Kant's Conception of Cognition and our Knowledge of Things-in-Themselves

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Abstract: In this essay, I develop a unified account Kant's conception of Erkenntniß or cognition and show that this conception generates two crucial constraints on cognition of an object: (i) a real possibility constraint and (ii) a determinate content constraint. In doing so, I stress the differences between Kant's conception of cognition and our contemporary conception of propositional knowledge, while connecting together important strands in the recent scholarly literature on these topics. Finally, I make use of this improved understanding of cognition to better understand why Kant claims that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves, while also appearing to claim that we can know a good deal about what things-in-themselves are like.

Perhaps the primary concern of Kant's Critical philosophy is the limits of our cognitive faculties.[1] But to understand the nature of this concern, we must first understand what these limits are supposed to be limits *of*. And, in order to understand this, we need to understand what Kant means by "cognition" or *Erkenntniß*.

Traditionally, "Erkenntniß" was translated into English as "knowledge". And while it is more commonly translated today as "cognition", it is still often thought of in a manner that bears the imprint of past attempts to force Kant's notion of *Erkenntniß* into the

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framework of contemporary epistemological debates. As I argue below, this has a number of unfortunate consequences for our understanding of Kant. For while *Erkenntniß* is a form of knowledge, what Kant means by *Erkenntniß* is quite different from the sort of knowledge that is the focus of contemporary epistemological discussion.[2] Thus, if we attempt to understand Kant's claims as claims about anything like knowledge in this sense, we will make very little headway in understanding the views that Kant actually wished to defend.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more clear than with respect to the vexed issue of what Kant means when he claims that we cannot achieve cognition of things-in-themselves. For while Kant insists on this point, it also appears that he believes that we can know many general propositions about things-in-themselves, even from a theoretical point of view.[3] Thus, if we understand cognition to be knowledge in the contemporary sense, Kant seems to be claiming both that we are totally ignorant concerning things-in-themselves *and* that we can know a good deal about them.

Nearly every Kant interpreter has his or her preferred solution to this problem. Some argue that Kant did not *really* mean that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves to anything like the degree it might seem.[4] Others interpret his claims about things-in-themselves in an "epistemic" fashion that is compatible with total ignorance of them.[5] And not a few

[2]Houston Smit stresses this point in the initial sections of his important "Kant on Marks and the Immediacy of Intuition" (*The Philosophical Review* 109 (2000): 235-66). In many ways, the interpretation of Kant I offer below may be thought of as an attempt to extend Smit's comments about these matters towards the beginning of his paper - although I am sure he would not agree with everything I say here. (On this point, also see the Introduction to Robert Hanna's *Kant, Science, and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).)

[3]For example, Kant confidently asserts that things-in-themselves affect us, that they (at least in part) ground all appearances, and that they are outside of space and time.

[4]For an important recent instance of this line of interpretation, see Karl Ameriks' *Interpreting Kant's Critiques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[5]For a prominent example of this way of reading Kant, see Henry Allison's *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

simply conclude that his views on these issues are incoherent.[6]

Ultimately, the first of these alternatives comes closest to Kant's intentions.[7] But we can only properly understand why this is the case if we are careful not to assimilate Kant's conception of cognition to anything like a contemporary notion of propositional knowledge In particular, once we understand how Kant's conception of cognition is different from contemporary notions of propositional knowledge, it will become clear why Kant can maintain both that we can know many general facts about things-in-themselves, while nonetheless being unable to achieve cognition of them.

In considering these issues, I will proceed as follows. First, in section (1), I will briefly discuss the relationship between Kant's concept of cognition and the contemporary concept of propositional knowledge. Then, in section (2), I will discuss the basic conception of cognition that Kant provides in the first *Critique*. In section (3), I will draw on Kant's discussion of these issues in the *Jäsche Logic* to flesh out this abstract characterization of cognition. Finally, in section (4), I will turn to the connections between this conception of cognition and knowledge more generally, turning last to the issue of how it is possible for us to reconcile Kant's claims about the uncognizability of things-in-themselves with the

[6]The most famous example of this response to Kant is, of course, Jacobi.

[7]For two very different recent ways of resolving this problem see Rae Langton's *Kantian Humility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Des Hogan's "How To Know Unknowable Things-in-Themselves" (in *Nous* 43 (1) 2009: 49-63).

Hogan, in particular, agrees that to understand Kant's claims about these issues we need to attend closely to the meaning of terms like "cognition" in the post-Leibnizian context in which Kant was operating. But he gives a very different analysis of what is important for Kant about these terms than the one I offer here. For Hogan, "Kant's claims of ignorance incorporate a substantive metaphysical claim about reality in itself," namely, a claim about the undetermined (free) character of things-in-themselves. There is no space here to give this reading the attention it deserves. But let me simply note that while I'm sympathetic to some of what Hogan says about Kant's views, this way of reading "cognition" seems to me to paint a misleading picture of the argumentative structure of the first *Critique* - and, in particular, of the relationship between the claims Kant makes about the limits of theoretical cognition early in first *Critique* and the positive claims he makes elsewhere about freedom.

sort of general knowledge of them that he appears to accept.

1 Cognition and Knowledge

What exactly does Kant mean by *Erkenntniß* during the Critical period? In the first instance, cognitions are a subspecies of representations. But what distinguishes these representations from others?

As noted above, "Erkenntniß" was traditionally translated as "knowledge". And while translators have come to prefer "cognition" as a translation for this term, many interpretations of what Kant means by *Erkenntniß* still bear the imprint of this tradition.[8] In particular:

(i) Since much of the discussion of knowledge in the second half of the twentieth century has focused on the idea that knowledge is best understood as something like un-Gettiered, justified true belief (or, alternatively, as warranted true belief), the traditional way of translating *Erkenntniß* has encouraged readers of Kant to think that cognitions are primarily distinguished from other representations by the fact that cognitions are better justified or warranted than other representations are.

(ii) Since the recent epistemological discussion has focused on propositional knowledge - on knowledge that P - translating *Erkenntniß* as knowledge encourages one to think that instances of cognition are wholly propositional in nature.

Given the way Kant is often discussed, neither of these assumptions is at all unnatural. But neither gives one an accurate picture of what Kant means by *Erkenntniß*. Taking

[8]The current preference for "cognition" as a translation of *Erkenntniß* is motivated in the first instance by the desire to reserve "knowledge" as a translation of "Wissen". As should be clear, I have no complaint with this choice - my only concern is that despite this shift in translation, Kant interpreters sometimes fail to take seriously enough the differences between *Erkenntniß* in Kant's sense and the concept of knowledge that has been the focus of contemporary epistemological debate.

them in reverse order, the second of them is misleading because when Kant speaks of cognitions, he has in mind - not just judgments - but also concepts and intuitions. And both of the latter two types of representation are primarily representations of objects (or classes of objects) as opposed to propositions. Moreover, while Kant does refer to some judgments as cognitions, he is clear that they count as such because they are cognitions *of objects*.[9] Thus, at the very least, Kant's use of cognition is not limited to representations with propositional content. And while some of the representations that Kant refers to as cognitions do have propositional content, such representations count as cognitions because they provide the subject with cognition of objects - and not because of their propositional content *as such*.

Of course, it is impossible to make sense of concepts as Kant understands them in isolation from the judgments that can be formed from them. In particular, the role of concepts for Kant is to serve as functions of "unity" among our intuitions. And concepts are capable of playing this role only in virtue of the manner in which they can figure as possible constituents of judgments. Thus, a concept acquires the particular content (object or objects) it has only in virtue of the manner in which it can be embedded in various judgments. So, while a judgment will only *count* as a cognition in virtue of its relationship with concepts that provide one with cognitions of objects, these concepts will only be able to play this role insofar as they are capable of also playing the role of constituents in possible judgments.

