

Reconsidering Kant's Copernican Revolution: From Synthetic A Priori Knowledge to the Metaphysical Status of the Noumenon

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ENG Abstract: This paper critically examines Michael J. Olson's interpretation of Kant's Copernican Revolution as a transformation of the object of metaphysics into synthetic a priori knowledge with a twofold structure. While granting Olson's insight that the Copernican Revolution is not merely a perspectival reversal but a substantive reconfiguration of metaphysics modeled on the methodological revolutions in mathematics and physics, I argue that his account remains incomplete. In particular, Olson's interpretation risks reducing Kant's critical project to an epistemological enterprise. By focusing on Kant's phenomenon–noumenon distinction, I show that transcendental idealism involves unavoidable metaphysical commitments that cannot be captured solely in terms of synthetic a priori knowledge. Although noumena are not objects of knowledge, they function as necessary limiting concepts and as the metaphysical ground of appearances. Consequently, Kant's Copernican Revolution should be understood as a rearticulation rather than a replacement of metaphysics. **Keywords:** Kant, Copernican Revolution, Transcendental Idealism, Synthetic A Priori Knowledge, Phenomena and Noumena

Summary: 1. The Significance of The Copernican Revolution 1.1. Epistemic Justification 2. Kant's New Object of Metaphysics and Its Twofold Nature 3. Critique of Olson's Interpretation 3.1 Metaphysical Parts of Kant's Project Conclusion

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Kant's Copernican Revolution plays a crucial, perhaps central, role in his philosophy.¹ Yet it is often treated merely as an analogy rather than a metaphysical claim (see Thilly 1925, Smith 1913, Hanson 1959, and Paton 1937, for instance). In contemporary scholarship, attempts to make sense of the Copernican turn generally fall along a spectrum between two dominant interpretive camps: the “two-world” (or ontological) readings, which emphasize the metaphysical reality of things-in-themselves (e.g., Guyer 1987, Langton 1998), and the “two-aspect” (or methodological) readings, championed most notably by Henry Allison (2004), which deflate the metaphysics into an epistemological distinction between two ways of considering the same objects. As Frederick Beiser (2002) has extensively documented, this tension is not merely a contemporary dispute; the struggle to interpret Kant's critical project without collapsing it into pure subjectivism or mere epistemology has been the central crisis of German Idealism since the publication of the first *Critique*. The persistent temptation to read transcendental idealism exclusively as an epistemological restriction risks losing the metaphysical realism that Kant fiercely defended against his early critics. It is within this heavily contested terrain that Michael J. Olson intervenes. Michael J. Olson's “On the Significance of the Copernican Revolution: Transcendental Philosophy and the Object of Metaphysics” (2018) challenges this tendency by giving the Copernican Revolution a central place in Kant's philosophy. For Olson, the Revolution determines the new object of metaphysics itself, which is synthetic *a priori* knowledge, and it has a “twofold” nature.

This raises a central question: How does Olson's account of the “twofold” object of metaphysics help us understand the distinction and the relation between phenomena and noumena, or appearances and things in themselves? Although Olson offers a novel argument, as I will demonstrate, his meta-metaphysical reading, grounded in the Copernican revolution, remains incomplete. It provides only epistemological answers to questions concerning the phenomenon–noumenon distinction. Once this distinction is properly taken into

¹ I would like to thank Saniye Vatansever for her detailed comments on the earlier versions of this paper.

account, Kant's critical project, as I will argue, cannot be reduced to an epistemological project because it carries metaphysical commitments or assumptions. On the reading I will propose, Kant's division between pure and applied metaphysics, to which Olson refers, must likewise be understood as having metaphysical, not merely epistemological, significance.

In what follows, I will first summarize Olson's argument and explain why he believes that Kant's Copernican revolution establishes synthetic *a priori* knowledge as the new object of metaphysics. In doing so, I emphasize Olson's claim that this object of metaphysics is twofold in structure. I then argue that Olson's meta-metaphysical interpretation is incomplete by comparing his account with Kant's phenomenon–noumenon distinction.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify how the opposition between the “epistemological” and “metaphysical” dimensions of Kant's project is understood in this paper. Here, an exclusively epistemological reading refers to an interpretation that reduces Kant's critical enterprise strictly to the conditions, limits, and justification of cognition—specifically, the production of synthetic *a priori* knowledge regarding appearances. In contrast, a metaphysical reading does not deny this epistemological framework but recognizes the necessary ontological commitments required to sustain it. For Kant, identifying the limits of possible experience inherently involves conceptualizing what lies beyond those limits. Thus, the metaphysical dimension encompasses the structural and ontological necessities—such as the assumption of the noumenon as the ground of appearances—that are logically necessitated by transcendental idealism but cannot be objects of cognition.

Consequently, Kant's Copernican revolution should be understood as a rearticulation rather than a replacement of metaphysics. Against Olson's purely epistemological reading, I propose that the Copernican revolution is fundamentally a boundary-drawing enterprise—a structural reconfiguration of reason itself. Positively construed, the revolution is the act of reason legislating its own limits; it restricts valid cognition to the realm of phenomena while simultaneously and necessarily positing the noumenon not as an object of knowledge, but as the indispensable metaphysical ground that secures both empirical reality and the logical space required for practical philosophy.

