

Sofia Philosophical Review

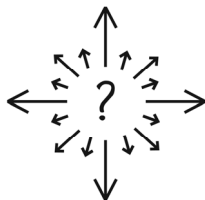
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Vol. XVIII, no. 2
2025



This issue is printed with the kind support of the PhD Program in Philosophy Taught in English at the University of Sofia.



Sofia Philosophical Review is a peer reviewed journal indexed by The Philosopher's Index, EBSCO, and the MLA International Bibliography.

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Dr Alexander L. Gungov
Editor-in-Chief
Sofia Philosophical Review
E-mail: agungov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Website: www.sphr-bg.org

All prospective contributions should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Review materials should be sent to the Senior Book Review Editor at:

Mr. Karim Mamdani
280 Donlands Ave.
Unit 403
Toronto, ON
M4J 0A3
CANADA
karim.mamdani@gmail.com

ISSN 1313-275X

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The Thing-in-Itself*

Todor Polimenov (University of Sofia)

*Verflucht voraus die hohe Meinung,
Womit der Geist sich selbst umfängt!
Verflucht das Blenden der Erscheinung,
Die sich an unsere Sinne drängt!*

Goethe, *Faust I*, V. 1591–1594.

The 300th anniversary of Kant's birth is a good occasion to recall Kant's contributions to philosophy and the spiritual life of mankind. There are only a few thinkers who have exerted as much influence on our understanding of man as Kant has. So, it is not accidental that it is on this day, on the very date of Kant's birthday, that throughout the world, and especially in Germany, Kant's jubilee is celebrated by numerous speeches, lectures, and conferences. I would like to adopt a somewhat uncommon position by adding a few critical notes to that choir of praises. I suppose that Kant himself, who, as we know, fought dogmatism in philosophy, would have valued positively a critical view on his philosophy.

I would like to say, at the very beginning of this talk, that I am guided by the conviction that no one – even Kant – is infallible. Even the most profound of thinkers, who seem to have thoroughly thought through everything, are not immune to falling into misconceptions. This is evidenced by, e.g., Aristotle's views on women or Thomas Aquinas's ones on demon-pact practitioners (later termed "witches"), as well as Kant's own views on Indians and Africans. We can add further instances here, such as Marx's racism (towards Africans, the Chinese, the Slavs, especially the Poles, and the Jews) or Heidegger's conviction of the superiority of the German spirit over those of other nations. Thus, my paper would be more of a critical kind. I will take the jubilee as an occasion to draw attention to a problematic symptom in philosophy's development, which, I think, also appears in Kant's theoretical philosophy

* The present paper is the English translation of a text that I delivered in Bulgarian on April 24, 2024, at the conference dedicated to the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth at Sofia University.

and particularly distinctly in his conception of “the thing-in-itself”.

Let me say it right from the start: what I have in mind is the underestimation of practice – of practice both in the narrower sense of concretely practising the activities of thinking and speaking, and in the wider sense of the originary immersion of human beings in life and in the practical tasks and questions related to it. It is my conviction that therein lies the source of human thinking and human rationality as mediated by language and community, where practice takes place and succeeds or fails. It seems to me that something like haughtiness, or even arrogance, towards human practice can be observed throughout the history of philosophy. A possible explanation for that is the social fact that, approximately up until 200 years ago, those who had the opportunity to do philosophy were, with few exceptions, members of the privileged social strata, where the “practice” of physical survival had no special role. Clearly, such social circumstances have their explanatory potential, and one should surely also find in them the explanation of why there are *de facto* no women in the history of philosophy. An empirically refutable misconception is the notion that the development of philosophy follows some kind of pure logic and consists of (only) a sequence of arguments (of questions, of answers that raise further questions, and so on). Of course, not all philosophers neglected practice. Instances of philosophers who were guided by it and tried to understand rather than overcome it are Aristotle and the later Wittgenstein. Kant occupies an intermediate place. While I do acknowledge this, in the present text, I would like to show that at the core of Kant’s theoretical philosophy – in what motivates him to compare it to a “Copernican Turn”, and, most of all, in the distinction between “appearance” and “the thing-in-itself” that lies at the basis of his own turn – there is a disregard of practice.