This is what makes it so natural for Kant to speak of both concepts and judgments as forms of cognition. For the sort of cognition involved in intuitions and concepts - i.e. cognition *of* an object or objects - is impossible without the sort of cognition involved in judgments - i.e. cognition *that* these objects possess certain features. But by the same token, judgments only deserve to be regarded as cognitions for Kant insofar as the concepts

[9] See, for example, Kant's claim that judgment (*qua* cognitions) are "the mediate cognition of an object". (A68/B93)

that figure in them provide us with a mechanism for the cognition of objects.[10]

Thus, as will become clearer below, insofar as the traditional translation of *Erkenntniß* as "knowledge" encourages the idea that cognition is always propositional, it can lead to a very misleading conception of Kant's concerns in his discussion of cognition. But while this source of confusion is important, it pales in comparison with the first source of confusion noted above.

Once again, a common thought among readers of Kant is that the distinction between cognitions and other sorts of representations is first and foremost an epistemological one.[11] That is, it is often assumed that what distinguishes cognitions from other sorts of representations is that we possess a certain sort of warrant for them or that they are justified in some way that other representations are not.

As we will see in more detail below, this paints a misleading picture of the distinction between cognitions and other representations as Kant understands it. For, in fact, a representation counts as a cognition for Kant not primarily because it is better warranted

[10] Ultimately, this means that there is a *sense* in which judgments may be thought of as a species of concepts - in the broad sense of "functions of unity" among one's representations. Compare Kant's definition of judgment in the *Jäsche Logic*, where he writes: "A judgment is the representation of the unity of the consciousness of various representations, or the representation of their relation insofar as they constitute a concept." (9:101)

[11] As noted above, this thought has become less common in the recent literature on these issues. For example, interpreters such as Robert Adams (in his "Things in Themselves", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57.4 (1997): 801-825) and Rae Langton have argued that what prevents us from achieving cognition of things in themselves relates to our inability to represent them in sufficiently rich terms. In thinking of cognition in terms of a certain sort of representation, these authors provide an important corrective to the traditional reading of Kant's views concerning cognition. But while I am sympathetic to the general thrust of their interpretations, for reasons that will become clearer, it seems to me that neither Adams nor Langton successfully pinpoint the precise sort of representation that Kant means to pick out in speaking of "cognition". For example, while Adams rightly stresses the importance of intuition in providing cognitions with an object (in Kant's technical sense), he does not do nearly enough to explain *why* intuition is necessary in order for this to come about.

or justified than other representations, but rather because it possesses certain distinctive representational features that mark it off from other sorts of representations.[12] Thus, when Kant claims that we cannot achieve cognition of things-in-themselves, this is not a primarily a claim about the limits of our ability to make judgments in a justified or warranted fashion. Rather, it is, first and foremost, a claim about the representational limitations of our faculties - namely, that there is *an* important sense in which we cannot even successfully represent to ourselves the nature of things as they are in themselves.

To say this is not to say that we cannot understand *Erkenntniß* as a sort of knowledge in a broad, intuitive sense. For, in fact, as I will discuss below, it is quite natural to describe what Kant has in mind here as a kind of knowledge - namely, knowledge *of* objects. But it does mean that we should not assume that the sort of knowledge that Kant means to refer to with *Erkenntniß* is the sort of propositional knowledge that is the focus of contemporary epistemological debate.

In order to appreciate this point, it is helpful to consider Kant's explicit discussion of the nature of epistemic justification in the The Canon of Pure Reason towards the end of the first *Critique*.[13] For once we do so, it becomes clear that the distinction between cognitions and other representations is not a matter of their epistemic justification in any straightforward sense. There Kant discusses the different forms of "taking to be true" (*Fürwahrhalten*) that can be present when one makes a judgment. These different forms of taking to be true are distinguished from one another in virtue of the different sorts of grounds one can have for accepting a judgment. And, crucially, in his discussion of these different sorts of grounds, the distinction between cognitions and other representations plays no explicit role. Rather, Kant's distinction between different sorts of grounds or jus-

[12] Although, as we will see, these representational features are themselves connected with certain issues of justification. So it is not as if questions of justification become irrelevant here - it is just that the significance of these questions is different from what it is often imagined to be.

[13] See, in particular, his discussion of these issues in Section 3 of The Canon of Pure Reason from A820/B848-A831/B859.

tification is meant to distinguish between the grounds I can have for taking some judgment to be true. And when I take something to be true, I am (of course) making a judgment - a judgment that, much of the time, will count as a cognition. So, for example, according to Kant one can take an empirical judgment to be true because one has objectively sufficient grounds for doing so. In which case, this will count as an instance of *Wissen* or knowledge. But one can also take the same empirical judgment to be true on the basis of grounds that are sufficient only in a subjective sense, as is true in cases of *Glauben* or faith. Nonetheless, in both of these cases, one will be making an empirical judgment that is itself a cognition. Thus, the distinction between empirical judgments that possess objectively sufficient grounds and those that possess merely subjectively sufficient grounds is not identical with the distinction between cognitions and other sorts of representations. Rather, the former distinction is a distinction between different sorts of *Fürwahrhalten* involving judgments (which may or may not themselves be cognitions).[14]

Now, to be sure, not every instance of *Fürwahrhalten* involves a judgment that rises to the level of cognition. And, moreover, taking a judgment to be true can (at least in general) be based on objectively sufficient grounds in Kant's sense only if this judgment is formed from concepts that have objects in the sense about to be discussed. Thus, a judgment can be based on objectively sufficient grounds only if it is made up of representations that are themselves cognitions. In other words, only judgments which reach the level of cognitions are (at least in general) even *candidates* for the status of *Wissen* or knowledge. In this way, there is an important connection between Kant's discussion of cognition and his understanding of objective grounds. But this connection is very different from the connection that readers of Kant have often taken for granted. For while these two issues are connected, it is not the case that the primary thing that distinguishes cognitions from other sorts of representations is a matter of their grounds or justification. Rather, at least

[14]For a useful discussion of these passages, see Andrew Chignell's "Kant's Concepts of Justification" (*Nous* 41 (1) 2007: 3363) - although note that Chignell would not agree with everything I say about these matters here.

in general, being a cognition is a necessary - but not sufficient - condition for a judgment to be a possible instance of *Wissen*.[15]

2 Cognition as Objective Representation

With this in mind, let's return to our original question: what distinguishes cognitions from other representations? Here it is natural to begin with the taxonomy of different forms of representation that Kant provides in the famous *Stufenleiter* passage of the first *Critique*:

> The genus is representation in general (repraesentatio). Under it stands the representation with consciousness (perceptio). A perception that refers to the subject as a modification of its state is a sensation (sensatio), an objective perception is a cognition (cognitio).[16]

[15]So, for example, our inability to achieve cognition of God is not only (of even primarily) a matter of the fact that we lack objective grounds for assenting to God's existence. Rather, it is primarily a matter of the fact that we do not possess the sort of concept of God we would need to in order to cognize him. As discussed below, in order to possess such a concept, it would have to both (i) represent God as a determinate object and (ii) represent God in a manner that allowed us to prove his real possibility. Or, as Kant writes at A827/B855:

> If here too I would call merely theoretically taking something to be true only an hypothesis that I would be justified in assuming, I would thereby make myself liable for more of a concept of the constitution of a world-cause and of another world than I can really boast of; for of that which I even only assume as a hypothesis I must know at least enough of its properties so that I need invent not its concept but only its existence.

Here the interaction between the two requirements mentioned above is particularly important. For while we can come up with a concept of God that represents him in a highly determinate fashion, we cannot do so while preserving our ability to prove that the object of this concept is really possible.

