstruction of the conditions that make objective knowledge possible.

conceded that Kant's statements about *things in themselves* may require some sort of justification (insofar as the critical epistemology denies all possibility of knowing *things in themselves*), that does not mean that the *starting point* of transcendental investigation (*i.e. affection*) demands a particular explanation: the passages quoted above show, in effect, that Kant's references to *affection* are not considered by him as *problematic* statements (not even – I might add – as *doctrinal* statements, for *affection* itself does not indeed take part of Kant's critical investigation).¹

Onof states that the grounds for Kant's alleged *metaphysical* claim can be found if we analyze the meaning of the word *object* as it is used in this preliminary section of the *Aesthetics*. I will now consider briefly the argument he proposes in order to justify what he considers Kant's main *metaphysical* assumption (regarding the existence of *non-subjective things* that affect us). Firstly, he argues that an *intuition* does not connect us with *objects* in the proper sense, since through mere intuition there is no representation of a *determinate* object.² He states, secondly, that the *indeterminate character* of the unknowable thing-in-itself (which, strictly speaking, does not constitute an *object*)³ cannot be identified with the distinctive *indeterminate character* of the *appearance* (*Erscheinung*), conceived as the *indeterminate object of our empirical intuition*.⁴ As he suggests, there would be *two different kinds of indetermination* at issue here. Based on a series of passages that he quotes in support of his interpretation,⁵ he concludes:

in such passages, it is claimed that something about which nothing further is said, affects our faculty of sensibility. But additionally, here as in other passages (e.g., A 494/B 522), he brings out the fact that there is no representation of a determinate object through mere intuition. With this two distinct claims, Kant identifies, first, something indeterminate that is not even characterized as an object, which affects our faculty of sensibility, and second, an indeterminate object of our intuitive representation. The *difference between the two indeterminacies* is that the second calls for further determination, insofar as it is that of an object (A 267/B 323): this indeterminacy is an *under-determination*. By contrast, by not characterizing the first as an object, Kant is indicating that, rather than an under-determined object, something *essentially indeterminate* is at stake here, which TI characterizes as unknowable.⁶

Onof proposes to argue «from the conceptual indeterminacy of the content of an intuitive representation to the conceptual indeterminacy of its ground»,⁷ in order to justify Kant's claim that something *in-itself* exists and affects us (being, therefore, the *cause* or *ground* of our empirical representations). I have already referred to the reasons that make Onof's argument needless,⁸ so I will now justify my initial claim that

¹ Only once the distinction between *appearances* and *things in themselves* is established does it become relevant to characterize the affecting object as a thing-in-itself. *Before* that, however, Kant simply refers to an *affecting object* which must be given for an intuition to take place, and there is actually no reason – not, at least, in that specific initial moment of the investigation – to characterize that object as something *in itself*.

² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 217.

⁴ Cf. *KrV*, A 20 B 34.

⁶ CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 224. For a detailed account of the characteristic indeterminateness of *appearances*, see: M. BAUM, *Objects and Objectivity in Kant's First Critique*, in *Kant's Idealism. New Interpretations of a Controversial Doctrine*, cit., pp. 55-70: 57 ff.

⁸ The existence of the thing-in-itself is simply taken for granted at the *starting point* of the transcendental investigation. On the other hand, given that one could affirm that the *concept* of a thing-in-itself is *by definition* indeterminate, it would seem unnecessary to explain its indeterminacy through a particular argument.

