Arguing for transcendental idealism is among Kant’s principal aims in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹ I aim to show that his primary argument has been misinterpreted due to the neglect of his hylomorphic theory of our cognitive faculties.² Kant’s transcendental idealism involves the limitation of our cognition to appearances and the more specific limitation of space and time to appearances. What is the relationship between these limitations?

On the standard interpretation, Kant argues for the limitation of our cognition by arguing for the limitation of space and time, and he does so primarily in his Aesthetic’s treatment of our sensibility. My aim is to offer a deeper explanation. I grant that our cognition cannot be of things in themselves because space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves. I argue, however, that the reason why space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves is that the categories do have a valid application to objects in space and time but do not have a valid application to things in themselves. On my interpretation, it is primarily in the Deduction’s treatment of the understanding where Kant argues for the limitation of space and time and the limitation of our cognition.

I will make my argument by reflecting on Kant’s hylomorphism, which states that our sensibility relates to the understanding as matter relates to form. I will argue that while on the standard interpretation our sensibility’s limits determine the limits of our cognition, Kant’s

---

¹ References to Kant’s *Critique* cite Kant 1998, and use A/B pagination. References to his *Prolegomena* cite Kant Kant 1997 and references to his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* cite 2004, in Akademie pagination.

² Kant distinguishes analytic and synthetic methods of proving transcendental idealism in his *Prolegomena* (4:274-275), and direct and indirect proofs in his Antinomies. (A506/B534 and A789/B817). Kant’s direct, synthetic proof is his primary argument for transcendental idealism, and it is the topic of this paper.
hylomorphism implies that it is the understanding’s limits that determine our sensibility’s limits specifically and the limits of our cognition generally.

1. I will begin with some terminology. Kant distinguishes two species of our cognitions, and two faculties of our cognition. Intuitions relate immediately to objects and are singular, while concepts are general representations that relate to objects by means of intuitions with common marks. (A19/B33, A50-51/B74-75, and A320/B376-377) Sensibility is our faculty of intuitions, and the understanding is our faculty of concepts.

Kant distinguishes the matter and the form of our cognitions. Their matter is their relation to objects (A58-59/B83), while their form is the way in which their matters are ordered amongst one another (A20/B34). Sensations are the matters of our empirical intuitions, and space and time are the forms (A20-22/B34-36). The categories are the forms of all our cognitions (A79-80/B105-106). The matters of our empirical cognitions are empirical intuitions in space and time (A50-51/B75). The matters of our *a priori* cognitions are space and time themselves (A76-77/B102).

The question is: What is the fundamental reason why our cognition cannot be of things in themselves? Is it that we cannot have intuitions of things in themselves? And, is this because space and time do not apply to things in themselves? Or, is it more fundamentally because the categories do not have a valid application to things in themselves?

2. The standard interpretation endorses the former alternative. It is motivated by Karl Ameriks’s criticism of “short arguments.” Ameriks explains, “The key idea of what I mean by a ‘short argument’ is, very roughly, that reflection on the mere notion of representation, or on such
very general features as the passivity or activity involved in representation, is what is meant to show that knowledge is restricted from any determination of things in themselves.” (Ameriks 1990, 63) Ameriks contends that such short arguments are specious, and that they are not Kant’s own arguments for transcendental idealism.

Ameriks instead proposes, “transcendental idealism rests, first, on a series of complex considerations entailing the ideality of space and time, and, secondly, on an equally complex series of considerations requiring that all our theoretical knowledge is limited to spatio-temporal determinations.” (Ameriks 1990, 64) On Ameriks’s interpretation, Kant’s Aesthetic argues that space and time are the forms of our intuitions, and that space and time are limited to appearances, from which it follows that our intuitions are limited to appearances. His Analytic then argues that our cognitions relate to objects only by means of intuitions, and since the Aesthetic has already argued that our intuitions are limited to appearances, it follows our cognitions are limited to appearances too.