[16]There are many difficulties concerning the proper interpretation of this passage. Most notably, Kant here includes both intuitions and concepts under the heading of "cognitions". And yet elsewhere (e.g. B146) he stresses the claim that (at least from a theoretical perspective) cognition requires the cooperation and connection of both intuitions and concepts. Giving a full account of the compatibility of these passages is no

In this passage, cognitions are characterized as possessing two characteristics. First, they are representations "with consciousness" - or "perceptions" in Kant's technical sense. And, second, they are representations that are "objective", as opposed to merely relating to the "subject's state". Or, in other words, they are perceptions that are related *both* to the subject of the perception and to some object or objects that are at least partially independent of the subject's subjective state.

But what does all this mean? Taking the second of these characteristics first, the claim that a cognition is a representation with consciousness might be taken simply to mean that

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simple matter, but the important point here is that Kant's insistence here that both intuitions and concepts have the potential to provide us with cognition of an object is perfectly compatible with the claim that intuitions and concepts can only provide us with such cognition insofar as they stand in systematic relations to cognitions of the other sort. Thus, for example, Kant is quite clear that intuitions are only capable of providing us with cognition of objects insofar as the synthesis involved in intuition has been guided by concepts in their guise as rules for intuitive synthesis. And any intuition whose synthesis has been guided by such rules will stand in certain systematic relations with concepts in their guise as discursive, general representations. As such, there need be no conflict between Kant's claim that intuitions are a species of cognition and his claim that theoretical cognition always requires the cooperation of intuitions and concepts. (For more on these issues, see the discussion in Beatrice Longuenesse's *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).)

In addition, Kant here categorizes Ideas as a sort of concept and thus, in turn, as a sort of cognition or objective representation. And yet Kant holds that many Ideas - such as our Ideas of a soul, of God, and of a world whole - lack the sort of relation to an object with is required for a representation to be an objective representation, at least from a theoretical perspective. The proper response to this concern is simply to note that Kant is here giving a taxonomy of different varieties of representation in isolation from any of the particular results of the *Critique*. Thus, while it is true that these Ideas cannot be the basis of any cognition for creatures like us, at least from a theoretical point of view - they are, at least in principle, the sorts of things that might enable a being to achieve cognition of an object. In particular, while these ideas are such that it is impossible to achieve any cognition through the application of them to the objects of experience, this only generates the result that it is impossible to achieve cognition through them in general if we restrict our attention to beings whose cognitive powers are limited to the objects of experience. And Kant does not believe that every possible being meets this description.

it is a representation that we are conscious of. But this is only part of what Kant has in mind here. In particular, when we are dealing with an objective representation - that is, a representation that has a relation to both a subject and some object (or objects) - this representation will only count as an objective representation with consciousness in Kant's sense if we are conscious of the object (or objects) that it is a representation of. Otherwise, the representation would present itself to consciousness merely as a modification of the subject's subjective state - and not as having a relation to an object that is independent of this state. Thus, in order for a representation to count as a cognition for Kant, it must provide its subject with consciousness of its object.

But what is the nature of the relationship between a cognition and its object? The most fundamental feature of the object (or objects) of a cognition is the connection between it and the "material" truth or falsity of judgments involving the cognition to which it is related. For example, a judgment whose subject is a singular cognition will be true just in case this judgment attaches to this cognition a predicate that agrees with the cognition's object. And a judgment whose subject is a general concept will be true just in case this judgment attaches to this concept a predicate that agrees with all of the possible objects that fall under the subject concept.[17] Thus, in being related to an object (or objects), a cognition (and its associated judgments) acquires a standard of correctness - of "material" truth or falsity - that extends beyond anything internal to the judgment itself, considered as a state of the subject.

Thus, contrary to what is sometimes suggested to proponents of this sort of "semantic" interpretation of cognition, it is not the case that only cognitions can be true or false in *any* sense. For, as we will see in moment, it is perfectly possible for a representation to acquire a merely formal standard of correctness without thereby qualifying as a cognition in Kant's sense of the term. Rather, it is "material" truth or falsity in particular that is the mark of a cognition in Kant's sense.

[17] Here I restrict myself to judgments with the simplest subject-predicate form.

To see why this distinction between formal and material standards of correctness matters here, though, we need to go more in depth in our consideration of these issues. For Kant goes on to argue that in order to provide a standard of material correctness in this sense, the object of a cognition must have two features that are more controversial. First, Kant claims, the object in question must be something that could actually exist - or, as Kant puts it, is "really possible". And, second, it must be determinate what the object (or objects) of the cognition is. Or, in other words, a representation of X will count as a cognition of X only insofar as it provides the subject with a consciousness of the determinate thing (or class of things) to which it is related.

2.1 Cognition and Real Possibility

The first constraint appears at many locations throughout Kant's discussion of the nature of cognition. For example:

> To cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason). (Bxxvi) [18]

But why must the object of a cognition be something that is "really possible" in Kant's sense? To understand this, it will be helpful to distinguish three modal statuses that something may have for Kant:

(i) It may be logically impossible.

(ii) It may be logically possible, but really impossible.

(iii) It may be both logically and really possible.

[18] Compare the discussion at A771/B799. For more on the importance of this constraint, see Andrew Chignell's helpful discussion in his "Real Repugnance and Belief in Things in Themselves" (in *Kant's Moral Metaphysics* (Krueger and Lipscomb, eds.), Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

If we consider each of these in turn, we can see why Kant believes that only something that is really possible is capable of playing the role of the object of a cognition. For instance, suppose that the putative object of some cognition were logically impossible. In this case, the very concept of the thing in question would involve a logical inconsistency. And such an object could hardly provide the cognitions that are related to it with a non-trivial standard of correctness in the manner the object of a cognition must. So we may safely assume that the object of a cognition is something that is at least logically possible.

But what of the second possibility? Something is logically possible, but really impossible in Kant's sense, when it is metaphysically impossible for this thing to be actual, even though the concept of it involves no logical contradiction. The problem with the putative object of a cognition having this status is, once again, that any such object would fail to provide the associated cognition with a non-trivial standard of correctness. After all, since the object in question is incapable of real existence, it cannot provide its concept with a standard of correctness over and above the purely logical standards of correctness that are *already* implicit in the concept in question *considered in isolation from its object*. Thus, any such "object" would simply provide us with another way of articulating these purely logical standards. In this way, the standards related to such an "object" would not extend beyond the concept itself in any way. Or, in other words, such an "object" would not provide its concept with a material (as opposed to formal) standard of correctness in the manner a cognition's object must for Kant.[19]

2.2 Cognition and Determinate Identity

For these reasons, it is very natural for Kant to claim that a non-trivial standard of material objective correctness can only be provided by an object that is really possible. This, as we will see below, has important consequences for Kant's understanding of cognition. But before we consider these consequences, I want to discuss the second constraint mentioned

[19] Compare Kant's discussion in the *Jäsche Logic* of the distinction between formal and material truth.

above - the idea that it must be determinate what a representation's object is insofar as the representation provides us with cognition of that object. Kant stresses this feature of cognitions again and again. For example, in the B Deduction, he writes:

> Understanding is, generally speaking, the faculty of cognitions. These consist in the *determinate* relation of a given representation to an object. An object, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united. (B137, my emphasis)

And a bit further on, we have:

> ... the categories are not restricted in thinking by the conditions of our sensible intuition, but have an unbounded field, and only the cognition of objects that we think, the *determination* of the object, requires intuition. (B166, my emphasis)

Finally, later on in the *Critique*, he writes:

> If we separate [intuitions from concepts], then we have representations that we cannot relate to any *determinate* object (A258/B314, my emphasis).