1. The Significance of The Copernican Revolution

In his paper “On the Significance of the Copernican Revolution: Transcendental Philosophy and the Object of Metaphysics”, Olson gives a different account of what Kant understood from metaphysics, developing a novel understanding of Kant's Copernican Revolution. According to Olson, Kant's Copernican Revolution should not be understood merely as a reversal of perspective, the view that is common among many Kant scholars. For Olson, the Copernican Revolution has a deeper significance. Kant's Copernican Revolution marks a transformation in the proper object of metaphysics. However, to fully grasp this transformation, it is helpful to situate Olson's claim within the broader interpretive debate regarding Kant's revolutionary vocabulary. As Reinhard Brandt (2015) extensively details in *Kants Revolutionen*, Kant deployed the concept of “revolution” ambiguously and plurally across theoretical, metaphysical, and moral domains. For Brandt, these revolutions consistently signify a radical structural shift: a move from external determination to self-legislation.² Recognizing this plurality hints early on that reducing the Copernican turn to a purely epistemological shift in theoretical knowledge—as Olson risks doing—may overlook the multi-dimensional nature of Kant's project.

For Olson, there is another significant reason for Kant's appeal to the Copernican Revolution, other than mere reversal of a perspective, which stems from the way in which Kant takes into account the revolutions (these are the revolutions in Kant's remark) in two sciences: mathematics and physics. According to Olson, the revolutions in these two sciences that Kant explains in the first *Critique* follow the same structure as the revolution by Copernicus, in which, through a revolution in the given science, an alteration in that science's object happens for epistemic justification.³

The first significant revolution, for Kant, was that in the way in which Ancient Greeks took into account mathematics by altering the very object of their science, according to Olson's interpretation of Kant. Hence, the Greeks' discovery of the mathematical *a priori* truths neither came from the empirical mathematical figure, nor the definition of any abstract mathematical concept, but rather stemmed from the very “construction” of the mathematician.⁴ That's how Ancient Greeks discovered (or constructed, in a more compatible jargon) the isosceles triangle, claims Kant.⁵

According to Olson, Kant sees a structurally (the structure is epistemic justification, which will be examined in chapter 1.1.,) similar revolution happening in a different science, namely that of physics.⁶ According to Olson's interpretation of Kant, the modern physician also alters her science's very object by making it the concept of an experimental system. So, in modern physics, the physicist has to begin by placing demands upon the phenomena she intends to describe; otherwise, she would not be able to identify the laws of nature.⁷ And Kant states that this way of demanding is not like a relation between a teacher and her pupil, in which the pupil writes down everything that her teacher says. Rather, it is like a relation between an appointed judge and the witnesses, for a judge compels all of the witnesses to answer the questions that she herself has formu-

² Brandt 2015, pp. 6-7

³ Olson 2018, pp.109-110

⁴ Olson 2018, p.109

⁵ Kant, CPR, Bxii-Bxiii.

⁶ Olson 2018, p.110

⁷ Olson 2018, p.111

lated.⁸ In other words, as Kant states, these scientists realized that “reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design”.⁹ And this realization was made possible with the alteration of their objects in both sciences.

1.1. Epistemic Justification

Kant’s main interest in the Copernican Revolution comes from the fact that Copernicus supported his hypothesis with proofs. As opposed to other scientists and philosophers, such as Philonus and Tycho Brahe, who stated the same heliocentric thesis as Copernicus without any epistemic justification. Thus, for Kant, claims Olson, Philonus’ thesis should be seen merely as a speculation, whereas Copernicus’ is an epistemically justified, proper hypothesis.¹⁰ However, since Kant cannot have the empirical means that Copernicus had, since he wants to make a similar move for metaphysics, he looks into the way in which other sciences, mathematics, and physics grounded the universality claims about their sciences. When Kant takes into account the revolutions in these two sciences, he concludes that the key move is, as explained above, the alteration of the object, according to Olson’s interpretation.

The structural parallel between the two revolutions lies in a methodological shift that secures scientific progress. For Olson, this success is defined specifically as the grounding of universal validity. Hence, the main significance of these revolutions is that they are the revolutions that give epistemic justification to these sciences, which puts them on the “secure path of a science”, according to Kant.¹¹ This reading aligns with Kant’s refusal to classify chemistry as a proper science; he argues that chemistry, unlike physics, lacks the *a priori* construction essential to mathematical science.¹²

Epistemic justification is what distinguishes Copernicus from both Tycho Brahe and Philonius, who then posit the same thesis, namely the heliocentric view. Yet, neither Tycho Brahe nor Philonius epistemically justifies their thesis. So, according to Kant, while Copernicus posits an epistemically justified hypothesis,¹³ Philonus only speculates. According to Kant, we also need an epistemic justification for the science of metaphysics, to put it into the secure path of science again, which can only be established by a similar shift in the very object of metaphysics.¹⁴ It is crucial to note that while Copernicus’ revolution, and his thesis, is hypothetical, Kant claims that his own Copernican Revolution, namely transcendental idealism, is apodeictical, in other words, it is logically certain.¹⁵

The revolutions in the two sciences (mathematics and physics) got into the secure path of science again, according to the interpretation of Olson, by altering their proper objects in their disciplines.¹⁶ To be able to do that, mathematics produced the concept of a construction, and physics produced the concept of an experimental system.¹⁷ In order to put the science of metaphysics on the secure path of science, a structurally similar revolution is needed, and this is basically what other Kant scholars are missing in Kant’s Copernican revolution, according to Olson.¹⁸

So then, Kant, too, just like other scientists, produces a new object for the science of metaphysics and, according to Olson, in parallel to the revolutions in mathematics and natural science, this shift redefines metaphysics from the traditional “being *qua* being” to the object of synthetic *a priori* knowledge.¹⁹