it is also a *misguiding* argument. In the first place, I do not consider the passages he quotes in order to justify Kant's statements about the thing-in-itself as the *affecting entity* as real evidence concerning the *essentially indeterminate* character of *the in-itself*.¹ To be sure, nothing *positive* about the *intrinsic nature* of the thing-in-itself should be established (not even on the ground of an analysis of the concept of *appearance*),² but this does not imply that the *in-itself* is something *essentially indeterminate* (as Onof suggests). In many passages of his critical works, Kant declares that *things in themselves* remain absolutely indeterminate *for us*, insofar as the categories – which make all *determination* possible, through *pure* or *a priori* synthesis – cannot be referred to things as they are *in-themselves*, but only to things as *appearances*. This means that the thing-in-itself is only *indeterminate for us*, who certainly cannot grasp things beyond the necessary formal conditions of human representation; it does not mean, however, that the thing is indeterminate *in itself*.³ It could be said, in this sense, that the qualification 'in itself' refers mainly to the subject (that is: it is specifically related to one of the two different perspectives we must assume in the transcendental reflection about objectivity). It is crucial to keep in mind here that anything we may legitimately affirm about *things in themselves* in the frame of T1 can be affirmed only in a merely *negative* sense:⁴ any legitimate statement about the *in-itself* can only refer (negatively) to those features that we cannot assign to things *considered* independently of any relationship with the subjective conditions of human representation.⁵ No claim about the *essential nature* of the *in-itself* is legitimate in the context of the transcendental reflection, and this certainly includes Onof's statement regarding the *essentially indeterminate character* of the thing-in-itself, a statement which clearly seems to infringe the limits stated by the critical epistemology regarding the legitimate use of pure concepts of understanding).

3. SOME REMARKS CONCERNING ONOF'S REJECTION OF THE EPISTEMIC INTERPRETATION OF T1

I will now discuss the position that Onof assumes in the current debate among *two-objects* and *two-aspects* interpreters. As we have seen, Onof understands T1 as «not merely an epistemic but also a metaphysical position».⁶ He makes it clear, however, that his interpretation must be distinguished from the so called 'metaphysical interpretation': in effect, whereas *metaphysical* or *ontological interpretations* of T1 usually regard *appearances* and *things in themselves* as two different kind of *entities*, Onof ex-

¹ In A 68 B 93 Kant indicates that our intuitions, as sensible ones, are based on affections. In B 129 he emphasizes that human intuition is merely sensible, *i.e.* it is a mere *receptivity*, which certainly means, according to what has been established in many other passages, that it needs to be *affected* by something for the intuitive representation to occur. In B 207 Kant remarks that appearances contain, apart from *the a priori* forms of space and time, a *matter* which is provided by sensation (caused by *affection*). Finally, in A 253 B 309 Kant states that through the affection of sensibility there is no reference of our representations to an *object*. I believe that these passages (which are not commented by Onof in detail) say nothing about the *indeterminacy* that – according to Onof's interpretation – must be inherent to a thing-in-itself: they merely refer to the *indeterminacy* of appearances.

² Cf. B 149; A 358.

³ Cf. CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴ Cf. K. AMERIKS, *Kant's Idealism on a Moderate Interpretation*, in *Kant's Idealism. New Interpretations of a Controversial Doctrine*, cit., p. 34.

⁵ Cf. *supra*, p. 000, note 8.

⁶ CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

plicitly rejects this position. However, he takes distance from the *two-aspects* interpretation, since he considers that to assume the existence of something that is not produced by the mind, «and which therefore has properties that are independent of the *a priori* forms of sensibility [...] supports a metaphysical understanding of T1». ¹ In the first place, I believe that two-aspects interpreters would not necessarily deny that the very same object that we experience can be *thought* – independently of all relation with the subjective conditions of human representation – as an entity endowed with properties which are irreducible to phenomenal features: the fact that we cannot reach any positive knowledge about those features does not prevent us from admitting that those features must be different from the features inherent in the object as *represented*. The epistemic interpretation is thus not necessarily incompatible with this characterization of the thing-in-itself as an entity endowed with intrinsic properties which cannot be known to human understanding. However, the supporters of the epistemic interpretation would emphasize – contrary to the supporters of the ontological interpretations, such as Langton² – that the distinction between two different sets of properties (that is: sensible and non-sensible properties) states nothing about the thing as such, but refers only to two different ways of considering things (within the frame of the transcendental reflection).