The key point on which I will disagree with Ameriks’s interpretation is that it privileges the Aesthetic’s treatment of our sensibility over the Analytic’s treatment of the understanding in Kant’s primary argument for transcendental idealism. Ameriks writes, “[F]or all our theoretical purposes, the use of [the understanding] is tied down to a reference to space and time, and hence the claims of our understanding […] are essentially restricted by the ideality of these forms of intuition.” (Ameriks 2003, 136-137) For Ameriks, sensibility’s limits restrict the understanding’s. The understanding can relate to whatever range of objects our sensibility relates to, and the reason the understanding cannot relate to things in themselves is that our sensibility does not relate to things in themselves, because of its spatiotemporal forms.  

Followers of Ameriks in this interpretation include Henry Allison, Robert Adams, and Lucy Allais. Allison writes, “We can know objects only as they appear because we can know them only insofar as they are given in sensible
3. I will now argue that Kant’s hylomorphism contradicts Ameriks’s interpretation. Kant calls the understanding “determining,” and sensibility “merely determinable” (B151-2). He writes, “the understanding determines sensibility” (B161n.), and more specifically that it “determines the form of sense a priori” (B152). This is precisely how form relates to matter, for Kant. The understanding relates to sensibility as determining form relates to determinable matter.

Now, on Ameriks’s interpretation, sensibility’s limits restrict the understanding’s. Sensibility is limited to appearances because of its own spatiotemporal forms, and the understanding is limited to appearances because of sensibility’s limits. But, according to Kant’s hylomorphism, sensibility is “merely determinable.” This implies that the determinate limits on the range of objects to which it relates should not be due to its own forms. The understanding is not “determinable” but “determining.” This implies that the limits on the range of objects to which it relates must not be determined by sensibility, but must instead be due to its own forms. Since “the understanding determines sensibility,” the limits on the range of objects to which the understanding relates must determine the limits on the range of objects to which sensibility relates, not vice versa. Thus, rather than sensibility’s limits restricting the understanding’s, the understanding’s limits must determine sensibility’s, just as form determines matter. To be sure, sensibility – as matter – must provide the relation to objects for the understanding. But the limits on the range of objects to which sensibility provides the understanding with the relation must not

intuition and because this intuition is structured according to our subjective forms of sensibility (space and time).” (Allison 1996, 7) Adams writes, “In Kant’s view the fundamental reason why things […] in themselves cannot be given as objects for our cognition is not that we do not have the concepts for it, but that we do not have the intuitions for it. […] It is precisely [the spatial and temporal forms of intuition] that provide Kant with a first and decisive reason for holding that objects can be presented to our intuition only as they are in relation to the structures […] of our mind – and hence not as they are […] in themselves.” (Adams 1997, 806-807) Allison writes, “[I]n the Critique, where [Kant] restricts the understanding to the conditions of sensibility, curbing the pretension of sensibility is […] considered necessary to restrict the understanding as well.” (Allison 2015, 186) And Allais writes, “Kant’s main argument for transcendental idealism […] is given in the Transcendental Aesthetic” (Allais 2015, 176) and “[T]he Deduction is limited by the results of the Aesthetic.” (Allais 2011, 106)
be set independently of the understanding. Instead, the understanding – as form – must determine
the limits on the range of objects to which sensibility provides it with the relation.

Indeed, Kant writes, “Sensibility and its field, namely that of appearances, are themselves
limited by the understanding, in that they do not pertain to things in themselves,” (A251) “The
understanding […] bounds sensibility […], warning sensibility not to presume to reach for things
in themselves but solely for appearances,” (A288/B344) and “[Our understanding] is not limited
by sensibility, but rather limits it […] it also immediately sets boundaries for itself”
(A256/B312). In these passages, Kant states that the understanding limits sensibility, not vice
versa. The Analytic’s treatment of the understanding should therefore be privileged over the
Aesthetic’s treatment of sensibility in Kant’s direct, synthetic proof of transcendental idealism.

4. I will now consider the main arguments of Kant’s Aesthetic and Analytic to show that
they bear out my interpretation. In the Aesthetic, Kant argues that our representations of space
and time are a priori and originally intuitions. (A23/B38-A25/B40 and A30/B46-A32/B48) He
states that our representations of space and time can be a priori and originally intuitions only if
space and time are the forms of our sensibility (B41). While it follows that space and time are
our sensibility’s forms, Kant draws two further conclusions.