Before I do that, though, I would like to give two short examples from the dawn of philosophy that are marked by the aforementioned dismissive attitude toward practice and to what we can call, with George Edward Moore, “common sense” (the concept is, of course, much older). The first example is Parmenides. Parmenides proceeds from the distinction between proper being and apparent being. Guided by the question of what the distinctive features that ought to characterize proper being are, he compiles a set of marks that play the role – namely, “not coming into existence” and “not going out of existence”, “indivisible” and “homogeneous”, “unchanging” and “motionless”, and so on. What is indicative here is that these marks could not be, without accept-

ing certain restrictions, exemplified by any of the objects of our everyday experience, or, in other words, by our practice. And since, according to Parmenides, there can be true knowledge only of proper being, we can speak of “truth” only in the case of thinking about the relation between proper being and the set of its marks, while everything else and, in particular, everything we believe we know about the real world, where there is time, change, actions and impacts, causes and effects, is denounced as “the opinion of mortals”.

Here, I would like to point out that early natural philosophers, as early as Thales, also distinguished between what nature is in its essence or at its basis – so to say, ‘in itself’ (e.g., ‘water’) – and what it appears to us, namely, its manifestations in the other elements and their configurations in the real world. Even though early natural philosophers distinguish between “essence” and “appearance”, they do not draw the conclusion that we *do not know* anything about the behaviour of the rest of the elements and the objects they constitute, having only “opinions” (in Parmenides’ terminology) about them. Parmenides’ final position is untenable. It goes so far against the everyday use of words such as “truth”, “knowledge”, “reality”, “appearance”, and so on – and we, I would like to stress, understand all these words precisely because they play a certain role in the everyday practice of communication – that it is no surprise that Parmenides’ view was supported only by his direct disciples.

Now for the second example. It is also paradigmatic and has turned out to be much more durable than Parmenides’ speculations. What I have in mind is Plato’s allegory of the cave and the act of climbing out of it as a way of philosophical knowledge. Since the allegory is so well-known, I will limit myself to a few key points. Most probably, the Cave is a representation of the empirical world, while nature outside of it is a representation of the World of Ideas. The escape from the Cave is obviously thought of as a kind of “being born” (with all the accompanying labour pains and the stress from the birth itself). After the birth, the world in the Cave becomes alien to the newborn. There are three elements within the Cave: 1. shadows cast on the inner wall of the Cave (that is, on its back wall), 2. man-made objects carried above a low wall along the path leading out of the Cave, and 3. a fire burning behind that intermediate partition, producing the shadows of the objects before the chained prisoners. Outside the Cave, there are also three: 1. reflections in the water, 2. natural objects, and 3. the Sun. Probably, the shadows in the Cave symbolize human prejudice about natural things; the artefacts car-

ried in – the suggestions of poets and sophists concerning natural things; and the fire in the Cave – the physical Sun. In their turn, reflections in the water probably symbolize mathematical objects; natural things in themselves (trees, stars) – other “ideas”; and the Sun – the Idea of the Good.¹

What seems to me important for the topic at hand is the replacement of reality. It is legitimized by the suggestion that what we have here is a journey to a deeper or more authentic reality than the one that constitutes the world of our practice. The everyday world is understood as a sense-perceivable given, where everything changes and nothing is stable – something like a Heraclitean river in which no one can step twice. Beyond that stream of phenomena, beyond the endless variety of successive sense data (appearances), there can be seen – with the help of philosophical reflection – an ideal world of essences and existential structures that, according to Plato, have a temporal, ontological, and epistemic priority over the world of appearances, which means, in the end, priority over the world of everyday practice.