Secondly, it must be stressed that many *two-aspects* theorists do not deny the metaphysical consequences of T1, even when they stress the original epistemic character of this doctrine (to consider the distinction between *appearances* and *things in themselves* as an *epistemic* one certainly does not mean that one should overlook the important metaphysical results of such distinction). In the third place, I believe that Onof is wrong in claiming that the two-aspects interpretation does not allow an intelligible conception of *things in themselves* as the *cause* or *ground* of appearances.³ Although two-aspects interpreters usually characterize the thing-in-itself as the empirical object considered independently of the *a priori* conditions of human representation, this does not actually prevent them from conceiving *things in themselves* as the *cause* or *ground* of appearances. To be sure, one could at first sight say that to conceive *things in themselves* as the *cause* of appearances and claim – at the same time – that those *things* are nothing different from *appearances* themselves seems to make no sense at all (indeed, a *cause* as such must be something different from the effect it produces). I believe, however, that this difficulty emerges as a result of a misleading formulation of the problem, which, strictly speaking, concerns the question of how to consider the *affecting entity* in the frame of T1, once the distinction between *appearances* and *things in themselves* has been established. A brief analysis of the specific sense that the notion of *causality* assumes in Kant's account of *affectation* will show that this problem may perhaps not be as complex as many of Kant's critics regard it to be.

Many passages of Kant's main critical works suggest that the relation between *appearances* and *things in themselves* is a mere semantic (or logical) correlation.⁴ This

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 215.

² Cf. R. LANGTON, *Kantian Humility*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001, pp. 124-125. Langton characterizes *things in themselves* as substances which have *intrinsic properties* and conceives of *phenomena* as the relational properties of those substances. Her interpretation is usually connected to the current ontological interpretations of T1.

³ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 234.

⁴ Cf. *KrV*, B XXVI-XXVII, A 251-252, B 306-307.

means, basically, that the *concept* of an *appearance* would lose its specific critical sense if we failed to take into account its fundamental relation with the *concept* of something *in itself*. However, others texts (particularly those which are directly connected to the affection problem) characterize the thing-in-itself not as a mere logical correlate of appearances, but also as something real which must be assumed as the cause or ground of our empirical intuitions, insofar as it affects our sensibility. In many of these passages, the thing-in-itself is thus characterized as the non-sensible cause of appearances. Indeed, to describe the thing-in-itself as the *cause* of an *appearance* seems to imply – at least at first sight – that they are not *one and the same* object, but rather two different ones. We have therefore to consider in what sense we can affirm that the thing-in-itself can be regarded as the *cause* of an appearance without this implying, nevertheless, that the thing-in-itself is something *ontologically different* from the *appearance* itself.

Although Kant claims that the non-empirical use of the categories is illegitimate (and can thus provide no knowledge at all), he admits on many occasions that it is entirely possible (and indeed necessary) to use the pure concepts of understanding to think (or represent) that which lies beyond the phenomenal sphere. Concerning the possibility of this non-sensible use of categories, he states in the third chapter of the *Analytic of principles*:

From the concept of a cause as a pure category (if I leave out the time in which something follows something else in accordance with a rule), I will not find out anything more than that it is something that allows an inference to the existence of something else; and in that case not only would there be nothing through which cause and effect could be distinguished, but further, since the possibility of drawing this inference also requires conditions about which I would know nothing, the concept would not even have any determination through which to apply to any object.