But why must the object of a cognition be determinate in some sense? According to Kant, this is a direct consequence of the idea that a cognition's object provides it with a material standard of correctness. For, as Kant puts it: "Material truth must consist in this agreement of a cognition with just that determinate object to which it is related." (9:51)

In particular, an object will only be capable of playing this role if two things are true of it. First, in order to play this role, it must be determinate which object (or class of possible objects) is relevant to the truth or falsity of judgments involving the cognition in question. Or, as Kant puts it:

> If truth consists in the agreement of a cognition with its object, then this object must thereby be distinguished from others; for a cognition is false if it does not

> agree with the object to which it is related even if it contains something that could well be valid of other objects. (A58/B83)

But in order for an object to provide the cognition associated with it with a material standard of correctness, something more than this is required. For an object will only be able to play this role to the degree that the following is true of it: for any quality, it is determinate whether or not the object in question possesses this quality. Thus, the object of a cognition can only play this role for Kant to the degree that it is determinate in two senses: it must be determinate which thing this object (or class of possible objects) is and it must be determinate what this object (or class of possible objects) is like. Of course, as will become clear, this sort of determinacy is, to some degree, a matter of degree. But a representation will count as a cognition only insofar as it possesses it.[20]

The sort of discriminating consciousness of identity that Kant has in mind here should call to mind a number of similar views within contemporary analytic philosophy. Perhaps

[20] As discussed below, the idea that cognition requires the representation of a determinate object has deep roots in the Leibnizian philosophy of mind that was dominant in Germany during Kant's life. But the history of a connection between these two notions is much older than this. In fact, both the idea that cognition requires the representation of a determinate object *and* the idea that this is only possible (in human beings) through the cooperation of an individual's sensible and intellectual faculties is fundamental to a great deal of scholastic philosophy of mind. For instance, compare the following comment of Aquinas in the *Summa contra Gentiles*:

> .. the substance of the human soul is immaterial and consequently, as we saw, is of intellectual nature: all immaterial substances are. But this doesn't yet make it a mind representing this or that thing, which it must be if it is to know determinately this or that thing ... So the mind is still potential in regard to determinate representation of the sort of things we can know, namely, the natures of things sensed. Now it is exactly these determinate natures of things that are presented to us in our images. .. so the images are understandable potentially and determinate representations of things actually ... (2.77)

most prominent of these is Gareth Evans' defense of what he calls "Russell's Principle":[21]

Russell's Principle: A necessary condition for S to be able to think about an object O (or to make a judgment about) it is that S know which object he is thinking (or attempting to think) about - he must be able to distinguish O from all other objects.

Although it is sometimes taken as a constraint on when it is possible for a subject to refer to a particular object, Evans' discussion makes it clear that the target of his discussion is something subtly different: namely, when it is possible for a subject to think (*de re*) about a particular object.[22] But even when restricted in this way, Evans' claims have seemed to many philosophers to be open to fairly clear counter-examples.[23] For is it really the case that I can only think about a particular object when I can discriminate it from other objects? The Kantian constraint we are discussing here is, at least in this regard, a good deal more plausible - for it is restricted to a particular sort of thought of an object, namely the sort of thought that puts the subject in a position to become conscious of the object of his thought as such. For even if we can think of a particular object without being able to fully discriminate from other things, it does not seem to be possible for us to become conscious of it as the particular thing it is under these circumstances. In this way, the Kantian conception of cognition we are discussing might well be regarded as representing the core of truth within Evans' discussion of singular thought.[24]

[21] See, in particular, chapter four of his *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1982).

[22] Compare his discussion of Kripke in chapter three of *The Varieties of Reference*.

[23] See, for example, the discussion in John Hawthorne and David Manley, *The Reference Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[24] Similarly, there are obvious connections between cognition in this sense and Russellian knowledge by acquaintance, but once again, our target here is considerably more restricted than was Russell's - making our claims easier to defend in proportion to this restriction.

2.3 The Interaction of these Constraints

Given all this, an objective representation with consciousness - a cognition - is just a representation of a determinate object (or objects) to consciousness. Crucially, this will only be possible if this representation makes the subject conscious of its object as something that places substantive, "material" constraints on the correctness of judgments involving this representation. For only then will the representation make the subject conscious of its object as something over and above the subject's own subjective state. Thus, in making us conscious of its object *as such* a cognition must also at least put us in a position to become conscious of this object as something that both has a determinate identity and is really possible.[25]

Thus, for Kant it is only possible to achieve cognition of something insofar as it is possible to satisfy the following two constraints:

Real Possibility: In order to cognize X we must be able to become conscious of X as a real possibility.

Determinate Content: We can only cognize X to the degree that we are able to become conscious of X's determinate identity.

A number of recent Kant interpreters have rightly stressed the importance of the first of these constraints for Kant's claims about the limits of our cognitive faculties.[26] But as important as this first constraint is, it is only possible to satisfactorily explain the limits Kant places on our cognitive faculties if we consider both of these constraints in tandem. For, as I discuss below, it is not impossible, according to Kant, for us to think of things-in-themselves in a way that makes it possible to prove their real possibility. Rather, what is impossible for us is to think of things-in-themselves in a way that *both* represents them

[25] This is why Kant often claims that cognition of an object requires the ability to "prove" - i.e. become conscious of - this object as a real possibility.

[26] See in particular Chignell's important work on these issues.

as having a determinate identity and allows us to prove their real possibility.[27]

Thus, while various readers of Kant have stressed one of these two constraints in relative isolation from the other, in order to fully understand Kant's claims about the limits of human cognition, it is crucial to consider how these constraints interact with one another. And, just as importantly, to truly understand Kant's conception of cognition as something more than an *ad hoc* bundle of such constraints, it is vital to understand how both of these constraints arise naturally out of a single, highly intuitive conception of what cognition requires. In both these respects, I hope that the account I am developing here represents a significant advance on past accounts of these issues.

For example, while Chignell quite correctly stresses the importance of a constraint like Real Possibility, for the most part he focuses on this constraint as opposed to constraints like Determinate Content. Thus, for reasons I discuss below, he is poorly placed to explain why cognition of things-in-themselves is impossible in the manner Kant claims. Moreover, even with respect to Real Possibility, Chignell fails to explain how this constraint is rooted in a more basic conception of cognition in the manner I have been developing here.[28] Thus, it seems to me that my account of cognition represents a significant advance on Chignell's understanding of these issues - although, to be sure, it builds upon some very important insights of Chignell in these areas.

[27] Chignell recognizes that something like both of these constraints must be active in Kant's discussion. For he stresses that the problem of whether some idea counts as a cognition is tantamount to the problem of "finding *really harmonious positive content*" for this idea. But nonetheless his discussion focuses primarily on the significance of the first of these constraints - while saying rather little about the, to my mind central, role that the second constraint plays in Kant's discussion.

[28] For example, in his "Real Repugnance and our Ignorance of Things-in-Themselves: A Lockean Problem in Kant and Hegel", Chignell writes, "It is unclear (to me at least) whether this is Kant's most fundamental answer to the question: there may be more to say about why our faculties do not reliably track real modality or about why proof of real possibility is required for knowledge in the first place." (136) One of my goals here is to offer at least the beginnings of an answer to these questions (although there is much more to be said about both).

