

# Kant on Individual Noumena and the Limits of Discursive Understanding

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**ENG Abstract:** It is relatively uncontroversial among scholars that, according to Kant, we cannot have determinate theoretical cognition of noumena. In this paper I shall argue that Kant's account of the limits of human understanding allows us to draw a more radical conclusion: the very notion of an *individual* 'intelligible being' lies beyond human comprehension. I further suggest that this claim best conveys Kant's ban of a positive use of the notion of noumenon. My investigation is guided by a question: Is it possible for concepts to successfully refer to an individual object in absence of sensible intuition? Or, to put it differently, is it possible to single out one or multiple individual noumena (and not mere concepts thereof) falling under a certain concept? I shall argue that, while we cannot exclude this possibility, we cannot comprehend (and thus admit) it either. My hope in this paper is thus to shed further light on Kant's stance towards noumena.

**Keywords:** noumena, individual, discursivity, idealism.

**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Thoroughgoing Determination. 2. Criteria for Objective Reference and Numerical Distinctness. 3. Intellectual Intuition. 4. The Positive Use of the Notion of 'Noumenon'. Abbreviations of Kant's Works. References.

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## Introduction

What would it mean for a non-sensible entity to be an individual, distinct from other such entities? In abstraction from sensible conditions, what kind of relationship might obtain between concepts and individual beings? Ultimately, what is (or would be) a non-sensible being? In the present article, my aim is to show that, due to the limits which according to Kant characterize our discursive understanding, there is little to no room for making sense of expressions such as 'intelligible being', 'noumenon' or, more in general, 'non-sensible being'. In fact, our discursive understanding is such that not only theoretical cognition is tied to sensibility, but also, more radically, that our very comprehension of what individuality and numerical distinctness amounts to does not extend beyond the spatiotemporal domain. When dealing with the concept of a supposed non-sensible being (e.g. <God> or <soul>), not only we cannot point to a concrete individual falling under such concept: we do not even comprehend whether and how objective reference is supposed to work in the first place in complete abstraction from sensible conditions.

My overall argument goes as follows. When assessing possible criteria for objective reference and individuation in absence of sensibility, it is worth taking into consideration a seemingly promising model, namely that of complete conceptual determination. Hence, section 1 discusses Kant's Principle of Thoroughgoing Determination in light of his characterization of concepts as being intrinsically general. A first negative result is then established to the effect that the existence of an individual intelligible being would not follow from the hypothetical complete determination of its concept. In section 2, I further suggest that thoroughgoing determination also plays no constitutive role in Kant's general positive account of objective reference and numerical distinctness, which is crucially dependent upon spatial location instead. Since the model of a thoroughly determined concept cannot enrich our comprehension of what an intelligible being could be, section 3 considers a notion that is introduced precisely to provide such enrichment: the notion of 'intellectual intuition'. However, while the latter is a useful, hypothetical, ad hoc model of non-sensible givenness, we are still left with no criteria for making sense of numerical distinctness among noumena. In section 4, I show that these results account for Kant's ban of the positive use of the notion of noumenon, and that the claim that we are at least able to 'think' noumena must be qualified accordingly.

Overall, although the existence of a non-sensible domain cannot be excluded<sup>1</sup>, from the analysis undertaken in this paper it shall emerge how entertaining thoughts about non-sensible individuals is even more problematic for our discursive understanding than what Kant's scholars are usually willing to acknowledge – a conclusion that has far-reaching consequences for the correct interpretation of Kant's views on non-sensible reality and therefore of transcendental idealism.

## 1. Thoroughgoing Determination

In order to account for the limits<sup>2</sup> faced by discursive understanding when attempting to make sense of individual non-sensible beings, it is important to examine more closely some crucial features of such discursivity.

The discursivity of human understanding is an essential feature of Kant's epistemology. In the *Jäsche Logic*, this feature is described as follows: «From the side of the understanding, human cognition is *discursive*, i.e., it takes place through representations which take as the ground of cognition that which is common to many things, hence through *marks* as such» (JL 9: 58)<sup>3</sup>. Kant then goes on to add that «[e]very mark may be considered from two sides: *First*, as a representation in itself». For instance, the concept <personal computer> can be considered in its specificity, as we readily grasp what it means. A personal computer is something that has specific features, certain predicates contained *in* its concept which make it distinguishable from similar type of objects. However, a mark must be considered also from another standpoint: «*Second*, as belonging, as a partial concept, to the whole representation of a thing, and thereby as ground of cognition of this thing itself» (JL 9: 58). In this second sense, a concept is a genus and is thus broader than other concepts standing *under* it. For example, the predicates included in <personal computer> are in turn concepts as well, which however are broader than that of <personal computer>: a personal computer is a solid, electronic, interactable physical object and so on. Precisely because of their generality, broader concepts can be used as the ground for cognition of the narrower ones. Kant's famous example is the empirical judgement 'all bodies are divisible': the concept <divisible> is broader than that of <body>, and because of that the former can be ascribed to the latter to generate empirical cognition. Yet it is significant that the very concept of <personal computer> is itself a genus that has many concepts under it, e.g. <laptop> or <desktop>, that has this or that specific operating system, brand, model and so on.

The two ways of considering a mark or concept are not mutually exclusive, but rather two sides that belong to every concept. However, generality is the most distinctive aspect of concepts. This is clear, for instance, from Kant's description of the process of empirical concept formation. That process in fact involves the stages of *comparison* among various representations, *reflection* on their similarities, and *abstraction* of a common trait, i.e. a concept<sup>4</sup>. More broadly, any concept is a representation produced by our spontaneous faculty for thinking, i.e. the understanding, and the «understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them» (A68/B93). The result is that, while it is certainly possible to consider concepts as relatively enclosed representations, they are essentially «predicates of possible judgments» (A69/B94). Every concept is a general mark which is common to many things, and precisely because of that it can be used in judgements as a predicate for other concepts under it.

Now, a first problem arises for human discursivity. We said that concepts are structurally general, that is, they are marks which are common to more than one thing; and cognition is expressed in judgements, where a subject is determined by means of a concept that serves as the predicate. If this is so, we are then faced with the following question: How is it possible to achieve a complete cognition of a thing in its qualitative particularity? This question is implicit in the chapter of the Transcendental Dialectic on the Ideal of Pure Reason. While the ultimate goal of the chapter is to critically assess the classical arguments for God's existence, in the first and especially in the second section can be found obscure but valuable claims concerning the nature of human discursivity.

Kant begins Section Two by stating the so-called «principle of determinability» (PD), which is a merely logical principle resting on the principle of contradiction: «Every *concept*, in regard to what is not contained in it, is indeterminate, and stands under the principle of *determinability*: that of *every two* contradictorily opposed predicates only one can apply to it» (A571/B599). If I consider a pair of contradictory predicates which have not yet been included in a concept, it is possible to add only one of them to the content of the latter, which becomes thus more determined. This can be done at any moment for any pair of contradictorily opposed predicates taken into consideration, which means that a concept can always be further determined.