(KrV, A 243 B 301)

I think that, in those passages specifically related to the notion of *affection*, Kant's employment of the concept of *causality* refers to the relation between *appearances* and their *non-sensible ground*.¹ Conceived as the *cause* of an appearance, the thing-in-itself is nothing but that unknown *something* that *allows an inference to the existence of something else*. In other words: the *in-itself* is considered there as the *ground* of an appearance, an appearance which cannot be said to exist *as such* unless we admit, at the same time, the existence of *that which appears as a phenomenon*. That *thing* (which cannot be represented as it is *in itself*) can be legitimately described as the *cause* of an appearance in the sense that it is its *ground* or necessary *correlate*, for the existence of the latter presupposes – as I have already emphasized – the existence of the former.² As Kant points out in *Prolegomena*,

In fact, if we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, as is fitting, then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing-in-itself underlies them, although we are not ac-

¹ Cf. KrV, A 277 B 333; A 358; A 379ss; A 538 B 566; A 613 B 641.

² Cf. M. CAIMI, *La sensación en la Crítica de la Razón Pura*, «Cuadernos de Filosofía», 19, 30-31, 1983, pp. 109-119; 111; E. ADICKES, *Kant und das Ding an sich*, cit., pp. 14-15; H. HERRING, *Das Problem der Affektion bei Kant. Die Frage nach der Gegebenheitsweise des Gegenstandes in der Kritik der reinen Vernunft und die Kant-Interpretation*, Köln, Pick, 1953, p. 84.

quainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself, but only with its appearance, i.e., with the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. Therefore the understanding, just by the fact that it accepts appearances, also admits to the existence of things in themselves, and to that extent we can say that the representation of such beings as underlie the appearances, hence of mere intelligible beings, is not merely permitted but also inevitable.

(AA IV 314-315)

The relation between both (appearance and thing-in-itself) is thus not a mere logical (or semantic) relation, but also an ontological one, for the *existence* of things in themselves must be admitted insofar as we establish the *existence* of appearances. This ontological correlation can be deduced, indeed, from the fact that we are dealing here with *one and the same* object (not with two different independent entities), and so it is natural to affirm that insofar as we establish the existence of an *appearance* we are assuming the existence of the *in-itself*, for this last is nothing but the same thing that appears as a phenomenon. The concept of causality is not used here in a *literal* but only in an *analogical* sense.¹

This brief account of the problem regarding Kant's use of the concept of *causality* in connection with *transcendental affection*, allows us to conclude that the causal language usually used by Kant does not actually mean that he considered *appearances* and *things in themselves* as *two different kind of entities*.² It is of course true that a *causal relationship*, in the strict sense of the expression, requires that something (the cause) produce something else (the effect), this relation being a temporal one. If we interpreted Kant's characterization of *things in themselves* as the non-sensible *cause* of appearances literally, this would force us to consider them as *different entities*, and so the two-aspects interpretation should be abandoned. But once we realize that the relationship between them need not be construed in strict *causal* terms (for nothing but

¹ Many interpretative strategies which have been proposed in order to justify Kant's use of the concept of causality in connection with transcendental affection refer to Kant's *non-literal* use of the concept of causation. Whereas Allison, for example, stresses that T1 allows a non-schematized use of the categories, concluding that affection, strictly speaking, «is not precisely a causal relation» (cf. H. ALLISON, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, cit., p. 54), Rescher proposes a distinction between a generic *Principle of Sufficient Reason* and a specific *Principle of Causality*. According to Rescher, this distinction «enables us to see how Kant can be freed from the charge of inconsistency in regard to noumenal causality [...]. Kant's own occasional looseness of formulation notwithstanding, it is clear that while things in themselves somehow *affect* the sensibility so as to bring representations of objects into being, the relationship here at issue is definitely not to be construed in properly causal terms. The linkage between phenomenon and thing-in-itself, rather than being actually causal in character, is not mediated by the principle of causality at all, but by a more basic and general principle of Sufficient Reason. This principle is – I submit – the (essentially) non-causal principle of grounding to which Kant time and again makes appeal» (N. RESCHER, *Noumenal Causality*, in *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, ed. by L. W. Beck, Dordrecht, 1974, pp. 175-183; 178). As Rescher points out, «noumenal causality is not actual causality at all, in the strict sense in which causality is governed by a specific, experientially constitutive Principle of causality. Rather it is only analogical causality, governed by a generic and regulative principle of grounding, a principle of Sufficient Reason, a principle that controls what we must think to be the case, rather than what we can claim to know regarding nature. Hence this use of Principle of Sufficient Reason does not demonstrate the *existence* of noumenal grounding. Rather, it only affords rational basis for the *necessary postulation* of noumenal causality in terms of Kant's know vs. think distinction. The Principle of Sufficient reason accordingly provides the basis of postulation that is both inevitable and rationally warranted» (*Noumenal Causality*, cit., pp. 182-183).