His conclusions are that space and time are empirically real – in that they apply to all
appearances – and transcendentally ideal, in that they do not apply to things in themselves
(A26/B42-A28/B44 and A32/B49-A36/B52). Kant’s argument for the empirical reality of space
and time is that since space and time are our sensibility’s forms, and since objects can appear to
us only by affecting our sensibility, space and time apply to all appearances (A27/B43 and
A34/B50-A35/B52). But Kant seems to provide no argument for the transcendental ideality of
space and time in his Aesthetic. This is the problem of the Neglected Alternative. Kant seems to leave open the possibility that space and time might apply to all appearances and also to things in themselves.⁴

While interpreters have commonly criticized Kant for failing to exclude this possibility in his Aesthetic, it would agree better with his hylomorphism to conclude that his Aesthetic is not meant to exclude this possibility, and that his Analytic is meant to do so instead. I will now turn to Kant’s Deduction in order to show that it does.

5. Kant formulates his Deduction’s problematic by considering the grounds on which our concepts can relate to objects. (A92/B124-125) He states that there are two possible grounds: the objects making our concepts possible, or our concepts making their objects possible. He states that objects can make our empirical concepts possible, but the categories cannot derive from objects, since they are *a priori* concepts. He states that our practical concepts can make their objects possible, by bringing them into existence, but since the categories are theoretical concepts, they cannot produce their objects. Kant concludes that because the categories are *a priori*, theoretical concepts, they can relate to objects only by making our cognition of objects possible. His Deduction’s aim, therefore, is to prove that the categories are conditions of the possibility of our experiences (A94/B126).

His 1787 Deduction comprises two arguments. His first aims to show that the categories are required for our experience to be of apperceptively synthesized intuitions of objects – that is, objects of which we can become self-consciously aware. (B131-132) In this argument, Kant’s criticizes “the logicians” for defining judgment as a relation of concepts (B140). His main

⁴ H.A. Pistorius (Sassen 2000) first formulates the problem in 1786. Other traditional treatments are in Adolf Trendelenburg (1862), Hans Vaihinger (1881), and Norman Kemp Smith (1918).
criticism is that this definition leaves it undetermined “wherein this relation consists” (B141).

Kant maintains that while associations are “subjective” relations of concepts, judgments are “objective.” (B141) What makes judgments “objective”? Kant writes,

“[T]o be sure, I do not mean to say that these representations necessarily belong to one another, but rather that they belong to one another in virtue of the necessary unity of the apperception in the synthesis of intuitions.” (B142)

What makes the relation of concepts in a judgment objective, for Kant, is that the concepts are related in virtue of the relation of representations in apperceptively synthesized intuitions. Judgments are relations of concepts that are grounded in intuitions of objects of which we are self-consciously aware, while mere associations are relations of concepts that lack such a grounding. Kant’s first argument concludes that the categories are required for apperceptively synthesized intuitions. His argument relies on the implicit premise that apperceptively synthesized intuitions can serve as the grounds for our judgments only if they have the same forms as our judgments, which are categorial forms.

Kant’s second argument turns to figuratively synthesized intuitions of objects – that is, objects in space and time. His key claim is that space and time are represented as objects of our formal intuitions, and therefore require the categories. (B160-161) He explains in a footnote,

Space, represented as object (as is really required in geometry), contains more than the mere form of intuition, namely the comprehension of the manifold given in accordance with the form of sensibility in an intuitive representation, so that the form of intuition merely gives the manifold, but the formal intuition gives unity of the representation. (B160, n.)
This footnote asks us to consider what is “really required in geometry.” Geometry proceeds by spatial construction in pure intuition, for Kant. The question is how our geometrical judgments can be objective. Judgments are objective, according to the Deduction’s first argument, insofar as apperceived intuitions provide the grounds for them. Kant’s claim is that our formal intuition of space itself is the apperceived intuition that provides the grounds for our geometrical judgments. Regarding time, Kant holds that just as geometry proceeds by spatial construction in pure intuition, mechanics proceeds by temporal construction in pure intuition. And, just as our geometrical judgments are objective in virtue of being based on our intuition of space, so too are our mechanical judgments objective in virtue of being based on our intuitive representation of time. Kant’s second argument, then, is that since space and time are the apperceptively synthesized intuitions that provide the grounds for our geometrical and mechanical judgments, and since the categories are required for apperceptively synthesized intuitions to serve as the grounds for our judgments, the categories are required for space and time. Finally, given Kant’s additional premise that objects in space and time must conform to space and time themselves (B161), his conclusion follows that the categories are required for objects in space and time.