If we make the leap from here directly to Kant, we will notice that, for him, the relation between appearance and essence, at least at first sight, has diametrically shifted. For Kant, it is appearances that turn out to be the properly existing or, at least, the properly knowable, while the things behind those appearances, traditional essences and natures of objects, are something that ought to be given up as a product of naïve naturalism. Upon closer scrutiny, however, one can see that the appearances in question are not the objects of everyday experience, which I contrasted above with Parmenides’ and Plato’s philosophical essences, but rather representations in our minds. With this clarification in place, we can nevertheless state that, unlike Parmenides and Plato, Kant insists that, at least in the domain of theoretical philosophy – where we speak of *existence*, *knowledge*, and *truth* – there has to be a transition from (the study of) things in themselves to (the study of) appearances. In practical philosophy, where we speak of *freedom*, *responsibility*, *duty*, and similar topics, the situation, as it later turns out, is more complicated.

The groundwork for Kant’s position had, of course, been laid by the so-called “subjective turn” initiated by Descartes. Kant himself, however, regards the true shift in perspective as being connected with his own philosophy. From his point of view, Descartes was not consistent enough.

¹ Cf. Pierfrancesco Basile, *Antike Philosophie* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 76.

Despite his methodic doubt and the centering of philosophy on the “I think” formula, Descartes divides reality into two substances – mental and physical – and, with respect to the physical substance, he retains a distinctive form of realism. In contrast, Kant is convinced that he has shown that the whole of reality in space and time together with its governing causality is a construct, whose formal dimensions are given by human capacities to represent and think something structured. Thus, the only reality accessible to the cognitive subject turns out to be, it seems, the domain of appearances as pre-structured by the forms of space and time, and by the category of causality — both dimensions of the mind (Gemüt).

In a sense, this position is exactly the opposite to Plato’s. Kant’s reasoning, however, in my opinion, follows the same figure of thought. Firstly, we have a naïve mind that illegitimately takes certain givens to be primary existents. For Plato, these are sense-perceivable objects (manifestations of hidden essences), for Kant, these are things-in-themselves (the reals in the human-independent world). For both of them, these are empirical “individualities” (individuals, individual properties, events) – in the former case, in so far as they are perceived by the senses, in the latter case, in so far as they are viewed as independent. However, what matters is that in both cases it is assumed that something is not right with these kind of things – at least from a philosophical point of view – and that, therefore, they should be “overcome”: we have to go “over” or “behind”, or “under”, or “before” them. The philosophical appeal thus requires us to overcome or abandon them by redirecting our mental sights to genuinely existing things. For Plato, these are the *Ideas*, i.e., certain existential structures behind appearing objects (that become accessible through pure thought). For Kant, these are, conversely, the *Erscheinungen* – appearances themselves (as representations in a single consciousness); although seemingly caused by human-independent “entities”, they are the only accessible objects of our knowledge. Things-in-themselves (*die Dinge an sich*²), on the contrary, remain unknowable in

² The expression “an sich” (in “Ding an sich”) is a translation of the Latin “per se”, which, in its turn, translates the Greek “καθ’αυτό”, originating from Aristotle’s distinction between substantial (“καθ’αυτό”) and accidental (“κατὰ συμβεβηκός”, “per accidens”) properties as well as from Plato’s reference to “the *F* itself” (“the idea of *F*” or “the *F* in itself”, “αὐτὸ καθ’αυτό”), where “*F*” is a general term, opposed to the “many *F*s”, i.e., to the many concrete *F*s, that stand in a relation of “participation” to “the *F* itself”.

principle. Kant's position on the primary givenness of appearances is later further developed in Husserl's phenomenology, with its rallying cry "Back to the things themselves" ("*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*"), where what is meant by things themselves, by primary existing, are precisely phenomena of consciousness.