1 On this broader issue, see Zanette de Araujo (forthcoming). There I argue that the existence of non-sensible reality as a whole is assumed by Kant, and that such assumption is entailed in his views on affection and the origin of experience.

2 A brief remark on my usage of the term 'limits' here and in the title. In §57 of the *Prolegomena*, Kant submits the distinction between limits (*Schranke*) and boundaries (*Grenze*). Limits «are mere negations that affect a magnitude insofar as it does not possess absolute completeness» (4: 352); boundaries, in contrast, presuppose something lying outside of them. In his analysis of this distinction, Howard (2022) stresses that «[s]ensibility and the *empirical* understanding, for us mere humans, have limits and not boundaries»; instead, «*pure* understanding, however, like reason, has a boundary, because it has two distinct objects: it can employ the categories not only in cognition but also in thought» (Howard 2022, p. 9). Things are however blurrier than that. I talk here about 'limits' of the understanding, since the possibility of setting a boundary between cognitions and mere thoughts of pure understanding is first made necessary by the intrinsic limits of human understanding in general, which, for instance, can neither itself intuit, nor does it know how to single out an actual object in absence of intuition.

3 Similarly, Kant writes in the *Critique* that concepts are related to objects only mediately, «by means of a mark [*vermittelt eines Merkmals*], which can be common to several things» (A320/B377).

4 See JL 9: 94-5. I will leave aside here the complex issue of how exactly *pure* concepts are arrived at.

However, a concept is always indeterminate with respect to those infinite predicates<sup>5</sup> that have not yet been considered with respect to it. All this is not per se problematic if the subject to be determined is in turn a concept, and thus general – and in fact PD concerns «[e]very concept».

However, a different challenge is presented by the fact that a finite set of general marks cannot amount to the complete cognition of a particular *thing*. In order to solve this problem, Kant introduces, right after the brief mention of the PD, the principle of thoroughgoing determination (PTD)<sup>6</sup>. This second principle is not merely logical but transcendental, and has more complex implications. It states: «among *all possible* predicates of *things*, insofar as they are compared with their opposites, one must apply to it» (A571-2/B599-600). First of all, the PTD does not just concern the relation of the subject with *any* given pair of contradictory predicates that can be taken into consideration at a certain moment. It rather involves *all possible* predicates. Secondly, unlike in the previous principle, the subject of predication involved here are *things* and not mere concepts. Now, it is arguably complicated to follow Kant's shift from the logical talk of 'concepts' in the formulation of the PD to the ontological talk of 'things' in the PTD, while continuing to speak in both cases of predicates of judgements. Trying to make order, though, the PTD can be understood as the claim that the cognition of a thing as qualitative distinct from others entails the reference to – paraphrasing La Rocca (1999)<sup>7</sup> – an *x* with regard to which the attribution of a predicate or its opposite is already decided in advance. Seen from the conceptual perspective, it can also be said that, if such cognition were to obtain, the thing's qualitative determinacy would be captured by a completely determined concept.

Kant's next step is noting that the PTD, which is synthetic and not analytic, presupposes, as an a priori condition of any thing whatsoever, the sum of all possible predicates. The fact that, in light of the PTD, things must already be assumed as completely determined before our judgements about it implies that the totality of predicates is also given as «a transcendental substratum, which contains as it were the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken» (A575/B603). It is clear, however, that this totality could not be accessible as such to us. Furthermore, the process of determination of a thing in judgement with respect to the infinite possible predicates is also impossible for us to complete. The totality of possible predicates is enclosed in Kant's notion of an «All of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)» (A575-6/B603-4), which is at the same time the abstract thought of a completely determined concept which contains, for every pair of contradictory predicates, «that which belongs absolutely to being» (A576/B604), i.e. it contains all positive reality<sup>8</sup>. However, this is a mere idea of reason, or rather, more precisely an *ideal*, which Kant describes as an idea «*in individuo*» (A568/B596)<sup>9</sup>. Kant's attempt to converge the notion of a thoroughly determined concept and the thought of an all of reality is not easy to follow, and the same can be said about the subsequent hypostatization of the ideal in the *ens realissimum*, which in turn leads him further to the refutation of the so called ontological argument. In the present context, however, I am only concerned with the characterization of human discursivity that emerges from the text.

What has been said so far is summarized by the following passage:

in order to cognize a thing completely one has to cognize everything possible and determine the thing through it, whether affirmatively or negatively. Thoroughgoing determination is consequently a concept that we can never exhibit *in concreto* in its totality, and thus it is grounded on an idea which has its seat solely in reason, which prescribes to the understanding the rule of its complete use (A573/B601).

The ideal is not descriptive of reality, but rather merely apt to a regulative use by reason in directing the activity of the understanding, namely the activity of cognition through conceptual determination in judgement. The ideal serves as «*prototypon*», says Kant, of which all other things are to be considered as «defective copies (*ectypa*)» (A578/B606). For reason makes a regulative use of the ideal both as the material condition of all objects of cognition, and as the archetype of a completely determined concept. I believe that Willaschek (2018, section 8.1.2) is right to read the PTD in light of his distinction between regulative and constitutive use of transcendental principles of reason. Making a constitutive use of a principle means taking it to be a true descriptive claim about reality; while a regulative use adopts it only as a hypothetical assumption<sup>10</sup>. Only the second use is warranted for theoretical reason. In light of the impossibility for our discursive understanding to achieve complete conceptual determination, a regulative use of the PTD, which means assuming that things already have complete ontological determinacy, is necessary in order for the understanding to progressively

5 It seems unproblematically correct for Kant that predicates are potentially infinite. In the *Vienna Logic*, for example, we read: «The series of coordinate marks can go on to infinity. E.g. Gold is heavy, extensible, refractory, does not rust, etc., etc. There is still not completeness here. For one could discover 1000 more such marks» (24: 834).

6 By claiming that the aforementioned challenge is the reason Kant introduces the PTD I am following a suggestion advanced by Guenova (2013, p. 337).

7 «[L]a condizione per pensare qualcosa come individuo *dato* è che [...] l'attribuzione di un predicato o il suo opposto [...] sia pensata riferita a un *x* rispetto alla quale è già decisa» (La Rocca 1999, pp. 190-1).

8 I will gloss over the problem of 'real repugnance' between some of the predicates which, as Kant writes, belong «absolutely to being». See Willaschek (2018, pp. 227-8) for a brief discussion of the issue with respect to the Ideal, and Chignell (2010) for an overview on real repugnance in Kant.