² Onof himself acknowledges this when he discusses Wood's account of the issue (cf. CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 231).

the relation between the *grounding* and the *grounded* – the *condition* and the *conditioned* – is at issue there), we can bring out the legitimacy of thinking the thing-in-itself as the ground of appearances, and still subscribe to the two-aspects interpretation.

We can affirm, in short, that insofar as it affects our sensibility, the thing-in-itself *causes* (in a mere analogical sense) the appearance, without being actually *something different* from it. In other words: the alleged causal relation between the thing-in-itself and the appearance does not actually involve a temporal relation between two different entities: to conceive of the thing-in-itself as the cause of an appearance only means that in the frame of τ_1 we have to consider the affecting object as a something *in itself* (because otherwise we would be assigning that affecting object those precise empirical features that are, in fact, a *result of affection*),¹ and that we have to recognize the *non-subjective thing* that affects us as a *ground* (i.e. a necessary and fundamental *condition*) of empirical phenomena.² As I have pointed out, one of the main aspects involved in Onof's rejection of the *two-aspects* interpretation concerns the alleged impossibility of articulating this interpretation with a *causal* account of the relation between *appearances* and *things in themselves* (Onof believes that two-aspects interpreters cannot explain the fundamental role played by the *in itself* as the cause or ground of appearances). Taking into account the reasons stated above, I argue that the *epistemic interpretation* can be freed of this charge. As I have tried to show, it is entirely possible to assume the existence of the *in-itself* (as *that which affects us*) and, at the same time, to conceive of it as nothing different from the empirical object.³ On the other side, I believe that *two-aspects* theorists can certainly offer a coherent and sound account of the notion of *affection* and of the fundamental role played by the

¹ It becomes evident that, insofar as we subscribe to the two-aspects interpretation, we must consider the problem of *affection* in different terms, so as to realize that the transcendental affection does not mean, literally, that the thing-in-itself *is the cause of the appearance*, but only that the thing which affects us (making the appearance possible) must be thought something *in-itself*.

² The *in-itself* can only be consistently characterized as the *cause* of appearances insofar as we interpret this relation as a *grounding* one, and we are allowed to conceive of the thing-in-itself as the *ground* of appearances insofar as it is their *necessary condition*.

³ It is worth to note that the epistemological interpretation does not deny the real character of the thing-in-itself, i.e., it does not reduce the *in-itself* to a mere 'point of view' or 'perspective' in the sense of a mere *philosophical fiction*. The point of view implied in the consideration of the thing as something *in itself* refers to a *real* (not to a mere *thought of*) dimension of the empirical object. Furthermore, the existence of things in themselves is implied – as Adickes emphasizes – in the very same existence of *appearances*: «Die transsubjective Existenz des Dinges an sich ist auch hier eine Selbstverständlichkeit: es ist mit der Erscheinung ohne weiteres gegeben als ihre eine Seite (bei der von unserer sinnlichen Auffassungsweise gänzlich abstrahiert wird), die Notwendigkeit seines Daseins ist also schon im Begriff der Erscheinung implicite enthalten» (E. ADICKES, *Kant und das Ding an sich*, cit., p. 8). It is important to keep in mind that the very specific sense as a critical concept of *appearance* demands that we conceive of the thing-in-itself as the necessary correlate of the appearance (cf. KrV, B xxvi-xxvii; A 251-252; Prol, AA iv 350-351, 354-355). This essential correlative character of the thing-in-itself must not be understood, however, only as a mere logical correlate, but also as an *ontological* one: it is necessary not only to oppose the *concept* of a thing-in-itself to the *concept* of *appearance*, but also to assume an existing thing-in-itself as the *ontological ground* of the empirical object. In other words: the thing-in-itself is not only something we need to *think*, but also something that is considered as a *real entity* in Kant's philosophical works (cf. I. BEADE, *Acerca de la cosa en sí como causa de la afeción sensible*, cit., pp. 9 ff.). Other examples of the possible articulation of the *epistemological interpretation* of the *appearance/thing-in-itself* distinction and a *realistic* interpretation of the thing-in-itself can be found in S. RÁBADE ROMEO, *Problemas gnoseológicos*, cit., p. 97; R. WOLFF, *Kant's Theory of Mental Activity. A Commentary on the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, Gloucester, Peter Smith, 1973, p. 313.