Similarly, while authors such as Ameriks have stressed the importance of a constraint like Determinate Content for Kant's conception of cognition, they have not focused in the manner that is necessary on the crucial question of how this constraint interacts with a constraint like Real Possibility.[29] Thus, once again, they have failed to identify the real source of Kant's understanding of the limits of our cognitive capacities. Once again, it is important to stress here that simply combining together the claims of authors such as Ameriks and the claims of authors such as Chignell is not sufficient to generate a compelling picture of Kant's views about these issues. For to do so would give the impression that Kant's claims about the limits of human cognition are the product of a brute and arbitrary combination of different possible constraints on what sort of representation should count as a cognition. Hopefully, I have already said enough here to indicate that, far from this being the case, both of these constraints follow quite naturally from a single, unified, and quite intuitive picture of what cognition requires. Thus, far from being the product of an arbitrary collection of constraints, Kant's understanding of the limits of our cognitive faculties stems from a quite quite minimal and well-grounded conception of what cognition involves.

For these reasons, as will become clearer, these constraints on cognition are central to many aspects of the Critical philosophy. For example, intuition is central for Kant's account of theoretical cognition because exhibiting the object of a concept in intuition simultaneously accomplishes two tasks. First, it allows one to establish the real possibility of this object. And, second, it does so in a manner that gives the concept in question the determinacy of content that true cognition of an object requires. While intuition is not the only means for accomplishing these two tasks in tandem, it is the primary means for doing so that we have available to us from a theoretical perspective. As a result, it plays a central role in Kant's account of the possibility of theoretical cognition in the manner that is familiar to any reader of Kant.

[29] See again Ameriks' *Interpreting Kant's Critiques*.

More generally, whenever a concept has a possible object in this sense, we may, following Kant, speak of it as having "objective validity". For any concept that has a possible object is, in virtue of this fact, a possible constituent of an objectively valid judgment. Similarly, as noted above, judgments of this sort are the sort of thing that we might (at least in principle) have objectively sufficient grounds to take to be true - thus such judgments are possible candidates for the status of *Wissen* or objectively-grounded knowledge. So there is a tight connection here between (i) a representation having an object in this sense, (ii) it having objective validity, and (iii) the fact that judgments involving it may constitute knowledge (*Wissen*) in Kant's sense.[30]

3 Comparison, Identity and Diversity, and Objective Representation

A cognition, then, is a representation that provides the subject with a consciousness of its object (or objects) as such. And, in particular, it must represent its object (or objects) so as to make us conscious of the *determinate identity* of this object, while also enabling to us show that this object is really possible.

I've already said a fair amount about what the second of these constraints requires, but the first constraint should remain rather obscure. In order to clarify what this first constraint requires, I want to turn now to what is, in many ways, Kant's most explicit definition of cognition, which appears in his discussion of the various forms of representation in the *Jäsche Logic*.

There, in giving a taxonomy of the different species of representation, Kant begins much as he does in the *Stufenleiter*. In particular, in both these passages he draws a

[30]This explains why Kant sometimes moves very freely between the conditions on the possibility of *a priori Erkenntniß* and the conditions on the possibility of *a priori Wissen*. (See, e.g. B2-3.) What explains such passages is not any equation of *Erkenntniß* and *Wissen*, but instead the idea that determinate *a priori Wissen* of some subject matter will only be possible to the degree that determinate *a priori Erkenntniß* is.

basic distinction between representations with and without consciousness, referring to the former as perceptions. But when he turns to the task of distinguishing cognitions from other perceptions in the *Logic*, he appears to do so in a different fashion than in the *Stufenleiter*. For the definition of cognition that Kant gives in the *Jäsche Logic* makes no explicit reference to the objective character of cognition at all. Instead, the definition Kant provides there contains two main elements:

To cognize something is (i) to represent that thing to oneself "in comparison with other things both as to identity and diversity", and (ii) to do so "with consciousness".[31]

Is this, then, a competing conception of what is distinctive about cognitions as a subspecies of conscious representations? Fortunately, it is not necessary to read it in this way. Rather, Kant is drawing much the same distinction here that he is drawing in the *Stufenleiter* passage - only in somewhat different terms. Thus, we can make use of this definition of cognition to better understand what Kant means by cognition in the first *Critique* - and, in particular, to better understand the Determinate Content criterion on cognition noted above.[32]

In order to do so, though, we need first to understand the definition of cognition that Kant provides in the *Jäsche Logic*. And to do this, we need to understand what it is to

[31] 9:65. A similar passage appears in the *Vienna Logic* at 24:846, where Kant writes: "To cognize, *percipere*, is to represent something in comparison with others and to have insight into its identity or diversity from them." And compare the discussion in the *Blomberg Logic* at 24:135-6.

There has been considerable controversy about the degree to which the *Jäsche Logic* represents Kant's own views. In what follows I attempt to explain why it is reasonable to view what Kant says about cognition here as representative of his views on the subject. But, of course, the more skeptical one is about the status of the *Jäsche Logic*, the less significant such quotes will seem.

[32] Kant also makes the connection between cognition and comparison central to his account of cognition in the *Lectures on Metaphysics*. For example: "With respect to the production of representations, the cognitive faculty is (a) the faculty of comparing. To this belongs wit as the faculty whereby we find similarity, and the power of judgment whereby we find difference in things." (29:881)

represent something to oneself in comparison with other things as to identity and diversity.[33]

What does this involve? Well, suppose I want to compare two everyday objects with one another as to identity and diversity. And suppose I want to do so with consciousness. Then I want to compare these two objects with one another in a manner that makes me conscious of their identity or diversity. As we have already discussed, there are two related notions of identity and diversity that might be at issue here: the numerical identity and diversity of the things being compared and their specific identity and diversity - i.e. whether they share the same qualitative features.

For Leibniz, of course, there was an extremely tight connection between these two forms of identity and diversity - since, on a Leibnizian account of these issues, every instance of numerical diversity must be grounded in a difference in the inner determinations of the things in question. For Kant, the connection between these two forms of identity is somewhat more complicated - since Kant holds that it is possible to distinguish objects in space and time purely on the basis of their spatial-temporal location, which in turn cannot be reduced in a Leibnizian fashion.[34] Thus, as noted above, the comparison of two things with respect to their numerical identity and diversity can, for Kant, occur in two different ways. First, we may become conscious of numerical identity and diversity through the

[33]In the passage under discussion, Kant appears to speak of the comparison of the objects of representations with one another. But in general, when Kant speaks of comparison, what is at issue is the comparison of representations with one another. To some readers, there may seem to be a conflict between these two ways of using "comparison". But, in fact, for Kant there is a close relationship between the two. For Kant, whenever we compare the objects of our representations with one another, we do so via comparing these representations with one another. So in this sense, the comparison of objects is just a particular instance of the comparison of representations. Or, in other words, one way in which we can compare two representations with one another is to compare them with one another with respect to their objects. See Longuenesse's *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* for a very helpful discussion of the relations between these two forms of comparison.

[34]For Kant's relationship to Leibniz on this issue, see e.g. the discussion in the *Lectures on Metaphysics* (29:839-840).

spatial-temporal relationships between objects in space and time. And, second, we may become conscious of numerical identity and diversity through the predicates or determinations we attribute to the things we are comparing. In the latter case, we will compare two things with respect to their numerical identity and diversity through comparing them with respect to their specific identity and diversity. In former case, on the other hand, no such qualitative comparison may be required. But, of course, this form of comparison will only be available insofar as the objects in question lie within space and time.