2. Kant’s New Object of Metaphysics and Its Twofold Nature

Olson maintains that this new object of metaphysics is twofold. Throughout the paper, and through Kant’s own references, Olson shows that Kant conceives of two distinct but interdependent kinds of metaphysics: Pure Metaphysics (which Kant sometimes calls Ontologia, see *CPR*, A846/B874) and Applied Metaphysics. Pure metaphysics concerns itself with the rational conditions and limits of cognition; it does not address the effects of applying these rational processes to empirical objects. It is, in essence, the critique of pure reason itself. Ontology, as the study of the *a priori* conditions of knowledge, is therefore propaedeutic—a preparatory discipline—for the *a priori* cognition of the objects of rational physics, psychology, cosmology, and theology, which are the branches of applied metaphysics, according to Kant.²⁰ Although Kant does not explicitly present this distinction between pure and applied metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Olson argues that it is implicitly operative throughout the work. This interdependence explains why Olson calls Kant’s new object of metaphysics “twofold.” Ontology (or transcendental philosophy) analyzes the sources, limits, and extent of *a priori* cognition, while the special sciences—rational physiology, psychology, cosmology, and theology—apply the results of these propaedeutic investigations.²¹

⁸ Kant, *CPR*, Bxiii.

⁹ Kant, *CPR*, Bxiii.

¹⁰ Olson 2018, p. 102

¹¹ Kant, *CPR*, Bxi-Bxiv.

¹² Kant 2004, 4:470-4.471

¹³ Kant provides a detailed account of the conditions required for a hypothesis to be epistemically justified, though a full examination of these criteria falls outside the scope of this paper (see, Kant, Refl 2680, AA 16:468).

¹⁴ Olson 2018, p. 109

¹⁵ Kant, *CPR*, Bxxiiin.

¹⁶ Olson 2018, p. 92

¹⁷ Olson 2018, p. 111

¹⁸ Olson 2018, pp. 104, 111

¹⁹ Olson 2018, pp. 111-112

²⁰ V-Met/Mron, AA 29:754-757.

²¹ Olson 2018, p. 120

Kant distinguishes four branches of the entire system of metaphysics in the *First Critique*: (1) ontology, (2) rational physiology, (3) rational cosmology, and (4) rational theology.²² Of these, ontology as the pure metaphysics is propaedeutic, as indicated above, and two are (cosmology and theology) subject to critique and cannot yield genuine metaphysical knowledge. Because pure metaphysics requires that *a priori* concepts apply only to objects of possible experience, most claims made by these special fields are undermined. Thus, the rational psychologist's inquiry into the nature of the soul, based solely on the necessity of the "I think," can only result in dogmatic assertions where no real knowledge is possible. Similarly, the rational cosmologist's inquiries into the origin of the world or the rational theologian's attempts to prove the existence of God are in vain. However, one branch of applied metaphysics escapes Kant's critique: rational physiology, claims Olson. Unlike the transcendent use of concepts in other branches, rational physics (or rational physiology) "views nature as the sum of all objects of the senses, and therefore just as it is given us, but solely in accordance with *a priori* conditions, under which alone it can ever be given us."²³ Whereas the other branches extend reason beyond possible experience, rational physics investigates nature only as it can be experienced.²⁴ Olson emphasizes the indistinguishability of these two branches of metaphysics (ontology and rational physiology) for Kant. Since Kant's critical metaphysics consists of two interdependent parts, its proper object must itself possess a twofold structure. This object, whose conceptually driven synthetic *a priori* knowledge is defined not by the object's properties but by the means through which it is known. Any study of this object must therefore begin with an analysis of the conditions of *a priori* knowledge in general, claims Olson.

Olson identifies three criteria for what makes a hypothesis a good one, according to Kant.²⁵ However, he stresses that metaphysics should not be reduced to hypothesis-making.²⁶ What interests Kant in Copernicus, Olson claims, is not the reversal itself but the justification that legitimates it.²⁷ Yet, metaphysics cannot model itself entirely on Copernicus, since Kant seeks not hypothetical but synthetic *a priori* truths. Here, the revolutions in mathematics and physics become essential. In both fields, a twofold, reciprocal structure emerges: in mathematics, the mathematician first constructs *a priori* propositions and then confirms them through application; in science, the scientist first designs the experiment and then tests it in the empirical world. In both cases, the discipline seems to "produce its own object." Following this analogy, Olson thinks that Kant concludes that metaphysics, too, must produce its own object. In the end, only two branches of metaphysics can yield genuine knowledge: ontology (pure metaphysics) and rational physics (applied metaphysics). Pure metaphysics concerns itself with the conditions of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge; it is critical. Rational physics, as one of the four branches of the applied metaphysics, is the study of the rational principles of spatio-temporal objects.

Rational physics, however, must be distinguished from empirical physics. While empirical physics is a natural science concerned with observations, rational physics—as the only scientific branch of applied metaphysics—concerns itself with the analysis of what can be known of spatio-temporal objects *a priori*.²⁸ Hence, Kant does not abandon applied metaphysics and leave metaphysics solely with the pure branch, which is epistemological rather than metaphysical. Rather, he asserts that rational physics as applied metaphysics can also yield metaphysical truths. Then, Kant should not be viewed as *der Alleszermalmer* ("the all destroying Kant"), as he is often called.²⁹ Rather, he redefines, rather than abolishes, the object of metaphysics in light of his Copernican Revolution.