thing-in-itself in the possibility of objective knowledge (even if they consider the thing-in-itself and the *appearance* as *one* and the same object).

Another important issue that I find problematic in Onof's account of *transcendental affection* concerns his characterization of the *existence* of the in-itself as a *transcendental condition* of knowledge.¹ I believe *transcendental affection* provides the *matter* of appearances,² and should be thus characterized as a *material* – *i.e.*, a *posteriori* – condition of knowledge, and not as a *formal* – *a priori* – one.³

I will now sum up the main points which I find problematic in Onof's account of affection. In the first place, I think that Kant's references to the *object* which affects our sensibility – in the preliminary passages of the *Aesthetics* – should not be interpreted as related to a *metaphysical* assumption of the transcendental investigation, but rather as a *pre-philosophical* assumption, which represents a sort of unproblematical *starting point* for such investigation. In the second place, I believe that the *epistemic* interpretation – which Onof explicitly rejects – is not necessarily incompatible with the conception of the thing-in-itself as the *cause* or *ground* of the appearance (at least not as long as the notion of *causality* is interpreted in its purely *logical*, *non-schematized*, sense, as I have suggested it should be). It is possible indeed to consider the in-itself as the

¹ «The existence of the in-itself as a ground of affection emerges as a *transcendental condition* of the cognition of objects: it is necessary for their cognition, but also makes sense in terms of this transcendental role. In this way, a metaphysical claim is indeed made, but it does not amount to an ontological assertion since it is only insofar as it is a condition of knowledge that the in-itself must be said to exist. Unconditional claims such as are found in ontology are thus replaced by metaphysical claims related to conditions of knowledge» (CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 218).

² Cf. ÜE, AA VIII 215.