9 The sage, for example, is said to be an ideal of virtue (A569/B597).

10 Needless to say, there is much disagreement among scholars on what the regulative use of ideas and principles of reason amounts to be. To give one example, some interpreters (e.g. Chignell 2007, Stang 2016 and Schafer 2023) would rather speak here of 'theoretical' or 'doctrinal' *belief* in the validity of those principles. I remain neutral on whether such mode of 'assent' (or '*Fürwahrhalten*', as Kant calls it in Section Three of the Canon of Pure Reason) is as crucial here and elsewhere as some believe.

increase its cognition of particular beings by means of general concepts<sup>11</sup>. The same can be applied to the related assumption that the totality of predicates is indeed given as well.

The problem of complete determination can be considered from a different but related perspective in Kant's discussion of the principle of *specification* in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic. As we learn there, in order for reason to pursue the goal of systematizing empirical cognitions, concepts can, and indeed must be arranged in a hierarchical structure of genus and species. Together with the principles of homogeneity and continuity, the principle of specification serves as guide in the development of a system<sup>12</sup>. This law prescribes reason to explore the manifoldness and variety of things belonging to the same genus. While our present system of knowledge arbitrarily stops somewhere on both sides of the chain of genera and species, it must always be possible at any given moment to go on and discover/define a new species (as well as a new genus). Hence no species can ever be found that it is not in turn a genus, i.e. no concept that could not be a possible predicate in a judgement. As Kant writes:

every *genus* requires different *species*, and these *subspecies* [...], reason demands in its entire extension that no species be regarded as in itself the lowest; for since each species is always a concept that contains within itself only what is common to different things, this concept cannot be thoroughly determined, hence it cannot be related to an individual, consequently, it must at every time contain other concepts, i.e., subspecies, under itself (A655-6/B683-4).

'No species can be the lowest' means that concepts are always general and indeterminate with respect to some possible predicates. Reason must assume that no concept's content is ever completely determined. The descent into the chain of genera and species by means of an increasing specification is therefore a never-ending path to complete determination, which in fact fosters the continuous enrichment of our system.

Now, in order to see how the just discussed account of human discursivity relates to our comprehension of the notion of 'noumenon', I would like to focus on the following questions. Let us suppose that our understanding were able to form a thoroughly determined concept: (1) Would the formation of such concept already entail the actuality of an object that instantiates it? (2) Would it be possible for more than *one* object to fall under the same thoroughly determined concept? The two previous questions are especially meaningful here in light of a third one: (3) Can we meaningfully describe individual noumena, i.e. beings of the understanding, as nothing but thoroughly determined concepts? The latter question is what ultimately matters the most for us here, but before an answer can be provided, further considerations are needed.

Starting from question (1), I believe the answer is negative. We know that for Kant actuality does not follow from the concept of *<ens realissimum>*, and since the latter would be a thoroughly determined concept, it results that actuality does not necessarily follow from thoroughly determined concepts. One might reply here that there is a difference between the higher order concept of a *<thoroughly determined concept>*, and the very concept itself that happens to be thoroughly determined. In the same way, we can distinguish between the concept of a *<contradictory concept>*, which is not itself contradictory, and a concept which instead *is* contradictory. One could then argue that, while actuality does not follow from our concept of a *<thoroughly determined concept>*, it may follow from a concept that we were actually capable of thoroughly determining. Yet this distinction does not seem to be part of Kant's strategy here. For if he had that in mind, in his attack at the 'ontological proof' Kant would have appealed to the aforementioned distinction in order to deny that the rationalist really does have the concept *<ens realissimum>* from which to derive the existence of God. Kant's famous point is rather that existence is not a predicate; that a concept remains the same regardless of whether an existing being instantiates it or not. Therefore, it seems safe to say that the view expressed by Kant here is that, even in the case of a thoroughly determined concept, logical possibility (i.e. the lack of internal contradiction) is not sufficient to prove the real possibility of a being that instantiates such concept (let alone its actuality)<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, in the specific case of the *ens realissimum*, it is clear that Kant is not committed to its actuality (at least not on theoretical, objective grounds), for all reason needs is to make a regulative use of this idea: «reason does not presuppose the existence of a being conforming to the ideal, but only the idea of such a being, in order to derive from an unconditioned totality of thoroughgoing determination the conditioned totality, i.e., that of the limited» (A577-8/B605-6; see also e.g. *Ref.* 5759, 18: 346). Let us now switch to the two remaining questions.

11 Guenova suggests that the role of PTD is to legitimize our attempt to cognize by means of general concepts, in the sense that this principle entails that «we have the right to» «use our current general empirical concepts in place of the complete concept of the object» «because our general empirical concepts would form part of the content of the complete concept of the object» (Guenova 2013, p. 342).

12 I will not engage here in detail with the problematic distinction introduced by Kant between a logical and a transcendental version of these principles. A groundbreaking account of the distinction between logical and transcendental principles is developed by Grier (2001). For a very recent, but interpretatively more pessimistic discussion of this problem in relation to the case here at issue, see Proops (2021, ch. 17). However, in this case as well I am sympathetic to Willaschek's account (2018, in particular ch. 4 and section 8.2.1), which provides an extremely detailed account of the differences between logical principles, the already mentioned regulative (and thus legitimate) use of transcendental principles and finally a constitutive (and therefore unwarranted) use of the latter. In sum, to the extent that it is relevant for the present context, it suffices to note that, while the logical principle of specification concerns concepts as such, the transcendental version of this principle is a maxim that assumes that further subspecies are given as corresponding objects in nature. Reason falls then into error when it makes a constitutive rather than a regulative use of this maxim.

13 Kant explains that something is logically possible if «the concept (thought) is possible» (B302-3), whereas establishing its real possibility means being able to refer such concept to a given object (cf. BXXVIn). For an extensive account of this crucial distinction, see Stang (2016).



## 2. Criteria for Objective Reference and Numerical Distinctness

We have just seen how for Kant the thought of a completely determined thing is an ideal which reason must assume in a regulative fashion when seeking for an increasing conceptual enrichment in the attempt of accounting for the inexhaustible variety presented to us by the senses. We must thus assume, although merely regulatively, that reality is graspable by means of infinite conceptual determination. Furthermore, this demand is in some sense counterbalanced by the principle of specification in the Appendix, according to which we must always assume that a further species can always be discovered, i.e. that there are no lower species. As we have seen, these and other considerations suggest a negative answer to (1): complete determination of a concept would not entail the actuality of a corresponding object. Issue (2) is more complex: Would it be possible for *multiple* objects to fall under the *same* thoroughly determined concept? Answering this question requires us to discuss the general conditions that allows us to distinguish between the multiple objects that may fall under a concept.