3. Critique of Olson's Interpretation

Olson claims that "once we have understood just what makes Kant's Copernican Revolution both Copernican and revolutionary, we will see that the critical stance of his transcendental idealism does not amount to an abandonment of metaphysics in favor of epistemology."³⁰ Yet if the object of metaphysics for Kant is *synthetic a priori knowledge*, then metaphysics seems to become a branch of epistemology after all. This is problematic, since one of Olson's central claims is precisely that Kant does *not* replace metaphysics with epistemology.³¹ The tension between these two claims demands clarification.

Thus, Olson's shift in the object of metaphysics appears to reduce metaphysics to epistemology. In this regard, Olson's framework inherits many of the vulnerabilities associated with broader "two-aspect" or purely methodological readings of Kant (such as Henry Allison's (2004)). Allison's influential methodological reading

²² Kant, CPR, A846/B874

²³ Kant, CPR, A846/B874

²⁴ Olson 2018, p. 121

²⁵ Olson 2018, p. 103

²⁶ Olson 2018, p. 108

²⁷ Olson 2018, pp. 106-107

²⁸ Olson 2018, p. 121

²⁹ Mendelssohn 1972- , 3.2, p. 3

³⁰ Olson 2018, p. 92

³¹ It is important to indicate that Olson clearly and strictly states that he only takes into account Kant's theoretical philosophy (see 2018, p. 96, footnote 13). So he is not concerned with Kant's practical philosophy. This is important because for Kant, we have three different metaphysical objects in the practical realm: God, Freedom, and Immortal Soul, which are in the realm of the noumena; thus, they are not object of any knowledge whatsoever. This would undermine Olson's whole account of the new object of metaphysics. Yet, he admits that he applies his account to Kant's theoretical philosophy only. However, this does not completely make his account free of criticism, as we shall see in this paper. Because Kant's main project, as we see in his 1790 letter to Kästner, was to unification of theoretical and practical philosophy: "[...] the union of theoretical and practical philosophy. This intention of mine will become clearer when, if I live long enough, I complete the reconstruction of metaphysics in a coherent system." (Kant, Br, AA 11:186).

deliberately strips the Copernican turn of heavy ontological commitments, arguing that transcendental idealism dictates how we must consider objects epistemologically, not what they are metaphysically. However, as defenders of ontological readings like Paul Guyer (1987) have continuously pointed out, a purely epistemological framework cannot adequately account for Kant's insistence on the reality of things-in-themselves affecting our sensibility. Olson's attempt to redefine the object of metaphysics as strictly synthetic *a priori* knowledge falls into this exact same trap: it adopts the epistemological safety of Allison's methodology but consequently loses the metaphysical grounding that Guyer rightly identifies as essential to Kant's system. Critics of the strict epistemological approach have long argued that reducing the noumenal to a mere epistemic standpoint struggles to account for Kant's explicit causal and ontological language regarding things-in-themselves (see, for example, Ameriks 2003). I will argue that this reduction is equally untenable in Olson's specific account, and this is not the case in Kant.

To be clear, the problem with Olson's account is not that he identifies an epistemological function in Kant's metaphysics, but that he treats this epistemological function as exhaustive. The relationship between epistemology and metaphysics in the first *Critique* is not a zero-sum dichotomy where one must replace the other. Rather, Kant's epistemological limits inherently necessitate metaphysical commitments. Even granting the "twofold" nature of this new object of metaphysics, as Olson emphasizes, the fact remains that for Olson, the object is still fundamentally a kind of *knowledge*. If metaphysics deals exclusively with a form of knowledge (whether one or twofold), then it becomes impossible to account for the necessary role of noumena within Kant's metaphysical system, as noumena are strictly outside the bounds of knowledge. To show this, I turn to Kant's phenomenon–noumenon distinction and examine how it relates to the twofoldness that Olson attributes to the new object of metaphysics.

According to Olson, the twofold structure of the new object of metaphysics is what prevents it from collapsing into mere epistemology. He writes that transcendental idealism replaces traditional metaphysics with an epistemological project, but only on one side of the twofoldness—namely, the "apodictic" side.³² The other side consists of the two domains in which synthetic *a priori* knowledge is applied, as Olson states:

[...] first, there are *a priori* concepts, when synthetizing pure intuitions, produce mathematical knowledge; second, there are *a priori* concepts that provide the necessary rules for the synthesis of merely possible empirical intuitions and that form the basis of transcendental philosophy.³³

This difference between mathematics and metaphysics, as indicated by Kant, is crucial to take Kantian metaphysics not merely as a reduction to epistemology, claims Olson. While mathematics uses *a priori* intuitions, the synthetic *a priori* knowledge that metaphysics and philosophy use *a priori* concepts. What makes different concepts from the intuitions for Kant is that "we need a *non-empirical* intuition to construct a concept."³⁴ If metaphysics is to be possible at all, it must stem from synthetic *a priori* knowledge. For Kant, this is strictly necessary: knowledge must be synthetic to extend our cognition, yet universal and necessary to qualify as metaphysical. As Kant claims:

...everything is grounded in intuitions [in mathematics], whereas in metaphysics we use pure reason, without grounding ourselves in intuitions.³⁵

Although mathematics and metaphysics both deal with concepts, Kant draws a sharp distinction between the two. According to Kant, mathematics constructs its own concepts because they inherently contain sensible intuition. Consequently, following the revolution in the field, the mathematician can both construct these concepts and apply them empirically. Whereas in metaphysics, the philosopher has to deal with the pure concepts, namely, concepts that do not contain sensible intuition. Consequently, all cognition must relate to possible intuitions, for strictly through them can objects be given. Kant argues that an *a priori* concept either contains a pure intuition in itself—in which case it can be constructed—or comprises nothing but the synthesis of possible intuitions not given *a priori*.³⁶ Hence, metaphysics deals with what Kant calls "transcendental propositions". Transcendental propositions are "synthetic propositions that pertain to things in general, the intuition of which cannot be given *a priori*, thus transcendental propositions can never be given through the construction of concepts, but only in accordance with *a priori* concepts."³⁷ This is the nuance that distinguishes metaphysics from mathematics.