I can now reconstruct Kant’s primary proof of transcendental idealism. First, regarding the specific limitation of space and time to appearances, Kant’s argument proceeds in two steps. In formulating his Deduction’s problematic, he argues that the categories cannot have a valid application to things in themselves. His argument is that there are only two possible ways in which our concepts can relate to objects: either by being made possible by objects, or by making objects possible. The categories cannot derive from things in themselves – since they are a priori

---

5 An example is the parallelogram rule for velocity addition in Kant’s Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science (4:492–495).
6 For Kant, we represent time intuitively by drawing a line in space and attending to our action of drawing it (B154-155).
concepts – nor can the categories produce things in themselves, since they are theoretical
categories. The only way the categories can relate to objects is by making our cognition of objects
possible. But in this way, the categories relate to appearances only, not things in themselves.
Kant’s argument, then, is that because there are no grounds on which the categories could relate
to things in themselves, the categories cannot have a valid application to things in themselves.7

The second step is to show that the categories do have a valid application to everything in
space and time. In his Deduction, Kant argues that space and time are the apperceptively
synthesized intuitions that provide the grounds for our geometrical and mechanical judgments.
Given that the categories are required for apperceptively synthesized intuitions to serve as the
grounds for our judgments, it follows that that the categories are required for space and time.
And, given Kant’s assumption that objects in space and time must conform to space and time
themselves, it follows that if things in themselves were to be in space and time, then the
categories would have to apply to them. But since Kant has already argued that the categories
cannot have a valid application to things in themselves, it now follows that space and time
cannot have a valid application to things in themselves either. This is how the Deduction
provides the solution to the problem of the Neglected Alternative. The Deduction shows that
space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves by arguing that the
categories do have a valid application to objects in space and time, yet that the categories do not
have a valid application to things in themselves.

Turning now to the limitation of our cognition to appearances, Kant must show that
neither our a priori cognitions nor our empirical cognitions can be of things in themselves. In the
case of our a priori cognitions, Kant’s hylomorphism states that space and time are the matter,

---

7 This leaves open the possibility that the categories may be invalidly applied to things in themselves. Kant
maintains that we inevitably do so, and that we have practical reasons for doing so.
while the categories are the forms. Because the matter of our cognitions provides their relation to objects, our a priori cognitions cannot be of things in themselves, in the first instance, because space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves. But as we have just seen, the reason why space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves is that the categories do not have a valid application to things in themselves. In this way, the categories – as the forms of our a priori cognitions – determine the limits on the range of objects to which space and time – the matter – provide our a priori cognitions with relation.

In the case of our empirical cognitions, the categories are the forms and empirical intuitions are the matter, where empirical intuitions themselves have space and time as forms and sensations as matter. In the first instance, then, our empirical cognitions cannot be of things in themselves because empirical intuitions – the matter of our empirical cognitions – do not relate to things in themselves. Empirical intuitions do not relate to things in themselves because sensations – the matter of our empirical intuitions – do not. The reason sensations do not relate to things in themselves is that space and time – the forms of our empirical intuitions – do not have a valid application to things in themselves. And, again, the fundamental reason why space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves is that the categories – the forms of our empirical cognitions – do not. In this way, then, the categories determine the limits on the range of objects to which empirical intuitions provide our empirical cognitions with the relation, and they do so by determining the limits on the range of objects to which space and time provide the relation.

In this paper, I have argued that the fundamental reason why our cognitions cannot be of things in themselves is that the categories do not have a valid application to things in themselves. The reason space and time do not have a valid application to things in themselves is that the
categories have a valid application to objects in space and time but not to things in themselves. On my interpretation, it is thus the limits and the validity of the categories that determine the limits of space and time specifically and the limits of our cognition generally.

Works Cited