It is useful to briefly contrast Kant's and Leibniz's views on these issues<sup>14</sup>. Although it is a complex matter of interpretation<sup>15</sup>, it can be said that for Leibniz those concepts which are not abstract and thus correspond directly to an individual substance are in principle completely determined<sup>16</sup>. While our finite mind is not able to achieve complete conceptual determination, we know that God instead is able to do that. Indeed, in order to create the best of all possible worlds, God examines the complete concept of things and decide which ones to actualize. Hence, despite our epistemological constraints, we know that the world is constituted by substances which find perfect correspondence in the thoroughly determined concepts that God is able to think. The role of unreachable *prototypen* played by the complete concept is here derived from our knowledge of an inner structure of reality – i.e. from the monadology – plus that of God's faculties. It seems correct to claim, as Friebe (2022) does, that for Leibniz a concept (or at least some concepts) *analytically* entails its objective referent. Things are certainly made more complicated by the fact, among others, that God is responsible for actualizing certain concepts and not others. For this implies some kind of hiatus between the concept and its actuality as a substance. Without digging too deep into Leibniz's own complex theoretical framework, though, it is fair enough to maintain that, for him, by means of conceptual analysis it should be possible to reach a *unique* individual, which is thereby qualitatively distinct from any other being. A unique individual is completely exhausted by its thoroughly determined concept. Therefore, rephrasing the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, two different objects cannot fall under the same thoroughly determined concept. In this way, numerical distinction and objective reference are established by means of pure understanding alone.

For Kant things stand quite differently. Kant's individual object is not unique. As he argues in the Amphiboly, two individuals, as appearances, may have the exact same conceptual properties. They would nonetheless be numerically distinct in case they occupy two different regions of *space* (at the same time). Location in space is then the criterion for individuation, and is therefore required if our discursive understanding is to apply a concept to a real object.

For example, the concept <table> can have two or many more objective referents in space. The two objects in front of me can perfectly be two instances of the concept <table>, independently of the generality of the latter – and this of course in a completely different sense from that in which two subspecies can be said to instantiate their common genus. Therefore, while it is possible to search for a more determined concept that better expresses the particularity of a certain object, this is *not* required for us to be able to apply a concept (e.g. <table>) to an individual, and furthermore does not prevent us from picking out more than one spatiotemporally given individual exemplifying the same concept. For instance, each of these two tables in front of me is not, and need not be the unique referent of the concept <table>.

Now, while this makes it clear that thoroughgoing determination is not *necessary* for objective reference, the key question is whether a thoroughly determined concept is *sufficient* to single out one individual object. The question is extremely relevant, for if this were in principle possible then it would also be possible to make sense through pure understanding alone of what it means to be an individual. That is, an individual would be definable as an object which corresponds to a thoroughly determined concept. A univocal answer to this interpretative issue can hardly be given once and for all for reasons I will discuss in a moment, but I contend that the most plausible answer is that thoroughgoing determination is *not* sufficient to single out one individual object. Or, to put it differently, that yes, it is in principle possible for multiple objects to fall under the same thoroughly determined concept.

In the *WRP* essay, Kant effectively writes that it «is a contradiction to think, by mere concepts of the understanding, of two things as external to one another [...]; *it is always merely one and the same thing thought twice over (numerically one)*» (20: 280, italics mine). The point is that, as far as we can tell, spatial location is the only criterion we know for numerical (and not qualitative) distinctness<sup>17</sup>. Consequently, it would be already misleading to ask whether in thought alone a concept objectively refers to only one or rather more individuals. This applies equally to a general concept as well as to a (hypothetical) thoroughly determined one, and I see

14 In fact, that is what Kant himself does in the Amphiboly chapter. For a more detailed discussion of the argument presented by Kant in the Amphiboly, see Zanette de Araujo (2023).

15 See for example Di Bella (2013) for a distinction between two different positions, that can be found in Leibniz's texts, concerning the completeness of concepts.

16 See, for example, Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §8.

17 This, again, is pointed out clearly by Friebe (2022).

no reason why in principle a complete concept could not have two objective referents occupying different regions of space at the same time.

Now, it is easy to object that, if among the predicates of a complete concept of an individual substance we also count its relational properties, which include its location in space over time, then such concept would indeed refer univocally to one individual, and the principle of the identity of indiscernibles would prove to be true. This may in fact be exactly Leibniz's reply. Stefano Di Bella notes that, according to one of the two strands about complete concepts that can be detected in Leibniz, such kind of concept is

thought of on the model of concrete individuals, where historical and relational predicates come to the fore, so that belonging to a world becomes a fundamental condition for the possibility of individual concepts. [...] [This way of considering complete concepts] prefigures, in a sense, the Kantian idea of complete determination of empirical objects through their location within the whole of experience. This, admittedly, in a pre-critical vein [...] (Di Bella 2013, p. 131).

The crucial disagreement turns then on whether Kant is right or not to claim against Leibniz that space and time are originally pure intuition, and thus that spatio-temporal location is irreducible to concepts alone. Since, however, engaging in a full comparison of the views of the two philosophers and establishing which one is superior is beyond my scope, I shall not discuss the matter further.

We just saw that spatial location is a sufficient criterion for numerical distinctness. I find it plausible that for Kant, although this sensible criterion for identity and multiplicity in general need not necessarily be the only possible one, it is nevertheless *the only criterion we are aware of*. As I anticipated, though, the answer here suggested to question (2) is not immune to doubt on a textual basis, since, unfortunately, the relevant texts are too ambiguous on the matter. We can start quoting the following passage from the *Ideal* chapter:

the concept of an *ens realissimum* is the concept of an individual being [*der Begriff eines einzelnen Wesens*], because of all possible opposed predicates, one, namely that which belongs absolutely to being, is encountered in its determination (A576/B604).

The most immediate reading of the passage would have Kant claiming precisely what I am opposing here, namely that complete determination of a concept is sufficient to establish the singularity of its (possible) referent. However, the picture gets more complex and in fact confused if we consider some *Reflexionen* alongside with some passages from the *Lectures on Logic*.

In the latter, Kant shows an ambiguous attitude towards the term «*conceptus singularis*». I quote a passage from the 1770's *Blomberg Logic*, for it is interesting to compare what we find here with claims that appear in later lecture transcriptions:

All *conceptus* are either

- A. *conceptus singulares* or
- B. *conceptus communes*.

In the former I think only one thing, but through the latter I go further, namely, I think that which is common to many things.

Thus the former concepts consider something individual. Thus, e.g., Rome, Bucephalus, etc. This is a *conceptus singularis*. [...] The representations of immediate experience are all *conceptus singulares*, for they represent individual things. Mediate concepts of experience, however, which are abstracted from many experiences, are *conceptus communes*; so, too, are all our concepts of reason. The concept of God, to be sure, only belongs to one being, to which alone it is to be ascribed, but without settling whether only one God is possible or more, one can make out several concepts of God. But afterwards a proof must be added that the concept of God is a *conceptus singularis* (24: 257).

The end of the passage may seem to support the just mentioned immediate reading of the *Ideal* (A575/B604): <God> is a *conceptus singularis*, for it «only belongs to one being, to which alone it is to be ascribed». Less clear is what comes afterwards, for we read that it is not settled «whether only one God is possible or more» and that a proof must still be added «that the concept of God is a *conceptus singularis*»<sup>18</sup>. Two things are noteworthy here about the way Kant describes a '*conceptus singularis*'.