Here, the emphasis on the word "possible" by Kant will be important when we take the concept of noumena into account. Since the concept of noumena suggests a logical possibility when it comes to its existence conditions.³⁸ To understand why this challenges Olson's purely epistemological reading, we must explicitly distinguish between epistemic (or real) possibility and logical possibility. Epistemic possibility requires that an object can be given within the conditions of possible experience through sensible intuition.³⁹ Noumena, by definition, fail this test. However, the concept of noumena retains logical possibility—meaning the concept contains no internal contradiction when thought. While logical possibility alone does not grant an object

³² Olson 2018, p. 112

³³ Olson 2018, p. 115

³⁴ Kant, CPR, A713/B741.

³⁵ Kant, LM, AA 29:780-781.

³⁶ Kant, CPR, A719/B747.

³⁷ Kant, CPR, A720/B748.

³⁸ Kant, CPR, A254-256/B310-312.

³⁹ Thorpe 2020, pp. 162-163

objective reality, it is philosophically decisive in this context: it secures the conceptual space necessary for Kant to posit the noumenon not as an object of knowledge, but as a structurally unavoidable metaphysical assumption.

The difference between mathematics and metaphysics clearly shows why the way in which philosophy ought to take concepts in a certain way is necessary, according to Kant. Since metaphysics has to use concepts without intuitions, the discipline has caused too many errors and illusions, claims Kant.⁴⁰ Kant argues that this negative side cannot be eliminated because metaphysics has never engaged in a critical examination of its own tool—reason itself.⁴¹ Kant emphasizes the need for self-reflection when he states, “when we cannot advance with the object, then it is good to direct our attention itself to the subject itself.”⁴² So, this self-reflexivity is the key move to save the discipline of metaphysics from its illusory state.

It is obvious that, whether it is prior or not, this very self-reflexivity, this meta-metaphysical critical project, creates the two-foldness of the object of metaphysics that Olson claims that to be. For Olson, with the first *Critique*, and as well with the Kantian Copernican Revolution, the discipline of metaphysics altered its object. The new object of metaphysics is synthetic *a priori* knowledge, and it is twofold, because it stems from the reciprocal relation between pure and applied metaphysics, claims Olson. This reciprocal relation shows that, for Olson, Kant does not eliminate metaphysics because pure metaphysics itself is capable of producing metaphysical knowledge as well as natural physics. These two are the only ones that can produce synthetic *a priori* knowledge.⁴³ Yet, Olson also admits that, “Transcendental philosophy does, then, replace much of metaphysics with an epistemological analysis of the sources and limits of knowledge.”⁴⁴

The problem with Olson’s interpretation is that it still fails to address why, in the twofoldness of the new, Kantian metaphysics, we should not take epistemology prior to metaphysics. If pure metaphysics concerns itself with the epistemological analysis only, then it means that Kant clearly surpassed metaphysics into epistemology. In order for Olson to convince us that Kant’s critical project has metaphysical parts, he should address the phenomena/noumena distinction. Yet, he does not address what would be the implications for the phenomena/noumena distinction if we take Olson’s account of the new object of metaphysics as synthetic *a priori* knowledge.

Furthermore, Olson’s reduction of the phenomenon-noumenon distinction to an epistemic dualism is problematic even on his own terms. By restricting his analysis to theoretical philosophy (excluding God, freedom, and the soul), he overlooks the fact that the very possibility of the noumenon requires a non-epistemological grounding. As I will argue in the next section, Olson’s account remains incomplete as long as it fails to include the role of noumena, which cannot be captured by a merely epistemic characterization of metaphysics, since for Kant, noumena are a logical possibility.⁴⁵ In other words, the justification for the concept of noumena does not stem from epistemology.

3.1. Metaphysical Parts of Kant’s Project

In order to understand what is missing in Olson’s account, we need to see what the implications would be on Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction if the object of Kantian metaphysics is solely synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Let us now take a closer look at Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction. An obvious problem occurs immediately when Kant implies that the phenomena/noumena distinction is also a metaphysical distinction because Kant states that things in themselves ground the (actual) existence of appearances. In a letter to Eberhard, Kant states this about the *Critique*:

It [the *Critique*] posits this ground of the material of sensory representations not once again in things, as objects of the senses, but in something super-sensible, which grounds the latter, and of which we can have no cognition.⁴⁶

In other words, Kant states that noumena ground phenomena. The reason for this claim, according to Stang, is that Kant wants to distinguish his idealism from that of Berkeley’s, which can be identified as strong phenomenalism.⁴⁷ Stang’s intervention here is crucial for contemporary debates, as it highlights that Kant’s system requires a mind-independent ontological anchor to prevent collapsing into Berkeleian dogmatic idealism. As Stang and others in the ontological camp recognize, Kant’s idealism is different from Berkeley’s.⁴⁸ The main difference is that, for Kant, mind-dependence concerns conditions of cognition, not being. Whereas Berkeley reduces all existence to the mental, Kant argues that the mind-dependence of appearances does not preclude the possibility of a mind-independent reality. In other words, Berkeley denies mind-independent reality⁴⁹, whereas Kant denies only that we can know reality independently of the conditions of human cognition; Kant’s idealism concerns the form of experience, not the existence of objects.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ Kant, AK, 29:780.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Olson 2018, pp. 121-122

⁴⁴ Olson 2018, p. 120

⁴⁵ Kant, CPR, A254-256/B310-312.