Kant compares his own position with the "Copernican Turn", i.e., with the replacement of the geocentric model of the world with the heliocentric model. One might think that what this is about is only a *shift in perspective*. We can "see" the movement of the Sun in the sky during the day and of stars during the night *as* a rotation of the Sun and stars around the Earth (so that then the Earth would occupy the central and fixed position in the cosmos) or *as* a rotation of the Earth itself around its axis with respect to the stationary Sun and stars (and, if we include in the picture not only the explanation of the alternation of days and nights, but also that of the succession of the seasons, we could construct the image of the rotation of the Earth – and of several other planets – around the Sun, which is, in its turn, in the centre of the cosmos framed by the sphere of fixed stars). The Copernican Turn, however, does not mean simply "shift of perspective". The new model has a significantly greater explanatory potential than the old one. Phenomena (events, facts) that have previously received complicated explanations and have led to insoluble problems become simply and plausibly explicable in the framework of the new model. The two models, therefore, have above all different *consequences*.

It is these consequences that are most important for Kant. They concern his new and original treatment of the fundamental philosophical questions about the world, the soul, and God, as well as their epistemological status. I cannot discuss them in detail here. With regard to the Copernican Turn, however, I would like to point out a peculiarity noted by Heine in his *History of religion and philosophy in Germany*. For Heine, too, the notion of the Copernican Turn is not limited merely to the idea of a shift in perspective. Heine does not stop there. He offers an interpretation of the symbolism of this notion.³ The Sun and its light, in Kant's reference to the model, stand for, as it seems, reason, whereas the Earth stands for the objects of the empirical world. According to that imagery, while our mind, before the Turn, revolved around the objects of the external world, seeking to

³ Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. Zit. nach der Neuausgabe in: H. Heine: *Säkularausgabe (Werke, Briefwechsel, Lebenszeugnisse)*. Bd. 8. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972, 198.

illuminate them, after the Turn, it became clear that the mind is precisely the Sun or the light around which the entire external reality circles. Thus, Kant's Transcendental Turn assigns to humanity exactly the opposite position to that established by the Copernican Turn. While Copernicus deprives humans of their central position in the cosmos, Kant restores it to them – at least from an epistemological perspective.

Curiously, texts that argue against the “common sense” of everyday thinking in favour of philosophically climbing out of its “cave” often present as examples of misconceptions several indicative cases⁴: (i) people believed that the Earth was flat, whereas it is actually round; (ii) people believed that the Sun travels through the sky, whereas actually the Earth rotates around it (the transition here would correspond to Copernicus's “Copernican Turn”); (iii) people (naively) believed that we know the world as it is in itself, whereas actually our knowledge of it – as modern philosophy has shown – is mediated by our cognitive abilities, so that the world is always given to us in the framework and according to the measure of their horizon (the consistent turn here would correspond precisely to Kant's “Copernican Turn” and to the redirection of perspective – with respect to the object of knowledge – from the things in themselves to appearances).

The present text is concerned with (iii). With regard to (i) and (ii), I would make the following observations. In our everyday practice, it is natural to assume that the ground on which we tread – on which we walk, sit or lie, on which we build houses and roads – is, more or less, flat. The assumption of this “flatness” is perfectly reasonable in everyday contexts. A problem emerges not when we are guided by it in concrete, limited situations, but when we *generalize* and turn it into a philosophical theory of the Earth as a whole. The same applies to (ii). In our daily life, it is entirely natural to say things such as (a) “The Sun moves across the sky from east to west”, (b) “The Sun shines brightest when it reaches the middle of the sky”, or (c) “The Sun has hidden behind a cloud”. The problem does not lie in these statements as part of our practice (because by using them we communicate unproblematically with each other), but in their philosophical detachment (“abstraction”) from practice and their transformation into a “general theory” of the Sun's motion. The transitions in (i) and (ii) are not so much tran-

⁴ Rafael Ferber, *Philosophische Grundbegriffe 1 (Philosophie, Sprache, Erkenntnis, Wahrheit, Sein, Gut). Eine Einführung*. München: Beck, 1994/2008, Ch. I, § 3.