First of all, Kant mentions «Rome» and «Bucephalus», i.e. proper names, as examples of singular concepts. Yet when confronted with later lecture transcripts this example turns out to be problematic. At *DWL* 24: 756 we learn that besides the difference between species and genera there is a *differentia numerica*, which is expressed through singular concepts that, «[a]mong men we indicate them by *nomina propria*». However, just a couple of pages earlier we explicitly read that «Socrates is not a *conceptus*» (24: 754). Secondly, in the quoted passage from the *Blomberg Logic* Kant pairs singular concepts with «representations of immediate experience». The reader will correctly notice that such description fits intuitions better than concepts. Indeed, in later transcriptions from the critical period we read that intuition is a «*singular [einzelne] representation (repraesentatio singularis)*» (*JL* 9: 91; for similar claims, see also *VL* 24: 904, *DW* 24: 754, 24: 756). More than that, Kant explicitly characterizes the opposition between intuition and concepts as one between singular and universal representations (e.g. *VL* 24: 805), and he goes as far as to claim that «one must not say *conceptus*

18 The concept of God or the notion of *ens realissimum* is described as a *conceptus singularis* in other occasions, e.g. *Refl.* 4253 (17: 483), 5759 (18: 346), and 5776 (18: 351-2). It is worth mentioning, however, that in the latter note Kant is explicitly commenting a passage from Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* (§114).

*communis*, because this would be a tautology, because every *conceptus* is also *communis*» (VL 24: 905; cf. JL 9: 91); or that «if a representation is not a *repraesentatio communis*, then it is not a concept at all» (VL 24: 908). Accordingly, Kant notes that the very distinction among singular and universal concepts is misleading, since what can be in fact singular is the *use* of a concept in judgement, for instance when I apply a concept (e.g. <man>) to an individual (see VL 24: 908-9 and JL 9: 91). Despite some ambiguities, then, it emerges that for Kant a singular concept is a *contradictio in terminis*, for a proper concept can in principle be applied to multiple individuals.

It remains unclear to me what is Kant's stance in the case of the *ens realissimum*. Its peculiarity is not only that it is a case of <thoroughly determined concept>, but that it is supposedly determined always through the positive predicate among each of the infinite pair of opposites, i.e. «that which belongs absolutely to being» (A575/B604). In a note dated between 1769 and 1771, Kant seems to suggest that this is exactly the reason why this notion must be regarded as a singular concept: «the general concept of a being that has limits comprehends many things under itself, but that of the unlimited is a *conceptus singularis*» (Refl. 4253, 17: 483). It must be reiterated that this note belongs to the pre-critical period; and while <God> or the notion of *ens realissimum* is described as a *conceptus singularis* in other places as well (e.g. Refl. 5759, 18: 346 and 5776, 18: 351-2), these texts often engage explicitly with specific passages of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*, or more generally with 'rationalist' arguments. It could be argued that the passage from the Ideal section belongs to the last category as well, because it reconstructs the path that leads to the arguments for God's existence.

Further considerations could be made in the attempt to make sense of Kant's usage of the self-contradictory expression 'singular concept' and of its connection to the concept of *ens realissimum*. Without bringing the discussion too far from our focus here, we can conclude the following with regard to issue (2). Let us concede that the concept <ens realissimum> is supposed to pick out one single entity, that only one existing thing could fall under it. Yet the concept of such unlimited thing is, precisely as such, an exception in Kant's account of concepts. There is no reason to believe that, on Kant's account, even if our understanding were able to produce thoroughly determined concepts, these could only be instanced by one single existing being – unless the concept were determined just through (infinite) positive predicates as in the case of the *ens realissimum*. The most plausible answer to question (2) raised above therefore remains the following: there is no reason to exclude the possibility that more than one existent object could actually fall under the same thoroughly determined concept.

This is relevant inasmuch as we are now able to answer question (3), namely whether it is possible to describe individual noumena in terms of thoroughly determined concepts. I suggest that the correct answer is: *As far as we are able to tell: No*. Even when hypothetically stretching the model of discursive understanding in order to obtain the idea of an infinite (but actual) conceptual determination, we are not able to conceive alternative criteria for objective reference and numerical distinctness apart from those involving space and time – that is, besides those valid for phenomena but not for 'intelligible beings'. How then can we make sense of the idea of an 'intelligible being', if these are not to remain empty words?

### 3. Intellectual Intuition

I have argued that the idea of thoroughgoing determination cannot help us make sense of the notion of intelligible being. Indeed, even if complete determination of a concept were achievable, this would not thereby entail the existence of some corresponding object. The gap, as it were, between mere thought and objective reality would still persist. Moreover, a complete determination of a concept is not itself necessary nor sufficient for us to successfully refer a concept to an individual thing belonging to the sensible domain. Kant's account of concepts is thus probably one reason why he insists in characterizing the noumenon taken in the positive sense as the object of an *intellectual intuition*. It is easy to see how the possibility of an intellectual intuition is designed to overcome the limits of discursive understanding and make some sense of the notion of a 'being of pure understanding'. A hypothetical intuitive understanding would in fact have *immediate* access to its object through a spontaneous intellectual act, which amounts to saying that the gap between pure thought and objective reality is bridged *ex hypothesi*.

However, Kant firmly denies the possibility for us to perform such an act. More than that, as Kant states, «the possibility of [intellectual intuition] we cannot understand» (B307). He in fact opposes the very conception of an intuitive intellect – often equated to the divine one (see B72) – to our discursive understanding. Now, Kant mentions the idea of a non-discursive understanding in different contexts. In order to avoid further complications, though, I shall leave aside here the role it plays in other contexts, e.g. in the possibility for us to formulate teleological judgements<sup>19</sup>. I will limit myself to a few notes concerning intellectual intuition as the act through which objects are immediately given in thought. A first point made by Kant when introducing this idea in the chapter titled 'On the ground of the distinction of all objects in general into *phenomena* and *noumena*' is that we must be able to conceive the possibility in general that there could be some type of intuition that differs from the sensible one. He then identifies this alternative with the intellectual intuition:

19 For a broader discussion, see for example O'Farrell (1979), Tilliette (1995), Förster (2002). In particular, Förster has subtly distinguished the variety of capacities usually taken to converge in the multifarious notion of intellectual intuition. He has also noted how they did not have the same legacy in post-Kantian thinkers. While many of his considerations are indubitably valuable, I nonetheless agree with Quarfood's (2011) point that the unsettling oscillation in Kant's characterization of the intellectual intuition (and intuitive understanding) is itself indicative of how general is the notion of non-discursive understanding in Kant, which comes into play first and foremost for contrastive purposes only.

«But if we understand by that an *object of a non-sensible intuition*, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition» (B307)<sup>20</sup>.