⁴⁶ Kant, Ak, 8:205.

⁴⁷ Stang 2024

⁴⁸ Wilson 1971, Allison 1973, Walker 1985, Beiser 2002, pp. 82-103, and Emundts 2008 are some of the scholars who claim that Kant’s idealism is fundamentally different from that of Berkeley’s.

⁴⁹ Berkeley, Treatise, §§3-4.

⁵⁰ Kant, CPR, B59-B69.

Fully exploiting the implications of this contemporary debate deals a severe blow to Olson's interpretation. If the phenomenal realm requires an ontologically fundamental ground to exist, then Kant's metaphysical architecture fundamentally relies on an ontological relation that cannot be reduced to synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Olson's framework, by restricting the new object of metaphysics exclusively to the epistemic conditions of cognition, lacks the conceptual vocabulary to account for the ontological grounding relation that Stang and others show is necessary to sustain transcendental idealism. Here, Joe Stratmann's (2018) analysis of Kantian grounding becomes highly instructive. Stratmann argues that the relationship between things in themselves and appearances cannot be reduced to a mere logical or epistemic dependency; it is a robust metaphysical grounding where the supersensible actually grounds the existence of the sensible. If Stratmann is correct that Kant is committed to an ontological theory of grounding, then Olson's thesis that the Copernican Revolution shifts the object of metaphysics entirely to synthetic *a priori* knowledge is fundamentally incomplete. Synthetic *a priori* knowledge can explain the epistemic conditions of appearances, but it cannot serve as the metaphysical ground for their existence.

More importantly, when he is explaining causality, Kant gives another reason to have appearances and things in themselves distinction as necessary. Kant argues that if appearances were taken as things in themselves, then every conditioned item would require a condition belonging to the same spatiotemporal series, forcing reason to determine whether this series is finite or infinite. Since either answer exceeds the capacities of the understanding, reason falls into antinomy. Transcendental idealism avoids this by restricting the series of conditions to appearances, thereby blocking the illegitimate demand for an unconditioned totality.⁵¹ Hence, if the phenomena/noumena distinction is also necessitated by causality, there has to be (intelligible, not empirical) causality between noumena and phenomena according to Kant. In other words, an appearance must be the appearance of something; otherwise, it would be nothing but illusion.⁵² Hence, while we cannot cognize things in themselves, we must think of them as the ground of appearances. Kant states this in the first *Critique* as,

If, on the other hand, appearances do not count for any more than they are in fact, namely, not for things in themselves but only for mere representations connected in accordance with empirical laws, then they themselves must have grounds that are not appearances. Such an intelligible cause, however, will not be determined in its causality by appearances, even though its effects appear and so can be determined through other appearances. Thus, the intelligible cause, with its causality, is outside the series; its effects, on the contrary, are encountered in the series of empirical conditions.⁵³

Then, appearances and things in themselves have different types of causality; the causality of noumena is metaphysical, while the phenomena are empirical. This claim is totally compatible with Kant's whole philosophy because Kant already asserts that "causality can be thought of in two ways, either according to nature or according to freedom."⁵⁴

This implies that rather than being a solely epistemological distinction, noumena have to have metaphysical aspects to them. This structural necessity aligns with a broader understanding of what a "revolution" entails for Kant. As Brandt (2015) notes, Kantian revolutions inherently involve the drawing of strict, self-legislated boundaries that save a discipline from endless dogmatic wandering. The Copernican Revolution does not just carve out a space for epistemologically justified phenomena; its very execution as a boundary-drawing *Revolution der Denkungsart* logically and metaphysically requires the noumenon as the limiting ground. This boundary-drawing action—securing the phenomenal by positing the noumenal—is precisely what constitutes the positive metaphysical core of the Copernican turn. Therefore, the revolution itself fails structurally if it is interpreted, as Olson does, without this necessary metaphysical counterpart.

We have a similar implication also in the first *Critique*. In the section "On the ground of the distinction of all objects in general into phenomena and noumena", after explaining why thought without sensibility would create an empty concept (A246/B303, A248/B305), Kant gives a justification for the thinking of noumena as a metaphysical, rather than an epistemological concept:

if the senses merely represent something to us as it appears, then this something must also be in itself a thing, and an object of a non-sensible intuition, i.e., of the understanding, i.e., a cognition must be possible in which no sensibility is encountered, and which alone has absolutely objective reality, through which, namely, objects are represented to us as they are, in contrast to the empirical use of our understanding, in which things are only cognized as they appear.⁵⁵

Kant, again, states here the necessity of his grounding claim concerning noumena. In other words, Kant shows that noumena have to be assumed if we adopt Kant's Transcendental Idealism and his own Copernican Revolution. For this very revolution itself presupposes the existence (as a logical possibility) of noumena: "Now from this [the concept of an appearance] arises the concept of a *noumenon*, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of something in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Kant, CPR, A535/B563.

⁵² See, Kant, CPR, A251-252/B307-308, and A490-491/B518-519.