Thus, the connection between these two forms of identity and diversity is more complicated for Kant than it is for Leibniz. Still, in the case of non-spatial-temporal things, such as things-in-themselves, these two forms of identity will line up in much the same fashion for Kant as they do for Leibniz. And when he speaks of our ability to consciously compare things with respect to identity and diversity, Kant appears to have both of these (closely connected) sorts of identity and diversity in mind. Thus, in order to represent my coffee cup C in conscious comparison with the ashtray A, I need to represent C and A in a manner that makes me conscious of their numerical identity and diversity. And this ability must be sufficient to enable me to become conscious of their specific identity and diversity.[35]

Crucially, in both cases, cognition will also require that the objects in question and their relations be something that we are conscious of. Thus, the ability to become conscious that our representations represent one object as opposed to another is the distinctive mark of cognition as defined in the *Logic*. Having cognition, in this sense, involves being conscious of *what it is* that you are thinking about - or, in other words, it involves the ability to

[35]Much the same may be said of general cognitions, which represent properties (or classes of possible objects). After all, suppose I want to compare two properties with one another as to their identity and diversity. And that I want to do so with consciousness. Then I must represent these properties in such a way that my representations make me conscious of their identity and diversity. And this will require, at the very least, that my representations put me in a position to be conscious of the possible identity and diversity of the extensions associated with these properties.

become conscious of the object - be it particular or general - that your representation represents *as such*.[36]

This, though, may seem an implausibly demanding constraint on when we can be said to cognize something. For surely we can cognize an object even though we are not in a position to compare it with *every* other actual or possible thing with respect to *both* numerical and specific identity and diversity? After all, as Kant himself notes, we often to seem to have "confused" or "indistinct" cognitions of an object.[37] And in such cases, it seems that we have some sort of cognition of a thing, even though we are not in a position to compare this thing with every other possible thing. For example, surely it is possible to form a cognition of the Evening Star, even though one is completely ignorant of the fact that it is identical with the Morning Star? And surely it possible for me to form a cognition of the coffee cup in front of me, even though I am not in a position to become conscious of its entire specific identity? In such cases, it seems, I have a sort of cognition of a thing, even if it is somewhat confused or indistinct.

What this indicates, of course, is that we should not understand the idea that cognition requires conscious comparison in all-or-nothing terms. Rather, we need to remember that, for Kant, not all cognition is created equal. That is, for Kant - like nearly every early modern philosopher - cognition comes in degrees of clarity and distinctness. And, for Kant, these degrees of clarity and distinctness are determined, at least in part, by our ability to perform the sort of conscious comparison under discussion. For example, as

[36]Compare Smit: "To cognize a thing, one must be conscious of a thing in respect of its determinate identity, so as to distinguish it from (some) other things." (243)

[37]See, in particular, the discussion of "confused" and "indistinct" representations at 9:35. A representation is "indistinct" for Kant just in case "we are conscious of the whole representation, but not of the manifold contained in it". A representation is confused if it is indistinct as a result of some sort of "disorder" among its parts. As defined here, both distinctness and indistinctness presuppose that we are conscious of the representation in question - that is, they presuppose that the representation is "clear" in the sense of the term that Kant makes use of in this passage. (Although note that Kant also sometimes refers to distinctness as a "higher degree of clarity".)

he uses these terms in the *Logic*, the distinctness of a representation is a matter of the "quantitative perfection" of this representation - which, in turn, is a matter of its "objective distinctness". And a representation's level of objective distinctness, as Kant's subsequent discussion makes clear, is determined by the degree to which this representations makes the subject conscious of its object as a distinct thing.

Here it is crucial to distinguish two ways in which Kant speaks of a representation as distinct or indistinct. First, we can consider whether a representation (considered on its own) is distinct - i.e. we can consider whether all of its component parts or marks are themselves clear.[38] This sort of distinctness is the product of a full analysis of the concept in question. But, according to Kant, this is not the only sense in which we can consider whether a representation is distinct - nor, in fact, the most important one. For we can also consider whether a representation is distinct in relation to its object - or, in other words, we can consider whether a representation provides the subject with a distinct consciousness of its object. This second form of distinctness requires the first form of distinctness but should not be identified with it. For while the first form of distinctness is the product of analysis alone, this sort of distinctness is always the product of a synthesis that produces a consciousness of the object.[39]

It is this latter, more comprehensive sort of distinctness that, for Kant, requires that we be able to perform the sort of conscious comparison at issue here.[40] And it is this

[38] Compare 9:58.

[39] Or, as Kant puts it in the Vienna Logic, "the act of making objects distinct occurs synthetically, the act of making concepts distinct occurs analytically." (24:845) (See also: "The greatest logical perfection as to clarity is distinctness. In Wolffian logics it is always only the analytic mode of distinctness that is considered. There is a far more extensive mode, however, namely the synthetic production of distinctness. Analytic production does not nourish cognition, it only analyzes cognition that is given to me, so I learn to distinguish what was already contained beforehand in that cognition." (24.843)) Finally, compare the very similar claim at 9:64.

[40] For, as Kant writes in the *Anthropology* - using "clarity" to refer to both the "first degree" of clarity (clarity proper) and the second degree thereof (distinctness): "Consciousness of one's representations, which suffices for the distinction of one object from another, is clarity." (7:137-8)

more demanding sort of distinctness - distinctness as a representation of an object - that Kant appeals to in the *Logic* in distinguishing cognition from lesser forms of conscious representation. In other words, as Kant characterizes it there, we can cognize an object only to the degree that our representations provide us with a clear and distinct consciousness of this object. And this is possible only insofar as we are capable of performing the sort of conscious comparison discussed above.

In this way distinctness is one of the essential perfections of cognitions considered in relation to their objects. That is, the more distinct our cognition of some object is, the more perfect this cognition will be. Or, more helpfully, the more distinct our cognition of something is, the more fully we will cognize this thing.

Given this, it is essential to cognition that full or perfect cognition of an object will involve the ability to consciously compare this object with respect to both numerical and specific identity and diversity. And, more generally, we can be said to cognize some thing only to the degree that our representation of it allows us to engage in this sort of conscious comparison. Or:

Numerical Identity: One can only cognize X to the degree that one can represent X in a manner that allows one to become conscious of X's numerical identity and diversity.

Specific Identity: One can only cognize X to the degree that one can represent X in a manner that allows one to become conscious of X's specific identity and diversity.

Thought of in this way, these constraints allow that we might have partial or incomplete cognition of something without being able to consciously compare it with every other possi-

Note that this aspect of Kant's conception of cognition is a direct successor to Leibniz's understanding of the same. For example, in his "Mediations on Cognition, Truth, and Ideas", Leibniz defines a clear representation as follows: ".. a clear notion is like the one an assayer has of gold - that is, a notion connected with listable marks and tests that are sufficient to distinguish the represented thing from all other similar bodies."

ble thing. But nonetheless, given these constraints, there is an essential connection between cognition and conscious comparison. For, given them, we can only cognize something to the degree to which we are capable of becoming conscious of its determinate identity - or, in other words, we can only cognize it to the degree that our representation of it allow us to achieve a clear consciousness of it in the sense defined above.[41]

In this way, although there is an essential connection between conscious comparison and cognition for Kant, this connection does not demand any *particular* degree of consciousness of identity. Rather, cognition comes in degrees, which correspond to the degree to which we are conscious of the determinate identity of thing being cognized. Of course, in some cases, like the case of things-in-themselves, our consciousness of identity will turn out to be so impoverished that it misleading to speak of us as having *any* cognition of the things in question. But this is ultimately just one case along a progression that runs from full cognition of a thing to a completely indeterminate - and thus contentless - representation.[42]

Thus, Kant's discussion of conscious comparison in the *Logic* shows us how to flesh out the Determinate Content requirement noted above. This requirement was motivated by the idea that a representation can only count as cognition of an object insofar as it makes the subject conscious of its object as such. And this will only be possible insofar as the representation provides the subject with a consciousness of this object's determinate identity - something which, in turn, will only be possible insofar as one is able to consciously

[41] Although there is a sense in which the resulting notion of cognition is a technical notion, it is important to stress here that it actually corresponds quite nicely to our ordinary understanding of what it is to know some thing. So, in discussing what it is to cognize an object, Kant is capturing a quite intuitive form of knowledge - even if this sort of knowledge is not the sort of knowledge that is the focus of contemporary epistemological debates. For more on this, see below.