Now, Förster (2002) finds it necessary to stress the difference between intellectual intuition taken as an act which produces its object on the one hand, and as a non-sensible intuition of things in themselves on the other<sup>21</sup>. However, I believe that the distinction is ultimately superfluous, since the object given to an intuitive intellect is for Kant to be characterized as being something ‘in-itself’ precisely insofar as it is the object of a productive intellect, that is, inasmuch as it is produced in the same act through which is given. In fact, in case the object be completely produced through a spontaneous act of the understanding and simultaneously given to it as well, there would be no further sense in which the object could have a constitution ‘in-itself’ apart from the way it is given/produced in (intellectual) intuition. Furthermore, a sharp distinction between a kind of intellectual intuition that produces its object and one that intuits things in themselves suggests – misleadingly, I believe – that the picture that Kant has in mind here is that of a world populated by non-sensible beings which are out there only to be intuited by some non-discursive understanding. However, the very meaning of the notion of an individual non-sensible being is problematic in the first place, and it is thus cannot presupposed by Kant when he considers the hypothesis of intellectual intuition.

The previous sections have shown that discursive understanding could never have access to an actual object without the contribution of sensible intuition – not even if it were able to actualize the infinite process of determination and achieve a thoroughly determined concept. Now, the only non-contradictory alternative that for Kant we can consistently think of is that of an intuitive intellect which could somehow be acquainted with and cognize a being of pure thought, and consequently a thing in itself. As a result, for all we know, a thing in itself could be an object for a subject only as the product of a hypothetical act of intellectual intuition. However, my main point here is that, whereas intellectual intuition is conceived as a model for non-sensible givenness, a criterion to establish numerical distinction among noumena is nonetheless still lacking. For how could we establish sameness or distinctness of the content of two acts of intellectual intuition?

Stang (2022) makes two related points on that regard<sup>22</sup>. First, he speculates that the identity among intelligible objects could be traced back to the identity of cognitive acts of intellectual intuition – although the problem, as he notes, would then be pushed back to that of finding a criterion of identity among such acts (cf. p. 313). That said, this model in general is admittedly no more than speculation, and yet, insists Stang, his aim was «merely to point out that this is a topic about which we can entertain logically consistent thoughts and examine their logical relations, even though none of our thoughts rise to the level of cognition, much less of knowledge» (p. 314). These remarks do not represent a challenge for my account, because we are left where we started: we ourselves are not aware of any criterion individuation outside the sensible domain; more than that, on theoretical grounds alone, we cannot even tell if any such criterion exists or not. Stang also shows that Kant himself, in particular in his lectures on rational theology, suggests the following model of «[d]ivine intuitive cognition of objects»: it «appears to be a case of what is now known as “maker’s knowledge”: a non-passive or non-sensible cognition of an object as being created by that very condition itself» (Stang 2022, p. 325). Stang argues as well that something very similar is at work for us in the consciousness of my freedom, which «is the ground of the moral law bidding me» (Stang 2022, p. 329). Regardless of this last issue, which I will not engage here, it must be noted that the model of ‘maker’s knowledge’, even if it were correct, would not by itself provide a *criterion* for identity and sameness among noumena. For it means only that, by producing the object, the subject *would just happen to know immediately* whether this specific object is the same thing as the product of another cognitive act or not. Therefore, this model is not particularly useful for us to enrich *our* comprehension of the general notion of ‘intelligible being’.

This brings us to a second point stressed by Stang. On moral grounds, we must admit that there are criteria for numerical distinctness in the noumenal realm. Because our moral belief in the highest good entails that God must «be able to cognize identity and difference *among* noumenal wills» (p. 314). While correct, this is not more scandalous – or perhaps, depending on one’s view: it is just as scandalous as – Kant’s claim that our awareness of the moral law compels us in complex ways to believe in the actuality of specific supersensible entities. Accounting and evaluating Kant’s move is a complex issue that cannot be addressed here. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the enterprise of discussing Kant’s notion of noumenon without accepting his attempt to solve metaphysical problems on practical grounds, or simply the attempt of starting from what could be called his ‘theoretical metaphysics’, is interpretatively useful and worth undertaking from a philosophical standpoint.

From such perspective then, it can be concluded that, on Kant’s view, we are left with very little when trying to achieve some understanding of what it means for something to be a singular ‘intelligible being’: it makes no sense in relation to our discursive understanding and, while not contradictory, it is nonetheless barely comprehensible when problematically characterized as the object of an intellectual intuition.

20 One may wonder whether such equation is necessary. In fact, Kant himself alludes to the possibility of alternative kinds of intuition which are not spatiotemporal nor intellectual (most explicitly at B72). That said, Kant may have found it easier and more fruitful to focus on the traditional paradigm of a divine intellect, i.e. one in which there is no difference between possibility and actuality, for the object is produced by the very act of thinking it.

21 See also Haag (2015), who draws heavily on Förster’s account.

22 In the following, I will not argue against Stang, but merely show that the remarks he makes are not necessarily incompatible with mine, and thus do not threaten the claim I am defending here.



#### 4. The Positive Use of the Notion of 'Noumenon'

We are now in a better position to discuss Kant's distinction between a positive and a negative use of the concept of noumenon. The concept of 'noumenon', of a non-sensible being, is empty in the Kantian sense that no sensible intuition – which is the only possible intuition for beings like us – corresponds to it. More precisely, in his table of «Nothing» at the end of the *Transcendental Analytic* (A290-2/B346-9) Kant reckons «noumena» as a case of «*ens rationis*», i.e. an «[e]mpty concept without object», «which cannot be counted among the possibilities although they must not on that ground be asserted to be impossible»<sup>23</sup>. Now, as long as we consider the thought of something «*insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*», that is, precisely as an empty concept for which no intuition can be presented, then we have «a noumenon in the negative sense» (B307)<sup>24</sup>. Kant distinguishes this use from a positive one. In the same passage, indeed, he continues:

if we understand by that an *object of a non-sensible intuition*, then we assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be the noumenon in a *positive* sense (B307).

Yet accounting for this distinction is not so straightforward, since the passages that Kant presents us are perplexing in some respects. For instance, in the Remark to the Amphiboly, Kant mentions «objects of a non-sensible intuition» by calling them «noumena in this merely negative sense», which «must of course be allowed» (A286/B342). The 'object of a non-sensible intuition' is thus designated first as noumenon in the «*positive* sense» (B307), but later as noumenon in the «*negative* sense» (A286/B342). Therefore, if we read these passages, as natural, as employing the notion of 'object of a non-sensible intuition' to define what a 'noumenon taken in the positive' (B307) or 'negative sense' (A286/B342) is, then we must conclude that they represent a textual contradiction. More in general, though, the main problem of Kant's account is the lack of clarity on whether a *positive* use of the notion of noumenon is made already by simply considering the logical possibility of an object of intellectual intuition, as B307 would appear to suggest, or rather only in case we hold that hypothesis as a real possibility. I submit that the core of Kant's distinction is best read in the latter way. When Kant emphatically claims at B307 that «we cannot understand» the «possibility» of an intellectual intuition, he must have had in mind here the latter's *real* «possibility». For if the former option proved to be correct, then, given that Kant often seems to allow us to at least entertain the logical possibility of intellectual intuition, a positive use would turn out to be admissible after all.