⁵³ Kant, CPR, A537/B565.

⁵⁴ Kant, CPR, A532/B560.

⁵⁵ Kant, CPR, A250.

⁵⁶ Kant, CPR, A251-252.

A very similar justification also takes place in the *Prolegomena to any future metaphysics*, stating that the concept of noumena, or things in themselves, is “unavoidable”:

And we indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing as it is in itself, but only know its appearances, viz., the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. The understanding therefore, by assuming appearances, grants also the existence of things in themselves, and thus far we may say that the representation of such things as are the basis of appearances, consequently of mere beings of the understanding, is not only admissible but unavoidable.⁵⁷

For Kant, appearances make things-in-themselves a necessity. So, we must assume their possible existence, even though we do not have epistemological justification, just like Copernicus; rather, we have a different kind of justification to assume their existence, and that is a metaphysical assumption.

Again, we see a very similar claim in the first *Critique*, where Kant repeats the idea that appearances have to presuppose things in themselves. “Something must correspond to it [the concept of appearance] which is not itself appearance.”⁵⁸ Thus, the concept of the noumenon necessarily arises from the concept of the phenomenon, a claim Kant repeats frequently throughout his writings.

On the other hand, in the first *Critique*, before giving a validation for the concept of noumena, Kant stresses that only synthetic *a priori* statements can be possible knowledge for metaphysics, as a science newly and critically determined by Kant: “The merely transcendental use of the categories is thus in fact no use at all, and has no determinate or even, as far as its form is concerned, determinable object.”⁵⁹ Then, what kind of object is noumenon? Clearly, it is not, and cannot be an object of knowledge.

First of all, the noumenon is an object of understanding, though this object also has intuition, but not a sensible one.⁶⁰ A sensible intuition happens when objects causally affect us; whereas in a non-sensible intuition, we bring the object into existence through intuition.⁶¹ Thus, noumenon is such a concept of an object that can be cognized by an intellect whose intuition brings its very objects into existence. But, as human beings, we do not cognize any noumena, since our intuition is sensible, not intellectual.⁶²

To understand the concept of noumena better, it is crucial to take into account the two senses (negative and positive) of noumena. Here, we must acknowledge the significant textual and rhetorical shift between the A and B editions of the *Critique*. In the B-edition, Kant deliberately steps back from language that might imply a straightforward ontological realm of things-in-themselves, instead reformulating the noumenon explicitly as a “problematic” concept designed to curb the pretensions of sensibility. As a problematic standpoint, this critical appropriation resists being straightforwardly classified as either traditional dogmatic metaphysics or mere epistemology. Yet, because with the idea of negative noumena, we see that noumena in this sense is not just phenomena that have been stripped off from sensible intuition, but more than that. This additional part directly comes from the metaphysical assumption that we necessarily make. Kant writes that, “it is not enough that I liberate my thoughts from all conditions of sensible intuition, but I must in addition have ground to assume another kind of intuition than this sensible one, under which such an object could be given; for otherwise my thought is empty, even though free of contradiction.”⁶³ So, this intuition is only possible for us. However, if we take noumena in a positive sense, we can think of other rational beings that can have this intellectual intuition.⁶⁴ And this is exactly what saves the concept of noumena from being contradictory for Kant.⁶⁵ So, the concept of noumena, being able to be taken into account both positively and negatively, is a problematic concept, but not contradictory. It is a problematic concept because it is a boundary concept, yet it does not contain a contradiction in itself.⁶⁶ By emphasizing this problematic, limiting function in the B-edition, Kant executes a structural, meta-metaphysical maneuver. This is precisely where Olson’s purely epistemological reading falters. Olson attempts to classify the new object of metaphysics exclusively under the banner of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. However, the B-edition’s problematic noumenon cannot be accommodated by this epistemological framework, precisely because it functions as a critical objection that secures the very limits of that knowledge. Furthermore, it is also a necessary concept in a negative sense, because otherwise we may try to extend our knowledge to the things that we do not have any sensible intuition.⁶⁷ So, we can conclude that the concept of noumena, as an assumption, is a necessary condition for pure metaphysics, and thus transcendental idealism. It is precisely here that the exhaustive dichotomy between epistemology and metaphysics collapses: Kant’s epistemological strictures logically force a metaphysical assumption. The noumenon is an assumption that does not ground itself in epistemology, yet the epistemological framework cannot function without it.

As we have seen, noumenon is clearly not an object of knowledge, but it is a limiting concept. Engaging with contemporary interpretations of this limiting function (e.g., Stang 2024) reveals that this limit is not

⁵⁷ Kant, P, 4:314–5.

⁵⁸ Kant, CPR, A252.

⁵⁹ Kant, CPR, A248/B305.

⁶⁰ Kant, CPR, A249.

⁶¹ For a controversial claim that Kant’s noumenon creates affection in us, see Adickes 1924.