sitions from an (unsuccessful) practice to a (successful) theory, but rather a replacement of a falsified theory (of the shape of the Earth in general in (i) or the basic relation between the Earth and the Sun in (ii) with a new theory that is based on significantly more data than the old one, and, in particular, data that in supporting it refute the old theory. On the other hand, it would be quite pointless if a philosopher decides to correct us, when she hears us speak with sentences such as (a), (b), and (c), and objects: “No, no, the Sun does not move across the sky. This is an illusion. It is the Earth that rotates around the Sun”. I do not want to deny the need for such qualifications. In certain situations, they are useful (e.g., for a child just beginning to learn about the planetary system). In our usual practice, however, these qualifications are unnecessary. It was already observed by Aristotle that in matters of practice – as well as those of ethics, of the theory of action, etc. – it is not necessary, and is actually impossible, to follow the ideal of mathematical accuracy.⁵ For people to understand one another, it would suffice to say, e.g., “The midday Sun shines brightest” – although the star itself that we call “the Sun” is neither a “morning”, nor a “midday”, nor an “evening” star. The criterion for the accuracy of speaking should be mutual understanding. Only when we notice that we do not understand each other do we need to undertake linguistic clarifications. It is symptomatic here that we usually cease to understand one another precisely when we begin to speak the language of philosophy (metaphysics). While reaching a consensus is easy in everyday practice, it becomes much harder when philosophical questions are involved.

Kant’s “Copernican Turn” consists in the view that the conditions making experience possible are at the same time the conditions that make possible the objects of experience themselves.⁶ What is new in his position is, above all, the assignment of the representations of space and time to the pre-experiential cognitive forms through which the cognitive subject per-

⁵ Cf. “It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits”, *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) I, Ch. 1, 1094^b 23–25.

⁶ Kant draws the comparison with Copernicus in the “Preface to the Second Edition” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with the following words: “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects [alle unsere Erkenntnis müsse sich nach den Gegenständen richten]. But [... we must] make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge [die Gegenstände müssen sich nach unserem Erkenntnis richten]”. Kant 1781/1787: B XVI; q. in Engl. trans. N. K. Smith, 1929.

ceives the object of experience, and of the concept of causality (as a “category of understanding”) to the pre-experiential cognitive structures, through which the subject thinks about perceived objects. These pre-experiential forms and structures, which predetermine the way in which we know reality, constitute the conditions of the possibility of experience. Kant’s thesis of the identity of the conditions of the possibility of experience and the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience seems rather strong if we think of the relation between experience and its objects as a relation between a whole and its parts. Whereas the whole cannot exist without its parts (one of the principles of mereology), parts can very well exist by themselves, separately, without forming the whole. If the parts of a wall are bricks, the wall would not exist if those bricks did not exist. If the parts of a brick are certain atoms, this brick would not exist if the atoms in question did not exist (“the part of a part is a part of the whole” is another mereological principle). Nothing, however, prevents the bricks from existing while the wall does not. This was actually the case before the wall was built (as it will be the case if the wall is dismantled). And yet again: when included in its constitution, the parts of a whole obviously have to satisfy the conditions of its formation. Thus, in order to become knowable – to become objects of experience – the things in themselves have to be “transformed” into appearances in accordance with the forms of space and time, the category of causality, and the rest of the categories of thought. So, as parts of experience, as something knowable, objects are, according to this view, appearances; whereas the thing whose presence appearances manifest is itself beyond experience – something that remains inaccessible within experiential knowledge, something that remains hidden from us. It is this thing exactly that Kant calls the “thing-in-itself”.

For Heine,⁷ the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves lies at the core of Kant’s philosophy. Appearances are the only knowable, whereas things-in-themselves guarantee that this knowable has its source in reality. Thus, with the conception of things-in-themselves, Kant tries to retain a certain form of realism, albeit a restricted one. The *existence* of things-in-themselves is a guarantee of the reality of the external world. We know *that* they are (exist), although we do not know *what* they are (we do not know their nature). At the same time, through his account of a priori structures, Kant shows how sci-

⁷ Ibid.

ences of the a priori, such as mathematics and logic – which are “formal” or “structural” sciences in that they concern only possible rather than actual objects of experience – are possible, as well as in what way traditional metaphysics is not possible as a science, since it lacks a subject matter of its own – all knowable entities are appearances, so that questions like those about the spatio-temporal limits of the world, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God cannot receive answers with the status of knowledge.