Hence my view is that Kant is not presenting us with two types of entities<sup>25</sup>. As Allais correctly puts it, «the distinction between a positive and a negative conception of noumena is not an attempt to sort noumena into kinds» (Allais, 2015, p. 61 fn. 3), but rather, as I see it, to define two ways of using the same concept, of which only one is warranted, i.e. the negative use<sup>26</sup>. The best way to make sense of Kant's ban of a positive use of 'noumenon', as I shall call it, is therefore by equating it to the following claim:

**Kant's ban of a positive use of <noumenon>:** A positive and thus unwarranted use of the notion of noumenon is made only when, on theoretical objective grounds, I claim to have established (or be able to establish) that a certain concept has one or more 'intelligible beings' as its objective referent(s).

A brief, perhaps trivial clarification is in order here. If we claim to *know* (on theoretical grounds) that a noumenon, i.e. a certain non-sensible, individual object falling under a certain concept (e.g. <soul>) is the object of an actual act of intellectual intuition (e.g. God's), we would thus be making a positive, i.e. unwarranted use of the notion of noumenon. My point is that one should not object here that the supposed intuitive intellect (e.g. God) would not employ concepts in his cognitive act, and thus would not describe what is at work in terms of 'an individual falling under a concept', or 'a concept having an actual referent' – an expression that I have included in my description of what making a positive use of <noumenon> amounts to. For we would be the ones making a positive use of <noumenon>, inasmuch as we would be claiming that a concept of *ours* has an existing objective referent, namely, in the previous example, a noumenal soul supposedly intuited by God.

23 We are at least able to establish the logical possibility of a certain concept of *ens rationis* (e.g. of the concept of God): the logically possible concept of an *ens rationis* is therefore a *logical something*, and thus *not* nothing at all. Nevertheless, we are not in a position to prove its real possibility. In sum, the concept of an *ens rationis* is the concept of a logically possible something whose real possibility, however, we are not able to establish due to its non-sensible nature – although it «must not on that ground be asserted to be impossible». For an insightful analysis of the table of nothing in light of Kant's theory of modality, see Stang (2016, section 6.6).

24 On the negative use of the notion of noumenon Kant also famously writes: «The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a *boundary concept*, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use. But it is nevertheless not invented arbitrarily, but is rather connected with the limitation of sensibility, yet without being able to posit anything positive outside of the domain of the latter» (A255/B310-1).

25 Among others, Messina (2020), Jauernig (2021) and Stang (2021), for example, submit what I think are defensible readings of that distinction as one among different types of objects, namely positive noumena and negative noumena. Some authors accordingly read Kant as committed to the existence of the latter, while at the same time remaining at least agnostic towards the former. However, I find it crucial that there is no explicit and decisive textual evidence that justifies taking Kant to be committed to such distinction as one about two varieties of noumena. In general, it can hardly be said that this terminology is consolidated in Kant's works. Quite the opposite, it appears in just a handful of passages which, on top of that, present the inconsistencies discussed above. In light of that, I take my proposal to be preferable because it is at least in a better position to account for the exact import of Kant's ban of a positive use of the notion of 'noumenon'.

26 That notwithstanding, I believe that Allais' account of noumena is ultimately mistaken as she somehow makes a positive use of the notion of noumenon (see Zanette de Araujo 2023).

We can thus count at least these two ways of making a positive use of <noumenon>. The first is by purporting our discursive understanding to have access to intelligible beings. This contradicts the most basic tenets of the *Critique*. The second is by claiming that some intelligible being is an actual or really possible object of some act of intellectual intuition. Since we cannot prove the real possibility (let alone actuality) of intellectual intuition, such use of the notion of noumenon is unwarranted as well.

A similar reasoning is introduced by Jauernig (2021), albeit against a crucially different background. First of all, in Chapter 6 of her book she reconfigures the often employed terminology of 'negative and positive noumenon' by construing these in terms of «Kantian things in themselves» and «Leibniz-Wolffian things in themselves» respectively. On her view, of course, only the latter are target of Kant's repeated attacks. Now, in response to some exegetical difficulties, but admittedly in contrast to B307, she additionally argues that a positive noumenon (i.e. a Leibniz-Wolffian thing in itself) should be first and foremost defined as «an object that can be cognized by a pure understanding alone» (Jauernig 2021, p. 340 fn. 70). She then suggests that Kant has in fact two notions of pure understanding in mind, and, accordingly, two conceptions of a positive noumenon:

First, there is the conception of a noumenon as an object that can be cognized by our pure understanding alone. Second, there is the conception of a noumenon as an object that can be cognized by an intuitive intellect alone, that is, as an object of a non-sensible or intellectual intuition. The negative conception of a noumenon is the conception of an object that is not an object of our sensible intuition. Based on the results of the Transcendental Analytic, we know that noumena in the first positive sense are impossible. By contrast, we have no reason to declare noumena in the second positive sense as impossible (Jauernig 2021, p. 341 fn. 71).

In sum, Jauernig identifies three kind of objects, two of which are not (namely the object of pure understanding alone) or may not be (namely the object of an intuitive intellect) really possible. By contrast, I believe that the picture I have presented is overall smoother and more representative of the struggles that, on Kant's view, we must deal with when entertaining thoughts about the supersensible. I suggested that there is just one core notion of noumenon, but alternative ways of making a positive, i.e. unwarranted use of it. To be sure, construing a noumenon as the object of intellectual intuition is not by itself unwarranted if the latter is taken to be no more than a logical possibility. In this case we would be sticking to a merely negative use of the notion of noumenon. Indeed, as I have argued, considering that we are aware of no criteria for numeric distinction within a non-sensible realm, Kant takes that construal to be useful as it is our best, and yet still deeply insufficient attempt to make some sense of something like an individual non-sensible being.

At this point, one may wonder whether Kant's ban of the positive use of the notion of noumenon entails that our very ability to *think* noumena is compromised. In order to shed some light on this question, consider the complex and much debated issue of the employment of 'pure' or 'unschematized' categories in Kant. Given that categories are pure concepts, meaning that they do not by themselves contain sensible elements, it is natural to wonder what we can make of them in abstraction from sensible schemata<sup>27</sup>.