⁶² Stang 2024

⁶³ Kant, CPR, A252.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Kant, CPR, A254/B310.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

merely a negative epistemic boundary, but a positive structural requirement of Kant's modal architecture. It is precisely here that the modal status of the noumenon—its strict logical possibility—breaks Olson's framework. If, as Olson insists, the object of metaphysics is exhausted by synthetic *a priori* knowledge, then the domain of metaphysics is restricted entirely to what is *epistemically* possible. By ignoring the contemporary consensus that the noumenon's limiting function operates as an unavoidable ontological grounding, Olson's framework leaves no room for a concept that lacks epistemic justification but retains logical possibility in order to satisfy a metaphysical demand (the grounding of appearances). Stating that the only object of metaphysics is synthetic *a priori* knowledge is equal to saying that the logically possible concept of noumena is outside of metaphysics, which is architectonically implausible. This is an incomplete evaluation of Kant's metaphysics because, as I showed above, the noumenon is the crucial part of Kantian metaphysics, and yet it is not an object of synthetic *a priori* knowledge.⁶⁸

A further difficulty in Olson's account lies in his stark bifurcation of theoretical and practical philosophy. Such a separation becomes untenable when attempting to grasp the unity of Kant's metaphysical project. The necessity of reading the Copernican Revolution holistically is reinforced by Brandt's (2015) conceptual analysis, which demonstrates that Kant's "revolution" extends crucially into the moral realm as the transition from heteronomy to autonomy. Because the whole project of the metaphysics of morals requires the postulates of God, freedom, and the immortal soul—none of which are objects of knowledge for us (see Kant, *KpV* 5,122-148)—an exclusively epistemological reading of the revolution threatens to collapse this practical architecture. For instance, in the B edition of the Preface of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

Now after speculative reason has been denied all advance in this field of the supersensible, what still remains for us is to try whether there are not data in reason's practical data for determining that transcendent rational concept of the unconditioned, in such a way as to reach beyond the boundaries of all possible experience, in accordance with the wishes of metaphysics, cognitions *a priori* that are possible, but only from a practical standpoint. By such procedures speculative reason has at least made room for such an extension, even if it had to leave it empty; and we remain at liberty, indeed we are called upon by reason to fill it if we can through practical data of reason.⁶⁹

In other words, Kant's Copernican Revolution made concepts that are beyond our speculative reason morally possible to think without conflicting with the secure sciences of the phenomenal world. Thus, concepts like God, freedom, and the soul belong strictly to the noumenal side (*CPR*, Bxxix). Although we cannot scientifically know them, our moral duty provides the practical motivation to have rational faith in them.⁷⁰

Still, Olson may claim that this very validation of the logically possible existence of noumena is the one side of this twofold object of new metaphysics. Olson may argue that the phenomena/noumena distinction stems from the apodeictical part of this twofold object of new metaphysics, namely, the *pure metaphysics*. Even if we grant this point, it remains implausible to define this twofold object exclusively as an object of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. As Olson himself notes, one aspect of this object concerns not knowledge itself, but the conditions of knowledge—a distinction that is inherently metaphysical, as shown in Kant's justification of the noumenon. Yet, noumena is not an object of knowledge; in theoretical philosophy of Kant, its use in the negative sense, it is a concept that sets the boundaries.

Conclusion

In his paper "On the Significance of the Copernican Revolution: Transcendental Philosophy and the Object of Metaphysics" (2018), Michael J. Olson makes a novel claim about why Kant's Copernican revolution is significant. For Olson, the need for such a move comes from the fact that the science of metaphysics, according to Kant, can no longer progress. So, according to Olson, Kant's Copernican move is not a mere reversal of perspective, but it is also, following the revolutions in mathematics and physics, an alteration of the object of metaphysics. The new object of metaphysics, claims Olson, is synthetic *a priori* knowledge.

Although Olson's approach to the significance of Kant's Copernican revolution is ampliative, it still falls short of explaining why Kantian metaphysics has not simply been surpassed by epistemology. By analyzing the implications of the phenomenon-noumenon distinction in Olson's account, I demonstrate that Kant does not reduce the traditional object of metaphysics to a purely epistemological one—namely, synthetic *a priori* knowledge. My argument drew on Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena: while noumena do not yield knowledge, the concept nevertheless indicates a necessary metaphysical assumption. This assumption lies at the core of Transcendental Idealism and, therefore, at the core of Kant's Copernican Revolution itself.

Therefore, a complete, positive account of the Copernican Revolution must recognize it as a dual movement: it is simultaneously the epistemological restriction of cognition to appearances and the metaphysical positing of the noumenal ground. The revolution does not merely produce synthetic *a priori* knowledge; it establishes a comprehensive, self-legislating metaphysical system where the very limits of theoretical reason guarantee the logical possibility of the unconditioned. This becomes even more apparent when one

⁶⁸ Again, when we think about Kant's causality distinction between nature and freedom (*CPR*, A532/B560), and when we take into account his practical philosophy, we see more clearly how crucial this distinction and the concept of noumena are. Still, it is not an object of synthetic *a priori* knowledge.

⁶⁹ Kant, *CPR*, Bxxi.

⁷⁰ Thorpe 2020, p. 89

considers Kant's broader project of unifying theoretical and practical philosophy, because although God, freedom, and the human soul are in the noumenal realm, Kant's practical philosophy necessitates the existence of these as a hope, even though they are not objects of knowledge whatsoever. Although a full treatment of Kant's practical philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper, its unification with his theoretical philosophy relies entirely on this metaphysical architecture.

Ultimately, while Olson provides a compelling account of the methodological mechanics of the Copernican turn, his reading inadvertently demonstrates the hard limits of the purely epistemological, "two-aspect" interpretive tradition championed by scholars like Allison. By attempting to restrict the new object of metaphysics exclusively to synthetic *a priori* knowledge, Olson's account risks stripping away the indispensable ontological grounding that scholars like Guyer, Beiser, and Stratmann rightly identify as the bedrock of transcendental idealism. The Copernican Revolution, therefore, must not be reduced to an epistemological methodology; it remains a robust and fundamentally metaphysical achievement.

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