Even some of Kant's contemporaries noticed that the concept of the thing-in-itself, as Kant employs it, is self-contradictory. Jacobi was probably the first to notice this, in 1787.⁸ Kant's reason for holding that, although we do not know what the thing-in-itself is, we must nevertheless assume that it exists, is that something – namely, a thing-in-itself, as Kant puts it – “affects” our sensibility and therein, in the capacity of its representatives, appearances emerge. This assumption, it seems, should be accepted as an explanation of the indisputable passivity (or receptivity) of perceiving subjects with respect to what they perceive – in contrast, e.g., to the spontaneity that characterizes acts of thought. But what kind of relation is this “affecting”? It is a relation of causality. In “*X* affects *Y*”, *X* stands in a certain causal relation to *Y* – namely, it causes or effects a certain change in *Y*. According to Kant's theory, however, the category of causality applies only to the domain of appearances. This means that, if we regard things-in-themselves as affecting our sensibility, we *eo ipso* turn them into appearances. At that very moment, however, they cease to be things-in-themselves.

In recent interpretations, the problems surrounding Kant's thesis of the in-principle unknowability of things-in-themselves have led to attempts to show that the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is not absolute and that what is at issue here is not a difference between two kinds of entities (objects) but rather two different aspects of the same thing. It is one and the same object which, insofar as it is independent of our knowledge, is a thing-in-itself, and which becomes an appearance when it enters the scope of knowledge. This interpretation, of course, is incompatible with Kant's thesis of the unknowability

⁸ Cf. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, “Ueber den transcendentalen Idealismus”, [Beilage] in: F. H. Jacobi: *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus*. Auf der Grundlage der Ausgabe v. W. Jaeschke u. I.-M. Piske hg. v. O. Koch: Hamburg: Meiner, 1787/2019, 108 ff.

of things-in-themselves. What is more, a major problem for Kant's overall theory would then systematically arise from the fact that, if this were so, knowledge would no longer be restricted to the realm of appearances (which would otherwise be a quite plausible view) – unless the distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves were merely a *façon de parler*, amounting to the trivial statement that the objects we know something about are always appearances, i.e., “objects which we know something about”, as opposed to objects that we have not (yet) known and which, only in *this* sense, are things-in-themselves. All this would call into question foundational elements within Kant's philosophy, such as the claim that time and space are a priori forms of sensibility, and thus also his theory of the synthetic a priori (which, in its turn, is crucial to Kant's criticism of metaphysics and to the guiding question of his theoretical philosophy of whether metaphysics can be a science at all).

Let me go back now to my own thesis about the underestimation of practice. If Kant had not been willing to ignore the *practice* of thinking and speaking for the sake of a *theory* and had, in his analysis, stayed closer to observing the way we *de facto* think and speak of concrete objects, he would most likely not have arrived at the thesis that by knowing reality, we know only appearances, nor would he have regarded the view that things-in-themselves were the real objects of knowledge as the result of naïve and non-critical thinking.

To illustrate, I would like to present an argument from Frege's “On Sense and Reference” (“Über Sinn und Bedeutung”). Frege introduces this argument as part of his criticism of psychologism. He uses the following statement as an example

($\mathfrak{M}$) The Moon is smaller than the Earth.

He then asks what we refer to by using the words “the Moon” in this sentence.⁹ The answer seems clear: the expression “the Moon” designates a celestial body. It is this body that, according to ($\mathfrak{M}$), is claimed to stand in a certain relation to the Earth. Frege emphasizes: with ($\mathfrak{M}$) we do not speak about an appearance in our mind, that is, about our representation of the Moon. In ($\mathfrak{M}$), we do not assert of one of our representations that it

⁹ Cf. Gottlob Frege, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung”, in: *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, [Neue Folge] Bd. 100, 1892, 31 ff.