While, to my knowledge, Kant never uses the word 'unschematized', he mentions – more or less problematically – a use of the categories in abstraction from sensible intuition in numerous places (e.g. B128-9 and A350). In the Paralogisms (see A402-3), for example, Kant explicitly mentions a «merely transcendental use of the category» and the employment of the concept of substance as a «pure intellectual concept». There he concedes that pure categories could very well be employed when I think myself as the subject of my thoughts – although he warns at the same time that in that case they would be of no use for the aims of the 'rational psychologists'. Now, interpreters have often insisted that, although we cannot rely on pure categories to cognize noumena, we are nonetheless entitled to *think* noumena by means of them. I ask here: Is that correct? In the aforementioned passages on 'pure categories' noumena are not explicitly involved. For instance, it is matter of debate among scholars whether the self which for Kant can be thought under the pure concept of substance should be characterized as 'noumenal' at all. Yet there are at least two more contexts where Kant seems to allow for some kind of employment of categories to think noumena despite the absence of sensible schemata. This seems to happen in the practical domain (most famously when conceiving our freedom by means of the category of causality, see e.g. *CPrR* 5: 55-6), and in the even more problematic case of noumenal affection as the ground of appearances. I will limit myself here to a couple of brief and generic remarks on the possibility of 'thinking' noumena.

Whether we can legitimately claim to think noumena through pure categories surely depends on what we mean here by 'thinking something', and in light of what we have seen in the previous sections we can distinguish two options. First of all, it is correct to maintain that categories are necessarily involved in the act of thinking, in being intellectually aware of something as an object for us. Categories represent the conceptual framework for any thought of an object whatsoever: «I can think nothing without a category» (*CPrR* 5: 103). By means of pure categories I may thus *purport* to think noumena, that is, I purport to represent something when attempting to provide some ontological consistency, as it were, to the logically possible concept <noumenon> (or to the concept of some specific non-sensible being, e.g., <God>)<sup>28</sup>. As Quarfoot nicely puts it: «When we try to attain knowledge of things by mere concepts, what we obtain is, one might say, the mirror image of

27 For an example of the debate on the applicability of unschematized categories to noumena, see Kohl (2015) and Marshall's (2018) response to it.

28 This achievement, though, is far from irrelevant for Kant. Entertaining a logically possible discourse that is supposed to be about noumena proves useful from the practical, but also from the theoretical standpoint (e.g. in solving the antinomies).

the structure of our discursivity» (Quarfood 2004, p. 58)<sup>29</sup>. Yet if, by contrast, ‘thinking something’ entails the additional requirement that we establish that our concepts *successfully* refer to a real object, or at least that it is really possible for them to do so, then it does *not* seem the case that we can actually ‘think’ noumena in this sense. For not only we cannot single out an actual object falling under this concept<sup>30</sup>; more than that, what I have tried to show is that it is inscrutable for us what it would possibly mean for one or multiple individuals to be an instance of the concept <noumenon> (or of any specific concept of a noumenon, e.g. <my soul>)<sup>31</sup>. As we noted above, the concept of <noumenon> is ‘empty’, and so are unschematized categories<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, we should refrain from drawing strong metaphysical conclusions from Kant’s claims on the possibility of ‘thinking’ beyond experience by means of pure categories<sup>33</sup>.

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Summing up, what I tried to illustrate thus far is the following. It is of utmost importance to appreciate that, on Kantian grounds, our theoretical tools to even make some sense of the notion ‘noumenon’ or ‘being of understanding’<sup>34</sup> are cut to the bone. For a noumenon could not be characterized as a mere concept, and, as far as we know not even a lowest species. The only way to make some sense of it is as the object of intellectual intuition, namely an act that our understanding cannot perform, that we do not comprehend, and whose real possibility (let alone actuality) we cannot establish. Accordingly, Kant’s account of the limits of discursivity teaches us that we have no theoretical grounds for claiming that a certain concept successfully refers to one or multiple noumena. We are aware of no criteria for numerical distinctness and objective reference in absence of sensible conditions. This is how serious we should take his claim that we can make no positive use of the notion of noumenon in the theoretical domain — although I leave it open whether Kant himself is always consistent in not overstepping the limits of discursive understanding. In conclusion, although the considerations advanced here do not yet exclude the existence of a non-sensible level of reality in general, they nonetheless have widespread implications for any interpretation of Kant’s transcendental idealism<sup>35</sup>.

### Abbreviations of Kant’s Works

A/B:	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>
BL:	<i>Blomberg Logic</i>
CPrR:	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
DWL:	<i>Dohna-Wundlacken Logic</i>
JL:	<i>Jäsche Logic</i>
VL:	<i>Vienna Logic</i>
WRP:	<i>What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?</i>

29 In Kant’s lectures on metaphysics we read: «We can make concepts of things in general only through the understanding, even if no object is given, because we are representing to ourselves only the manner in which we can think an object» (*MM* 29: 798).

30 To reiterate, at least not on purely theoretical grounds.

31 According to Kant, an intuitive intellect would not cognize through categories (see e.g. B145 and B148). Marshall (2018) nonetheless argues that this fact does not by itself prove that categories cannot be descriptive of noumena, for an intuitive understanding may be able to represent, if only indirectly, noumenal facts involving categorical properties. Regardless of its defensibility, what is relevant is that Marshall’s argument would not affect my claim. I am not denying that categories *may* be somehow descriptive of noumenal reality; I rather maintain that we cannot establish on theoretical grounds whether this is truly the case, and neither can we comprehend what it would mean for a category to refer successfully to a noumenon. All in all, I am inclined to the opinion that the whole problem of whether categories would be meaningful for an intuitive intellect lies on the edge of non-sense.

32 While Kant often pairs emptiness and lack of significance, it seems nonetheless clear that even empty thoughts are in some unspecified sense meaningful for him. Nevertheless, as Edwards effectively puts it, when entertaining empty thoughts, crucially, «we are not in a position to assess the thought for truth or falsity» (Edwards 2023, p. 10).

33 For such type of claims, which I take to be unwarranted, see for example Langton (1998), Wuerth (2014) and Allais (2015). Other authors committed as well to some kind of metaphysical reading of Kant’s idealism are nonetheless more subtle on that respect (e.g. Chignell 2007, Schafer 2022 and 2023).

34 My aim here was to argue against a certain ‘hypostatized’ — as it were — way of conceiving of intelligible beings. There are of course other possible ways to intend the latter notion. For instance, Kantian ‘ideas’, as concepts of reason which play a role in experience without ever being properly instanced in it, seem to me to offer such an alternative in some respect. One of Kant’s main points in the *Dialectic*, as I take it, is that there is a natural tendency to hypostatize some ideas, namely transcendental ones, in our search for the unconditioned; but at the same time, also that we lack at least the theoretical tools for such a move.

35 For instance, it can be argued that Kant’s theoretical agnosticism on the availability of criteria for individuation among noumena is hardly compatible with ascribing to him a secure commitment, on objective theoretical grounds, to the existence of individual noumena such as a non-sensible, substantial soul, or to a one-to-one identity between appearances and things in themselves. Assessing similar implications, though, goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

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