[42] An additional feature of Kant's views that is important to stress in this context is the fact that he takes the objects of ordinary empirical cognition to be more indeterminate than most philosophers do today. The indeterminacy of these objects plays an important role in Kant's (post-Leibnizian) arguments for their ideality and the related ideality of space and time. But full consideration of these issues would require more space than we have available here.

compare this object with other things as to identity and diversity. For it is only in virtue of being capable of consciously comparing the object of some representation with those things that are distinct from it that can we become conscious of this object as a determinate thing distinct from other things of a similar sort.[43] Thus, a representation will only satisfy the Determinate Content requirement to the degree that it also satisfies the two Identity requirements we have just noted.

In this way, even if Kant's two definitions of cognition are not quite equivalent, they are very closely related to one another. And, in particular, any limitation on cognition qua conscious comparison as to identity and diversity will also count as a limitation on cognition qua objective representation. For we can represent an object in this latter sense only to the degree that we can consciously compare it to other things with respect to identity and diversity.

Given this, it is not surprising that Kant often stresses the role that comparison plays as a necessary condition of cognition. For example, he begins the Introduction to the B Edition of the *Critique* by stressing that cognition only arises in so far as we compare the representations given to us by the senses:

> There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to *compare these*, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience. (B1, my emphasis)

And Kant makes a similar connection between comparison and cognition explicit at A97

[43] As philosophers inspired by Kant, such as P.F. Strawson, have often stressed. (See his *Individuals* (London: Routledge, 1959) and, in particular, his discussion of the connections between being able to identify some particular thing and being able to place this thing within a more general spatial-temporal world.)

of the *Critique*, where he writes:

> If every individual representation were entirely foreign to the other, as it were isolated and separated from it, then there would never arise anything like cognition, which is a whole of compared and connected representations. (A97) [44]

Finally, nowhere is the role of comparison in cognition more clear than in Kant's discussion towards the beginning of the Amphiboly, where he writes:

> Prior to all objective judgments we compare the concepts, with regard to their identity (of many representations under one concept) for the sake of universal judgments, or their difference, for the generation of particular ones, with regard to agreement, for affirmative judgments, or opposition, for negative ones, etc. (A262/B318)

As this last quote in particular makes plain, objective judgment - and so cognition - is only possible for the Kant of the *Critique* insofar as we have compared and connected together many different representations or concepts.[45] Given the nature of cognition and the Determinate Content constraint in particular, this should come as no surprise. For given this account of cognition, cognition of an object will be possible only insofar as we are able to compare this object to other things with respect to their numerical and

[44] Both of these quotes stress the role that both comparison *and* connection play in producing cognition. Although this is not my present focus, there is nothing surprising about this given my reading of cognition. After all, given this reading, we can only achieve cognition of an object - and, in particular, of an object as distinct from other things - insofar as we represent this object in relation to these other things. And this, naturally enough, requires that we represent this object using a representation that has been connected to representations of the other objects it is being compared to. So, in Kant's view, no comparison of the objects of representation is possible without these representations being connected together in certain ways.

[45] For further evidence of this sort, see Kant's discussion of whether the 'I think' enables us to the achieve cognition of the self in the Paralogisms.

specific identity and diversity. Of course, all three of these passages are concerned, in the first instance, with the sort of pre-consciousness synthesis that makes intuition (or so cognition) possible for Kant. But this synthesis is relevant here only insofar as it lays the groundwork for the sort of conscious comparison that we have been discussing here. Thus, there is a tight connection between the manner in which these two forms of comparison are relevant here.[46]

4 Knowledge, Cognition, and Things-in-Themselves

Thus, despite initial appearances, it is in fact possible to reconcile the descriptions of cognition that Kant provides in the first *Critique* and in the *Jäsche Logic*. And when we do so, we arrive at a conception of cognition according to which a representation counts as a cognition of some thing just in case this thing is the determinate object of this representation - where this requires (at least) that the representation allow us to consciously compare this thing with other possible things with respect to identity and diversity - be this the identity of a particular thing in the case of singular cognitions or the identity of a class of objects in the case of general cognitions.

[46] It may at first glance seem as though the role comparison is playing here is subtly different from the role it was playing in the *Jäsche Logic* passage we have been discussing. In particular, in these quotes, it seems as though what is at issue is the comparison of representations - and not the comparison of their objects, which was the focus in the *Jäsche Logic* passage. But while there is a sense in which this is correct, as Kant makes clear immediately following the last quote just noted, the sort of comparison of representations that is at issue here involves the comparison of "the contents of concepts" - i.e. the comparison of "the things themselves" which are the objects of these concepts. Thus, when Kant speaks of the comparison of representations in this context, the sort of comparison he primarily has in mind is the comparison of representations in virtue of their objects. And given this, what is at issue here is ultimately the same sort of comparison as was at issue in the *Jäsche Logic* (insofar as that form of comparison applies to general representations like concepts). At the end of the day, in both cases, the comparison in question is a comparison *both* of representations and of their objects - for it is a comparison of representations in virtue of their objects.

In addition, remember from our initial discussion of cognition that in order to cognize something we must able to be conscious of it as really possible. As we will see in a moment, the interaction between these two constraints is crucial for understanding the limits on our cognitive faculties that Kant argues for in the first *Critique*. For, in claiming that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves, Kant is claiming that we cannot form representations of things-in-themselves that satisfy both of the requirements just stated.

Before discussing why this is the case, though, I want to return to the differences between the Kantian notion of cognition and the contemporary philosophical concept of knowledge. In particular, it should now be plain that Kant's conception of cognition is quite different from the sort of propositional knowledge that is the focus of contemporary epistemological discussion. For not only is cognition here, at least in the first instance, cognition of a thing or property as opposed to knowledge of a proposition, what is distinctive about having cognition of some thing is not that one's representation of it is particularly well-justified or warranted. Rather, what distinguishes cognition of something from a mere representation of it is that a cognition of something must represent this thing in a manner that makes us conscious of what it is that is the object of our representation. Now this is, to be sure, a species of knowledge in an intuitive sense. For cognition of something constitutes knowledge *of* the thing that is the object of our cognition. When we cognize an object, we will know what it is and how it is different from other things.

In other words, to achieve cognition of some domain of objects in Kant's sense is a matter of *knowing them*. This, of course, will require that we have a good deal of propositional knowledge about them in something like the contemporary sense. And this sort of knowledge of objects, of course, often forms the grounds on which our proposition knowledge is based. But not every instance of propositional knowledge will count as an instance of cognition in this sense.

This is particularly important with respect to the question, with which we began, of how we can make coherent sense of Kant's claim that we cannot cognize things-in-themselves,

given that Kant plainly does believe that we can know a good deal about the nature of things-in-themselves in general. Kant interpreters have gone to great lengths to reconcile these two aspects of Kant's theoretical philosophy. But if we conceive of cognition in the manner I have suggested, there is no great difficulty in doing so. In particular, if cognition requires an ability to consciously compare the things cognized with respect to identity and diversity, then it is easy to see why we might, on the one hand, *know* that things-in-themselves exist, and even that they have certain general properties, without thereby having cognition of them. For this sort of knowledge of general facts concerning things-in-themselves need not be sufficient to provide us with the ability to consciously compare them with respect to identity and diversity. And, even if did, it might not provide us with the ability to consciously compare them in a manner that makes us conscious of the things being compared as *real possibilities*.