³ As it is well known, the term 'transcendental' plays different roles within the first *Critique*: Kant uses the term to qualify a certain kind of *knowledge* (B 25, B 80), a specific kind of *problems* of reason (cf. B 504 ff., B 512), a particular philosophical *point of view* (B 735, B 880), a certain *meaning* or *sense* (B 305, B 527), a series of *conditions of knowledge* (A 106), and even a certain type of *concept* (B 45, B 61, B 322, B 329). Kant also refers to *transcendental considerations* (B 586), *transcendental demonstrations* (B 215, B 619), *transcendental deductions* (B 88, B 117 ff.), This term is also used in connection with fundamental concepts of critical epistemology, such as *apperception* (B 107 ff.), *object* (B 236, B 304-305, etc.), *idealism* (B 518 ff., A 369), principles (B 88, B 188) and *synthesis* (B 150 ff., B 175, B 164). Kant has also referred to the *transcendental ideality of appearances* (B 534 ff.), the *transcendental ideas of reason* (B 368, B 377-396, B 434 ff., B 494, B 498, B 556 ff.) and a *transcendental use of reason* (B 376, B 386). Kant defines *transcendental knowledge* as a type of cognition «that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general» (B 25). This special kind of *cognition* is specifically connected to those formal *a priori* conditions, which make our representations in general possible. *Transcendental knowledge* is hence a philosophical knowledge particularly referred to *a priori* representations (such as space and time, and the categories) that provide the necessary formal conditions of knowledge (in B 401 he characterizes the investigation concerned with the possibility of experience in general as a *transcendental investigation*). We can conclude, therefore, that *transcendental affection* is not to be described as a *transcendental* condition of knowledge (insofar as *transcendental conditions* are, *stricto sensu*, *a priori* conditions). Even if Kant himself uses, on certain occasions, the word *transcendental* as a synonym of *transcendent* (cf. I. ANGELELLI, *On the Origins of Kant's 'Transcendental'*, «Kant-Studien», 63, 1972, pp. 117-122), I consider it misleading to characterize *transcendental affection* as a *transcendental condition* of objective knowledge, for it could lead to a wrong interpretation of Kant's statements regarding the *matter* of appearances. As we know, this *matter* requires experience, and this means that *affection* must be considered as a *transcendent* (*i.e.*, a non-subjective) *condition of knowledge* (not as a *transcendental* one, for – as I have emphasized – only *a priori* conditions are to be called like that). However, the *in-itself* could be characterized as a *transcendental condition* of knowledge insofar as we identified it with the *transcendental object*, interpreted as an *immanent object*, that is: as a mere *subjective object* or, more precisely, as an *a priori concept of an object in general*, which functions – according to the text of the 'A-Deduction' – as a *transcendental condition* of any empirical objectivity (cf. A 108-109). For a detailed analysis of this problem, see I. BEADE, *Consideraciones acerca del concepto kantiano de objeto transcendental*, «Tópicos», XXII, 2009, pp. 85-120.



cause or *ground* of the appearance, and to affirm at the same time that the thing-in-itself and the appearance are not *different* entities, but *one and the same entity* considered from different perspectives or points of view. Finally, I think that *affection* should not be characterized as a *transcendental* condition of objectivity, but rather as a *transcendent* (*non-subjective*) condition, a condition required for sensations to occur (and directly related, thereby, to the *matter* of appearance, in contrast to *formal* conditions, provided by our faculty of representation). Once the pre-philosophical *status* of Kant's assimilation of an existing but unknowable thing which affects us is recognized, and once the affection is interpreted as a necessary *transcendent* (but not *transcendental*) condition of objective knowledge, it seems unnecessary to provide a doctrinal explanation or justification of Kant's characterization of the affecting entity as something *in-itself*, and it is, instead, the *concept of a thing-in-itself* which still requires such justification, being, as it certainly is, a fundamental notion in Kant's theory of knowledge.

4. FINAL REMARKS

Despite of my disagreement with some of the premises involved in Onof's rejection of the *two-aspect* interpretation, I think that the author emphasizes important aspects of Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself, and his account of transcendental affection thereby represents a relevant contribution to the current debate about the doctrinal meaning of this problematic concept and about its relation to the concept of *appearance*. Although I have discussed those which I consider to be the most debatable points involved in Onof's reconstruction of *transcendental affection*, I share several important conclusions drawn by the author in connection to the problem of how to understand the *in-itself* within the framework of T1. In the first place, I agree with the author on the idea that the existence of the *in-itself* is not merely *thinkable*; as a matter of fact, the thing-in-itself was regarded by Kant not only as a regulative *idea of reason* – as suggested by many interpreters –,¹ but also as something *real*, the existence of which had to be established as a fundamental condition of objectivity.² Even if I do not share Onof's characterization of this *existence* as a *transcendental condition* of knowledge, I think he is right in emphasizing the fundamental role played by the *in-itself* in the possibility of objective knowledge.³ He is also right in pointing out that Kant's references to the existence of the thing-in-itself can only be *legitimate claims* insofar as one regards that existence as a fundamental condition of any objective representation.⁴

¹ Cf. N. RESCHER, *Kant and the Reach of Reason. Studies in Kant's Theory of Rational Systematization*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 15 ff. For another example of the interpretation of the thing-in-itself as something merely *thinkable* (but not actually *real*), see E. SCHAPER, *The Kantian Thing-in-itself as a Philosophical Fiction*, «The Philosophical Quarterly», XVI, 64, 1966, pp. 233-243.