For instance, consider the sorts of facts about things-in-themselves that Kant accepts. As noted above, the facts in question include the fact that things-in-themselves affect us, that they are the ground of appearances, and that they lie outside of space and time. At least on their face, these are non-trivial claims about the nature of things-in-themselves - claims that, at least insofar as they involve existence claims, go beyond mere analytic truths. But while they are by no means trivial, it is also clear that knowledge of these general properties of things-in-themselves is insufficient to provide us with cognition of them in the sense discussed above.

In particular, knowing these general facts about things-in-themselves does not put us in a position to know the determinate objects of our representations, when these representations concern things-in-themselves. For example, given Kant's claims about things-in-themselves, one way we can represent them is as the grounds underlying the world of appearances. But while doing so may allow me to refer to the things-in-themselves that ground the appearances I am aware of, it does not allow me to do so in a manner that makes me conscious of the relations of identity and diversity that exist among these

things-in-themselves.

For example, consider two experiences of mine, E and F. I can think about the things-in-themselves underlying each of these two experiences simply by use of the definite descriptions: the thing- or things-in-themselves that ground E and the thing- or things-in-themselves that ground F. And, given that I have in fact experienced E and F, I may well be in a position to "prove" in the relevant sense that things-in-themselves answering to these descriptions are really possible. For I may appeal to the testimony of my experience, plus the connection between the existence of this experience and the existence of the things-in-themselves in question to do so. But while I can form such representations, these representations - plus all of my general knowledge about things-in-themselves - do not place me in a position to say anything about whether the thing- or things-in-themselves that ground E are the same as the thing- or things-in-themselves that ground F. So these representations - plus my general knowledge about things-in-themselves - do not place me in a position to form a determinate conception of these objects in the sense of interest to Kant.

In particular, these representations will not put me in a position to consciously compare the things-in-themselves I am thinking about with one another with respect to their numerical identity and diversity. And something very similar is true of my ability to compare the things-in-themselves I am thinking of in this way with other things-in-themselves with respect to their specific identity and diversity. For while the mode of presentation I am using to think of the things-in-themselves in question does make certain claims about the sort of things they are, these claims are extremely limited. And beyond these limits, the manner in which I am thinking of them does not put me in a position to determine whether the things I am thinking of are instances of one species (of potential thing-in-itself) as opposed to another. So while the ability to form these sorts of representations does allow me to form some very general judgments about things-in-themselves, it does not provide me with an ability to consciously compare them in at least two crucial respects - and so

does not amount to an ability to truly cognize things-in-themselves in the sense of interest to Kant. In other words, these representation of things-in-themselves provides me with *such* a minimal consciousness of their determinate identity that it would be misleading to speak of me cognizing them in any meaningful sense. In other words, while there are some *very* weak standards of material correctness associated with these representations, they are so weak that it is impossible to speak of us having any genuine cognition of objects in this case. Thus, while we do know some very general truths about things-in-themselves, these truths are nowhere near substantive enough to provide us with anything like genuine cognitions of these things.

Obviously, this fact is the product of the impoverished nature of the concepts we are employing to think about things-in-themselves in this example. So we might try to achieve cognition of things-in-themselves by "enriching" these concepts in some way - say example, by packaging them with some positive theory of the nature of things-in-themselves. For example, we might try to accomplish this task by characterizing the nature of things-in-themselves using the theory of their nature provided by one of Kant's rationalist predecessors. By doing so, we *might* be able to arrive at a set of concepts for thinking of things-in-themselves that do provide us with a basis for consciously comparing them with another as to identity and diversity, at least to a substantial degree. But in arriving at this capacity via this route, we would run afoul of the other restriction on cognition noted above. For once we "enrich" our account of things-in-themselves in this way, we can no longer rely on the testimony of experience to prove the real possibility of things-in-themselves so conceived. For the existence of our experiences and the general fact that these experiences must have some ground does not provide us with a basis for claiming that things-in-themselves meeting this "enriched" description are really possible. So while this maneuver might provide us with the ability to conceive of things-in-themselves as determinate objects, it would only do so via sacrificing our ability to prove their real possibility. And thus, on balance it would bring us no closer to cognition of them in Kant's sense.

Thus, referring back to our earlier discussion, our inability to cognize things-in-themselves is a product of our inability to form a representation of such things that provides us with even a moderately clear and distinct cognition of them, while also allowing us to prove their real possibility.[47] It is only by considering the interaction between these two requirements on cognitions that it is possible to appreciate why Kant takes intuition to be essential to human cognition, at least of a theoretical sort. For what is distinctive about intuition in the present context is that when we exhibit the object of some concept to ourselves in intuition, we simultaneously accomplish two things. First, we demonstrate that the object of the concept is really (as opposed to merely logically) possible. And second, we provide the concept in question with a determinacy of content that it would otherwise lack. This, then, is what makes intuition so important to human cognition for Kant: intuitions possess the ability to provide our concepts with the determinacy that cognition requires *in such a way* that it is possible to prove the real possibility of the resulting determinate object. Explaining just why this is true is, of course, a very complicated issue. But the essential feature of intuition in this regard is the manner in which an intuition makes a *singular* object *immediately* present to the cognizer. For it is precisely the combination of these two canonical features of intuition that allow it to simultaneously present a determinate object to the the cognizer in a manner that guarantees its real possibility.[48]

It is the impossibility of completing both these tasks simultaneously with respect to things-in-themselves (at least from a theoretical perspective) that makes cognition of them impossible. One of the primary advantages of this way of accounting for the limits of our

[47] Thus, the situation with respect to things-in-themselves is similar to what Kant describes in the following passage of the Blomberg Logic: "But when the relation of a thing to the boundaries of human cognition is such that it cannot be cognized clearly enough, but always remains obscure, then in most cases we do not ascribe responsibility to him who does not cognize the thing clearly enough, but rather to the thing itself, or to him who expounds it. ... We call this cognitio, into [which] man does not and cannot have insight, *obscure objective*$_L$." (24:121)

[48] Something similar is true, in a somewhat qualified sense, of the that the so-called fact of reason plays in practical cognition. But this is a topic that would take us very far afield of the main subject of this essay.

ability to cognize things-in-themselves is that it - unlike many other such theories - does not rest on any particular view about what the distinction between things-in-themselves and appearances amounts to. For the difficulty just described will arise with respect to any conception of things-in-themselves *so long as it is allowed that the nature of things-in-themselves extends beyond what we are capable of intuiting.* For so long as this is the case, it will be impossible for us to rely on intuition as a means of simultaneously providing our concepts of things-in-themselves with determinate content *and* demonstrating the real possibility of the resulting conception of things-in-themselves. And while there is, of course, a great deal of room for debate about the precise relationship between things-in-themselves and appearances, this claim - that the nature of things-in-themselves is not exhausted by how they appear to us - should not be at all controversial. Thus, this way of thinking of the limits of cognition allows us to understand the fundamental limits Kant places on our cognitive faculties without entering into the endless controversies concerning the precise metaphysical status of things-in-themselves. This, I take it, is one of the primary advantages of the interpretation I have been offering here when compared with other, not-unrelated interpretations in the recent literature.[49]

In any case, I hope I have said enough to indicate that Kant takes the task of cognizing things-in-themselves to be impossible (in the broadest possible sense) because of the interaction between two fundamental constraints that are built into his conception of cognition: the demand that cognition be cognition of a determinate object and the demand that this object be something we can show to be really possible. If we accept this, then it is clear that, once we properly understand what Kant has in mind when he speaks of "cognition", there need be no great mystery about how Kant can both deny that we can achieve cognition of things-in-themselves and claim that we can know many general facts about them. For knowing a good deal about the nature of A's in general is not always sufficient to provide one with cognition of any particular A as a determinate and really

[49]Compare, in particular, the interpretations offered by Langton, Adams, and Hogan.

possible object.