² Cf. K. AMERIKS, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³ In connection with this issue, I agree with Onof's conclusion that «the distance of any particular representation to an object it refers to is made possible through an absolute *distance* of our receptive cognition to something which is independent of it» (CHR. ONOF, *op. cit.*, p. 220). Indeed, in order to represent objects *outside us* (i.e., objects in space) it is necessary for us to assume the existence of objects that are radically independent of our conditions of representation.

⁴ As Onof points out, we are only allowed to affirm that a thing-in-itself affects us in a transcendental context, for it is in this specific philosophical context that we must characterize the affecting entity as a thing-in-itself. The in-itself *must be thought of as existing*, for the affecting entity can only be properly described as a thing-

Kant is not violating his *critical agnostic principle* when he assumes that *things exist* (even if we can have no knowledge about them as they are *in themselves*). I have tried to show, however, that this initial assumption regarding the existence of *absolutely external things* operates at the beginning of the transcendental investigation as a sort of unproblematic *premise*, an unquestionable *starting point* of Kant's critical research that does not need to be – and certainly *cannot* be – justified.¹ Kant's statements regarding the thing-in-itself as the *affecting entity* do not need any justification, because they do not suppose any kind of knowledge about the *in-itself*: to be sure, all that Kant is asserting is that things which affect us (but can be represented by us only as they *appear*) are to be considered, within the transcendental reflection, as something *in itself*, that is, as something radically independent of any subjective condition of human knowledge. All that is at stake there is, therefore, the question of how *we must conceive* of those things within the framework of an investigation that is meant to establish a fundamental distinction between these two different (and correlative) ways of considering the experienced object.

ABSTRACT

I examine some conclusions drawn by Christian Onof in a recent paper, in which the author analyzes the problem of *transcendental affection*. Onof assumes that Kant's references to the thing-in-itself as the *cause* (or *ground*) of sensible affection reveal a commitment to a *metaphysical* assumption, that is: the existence of something real beyond the subject's mind. I suggest, on the contrary, that Kant's confidence in the existence of a non-subjective reality should not be characterized as a *metaphysical* but as a pre-philosophical assumption, that is: an unproblematic starting point for the critical investigation not demanding any particular justification. In the second place, I try to show that *affection* should not be characterized – as Onof suggests – as a transcendental condition of the constitution of objectivity, but rather as a *transcendent* condition (directly related to sensations, which provide the *matter* of appearances). Finally, I try to demonstrate that the *two-aspects* interpretation – which Onof explicitly rejects – is compatible with the conception of the thing-in-itself as the unknown *cause* or *ground* of appearances.

in-itself within a transcendental framework. The critical concept of a thing-in-itself plays this crucial role as a fundamental condition of objectivity and cannot therefore be simply dismissed, as many interpreters have tried to do (cf. P. GUYER, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 333).

¹ As I have suggested, it is the *concept* of a thing-in-itself that needs to be justified, as a notion that obviously plays a specific and fundamental role in such investigation, and I believe that Onof's analysis may well be interpreted as a satisfactory explanation in this last sense, even if his analysis is unnecessary as a justification of the initial Kantian assumption regarding the existence of *real things outside us*. The confusion between the *thing* which affects us (and cannot be represented as it is *in-itself*) and the *concept* of a thing-in-itself (which of course plays a fundamental role in the critical investigation) has caused considerable problems in the history of Kantian studies, and it certainly undermines Onof's reconstruction of *transcendental affection*.