has the property of *being smaller than the Earth*. (As we know, the concept of “representation” (Ger., *Vorstellung*), according to Kant, is a generic concept encompassing both “intuition” (*Anschaung*) and “concept” (*Begriff*).¹⁰) Frege’s argument runs as follows: if we wanted to ascribe a property not to the Moon but to our representation of it, then we would simply have used the phrase “our representation of the Moon” (as a logical subject of the corresponding statement). In that case, we would indeed be referring to one of our representations. This phrase is the linguistic expression whose referent is our representation of the Moon. By contrast, the phrase “the Moon” itself, when it appears in sentences, denotes a particular celestial body. Hence, the assumption that in (M) we are saying something about *our representation* of the Moon is merely a distortion of the meaning of (M).

Insisting that the reference of the phrase “the Moon” is a representation is, in effect, pointless. Do we utter (M) in order to state that a *representation* is smaller than the Earth? If that were the case, how could we possibly compare a representation – something mental, that is, something belonging to the inner psychological world of human beings – with the Earth, something extra-mental, that is, something belonging to the external physical world? Or do we perhaps mean, by uttering (M), that our representation of the Moon is smaller than another of our representations, namely that of the Earth? Is the representation of the Moon smaller than the representation of the Earth? And how could we apply the two-place predicate “smaller than” to representations? What would the relevant criteria be? Can the relation *smaller than* hold between mental – that is, non-spatial – items at all?

Furthermore, if everything knowable is a representation, would not the relation *smaller than* itself be a representation too? Then (M) would express the thought that the representation of the Moon and the representation of the Earth stand in a special relation between representations – a relation that would itself have to be depicted by a further (so to speak, formal) representation, which, in turn, would have to correspond in some way to the (material) representation of something being smaller than something else. Yet even if we assume that the content of (M) consists solely of representations, it still remains doubtful whether the con-

¹⁰ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Nach der ersten und zweiten Original-Ausgabe hg. v. R. Schmidt. Hamburg: Meiner, 1781/1787, 1993, A320/B376 ff.

tent of the representation of the *predicated* relation is that one representation is smaller than another, or rather that something which is not a representation at all is smaller than another thing which is likewise not a representation.

Frege resolves these issues by appealing to our intention (*Absicht*) when using the singular term “the Moon” in ($\mathfrak{M}$). Our intention *is* to speak of a celestial body, and that is independent of the fact that one may in certain cases be mistaken and find that the intention remains unfulfilled. Dagfinn Føllesdal¹¹ and Michael Dummett¹² rightly note that the idea here is the same as in Brentano, when he questions the assumption that the objects of intentional acts are mental items (representations). In a letter to Oskar Kraus dated 17 September 1909, Brentano writes that it is “utterly paradoxical” (*im höchsten Grade paradox*) to assume that someone who promises to marry a woman (and this woman is therefore the object of his intentional act of promising and thus, it seems, something mental) would keep his word by marrying a real human being.¹³ His *intention*, from the very beginning, has been to marry a real human being, and it has therefore concerned something that is not a representation (and the promisor could hardly marry a representation, since a wedding is an event that takes place in external reality, whereas representations are parts of the promisor’s psychological experiences).¹⁴

¹¹ Dagfinn Føllesdal, “Brentano and Husserl on Intentional Objects and Perception”, in: H. L. Dreyfus (ed.): *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1978/1982, 32.

¹² Michael Dummett, *Ursprünge der analytischen Philosophie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988, 40.

¹³ Franz Brentano, Brief an Oskar Kraus vom 17.09.1909, abgedr. in (Karaus’ Einleitung zu): F. Brenatano: *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*. Bd. 1. Hamburg: Meiner, 1924 (Nachdruck 1973), 1909, XLIX.

¹⁴ Curiously, when Heine describes the satirical criticism of Fichte’s theory of the “I” – according to which the “I” creates the objects of its accessible reality – he ends with a similar example involving a wife (in this case, Fichte’s own wife): “It is a peculiar circumstance that the Fichtean philosophy was destined to suffer all manner of satire. [...] The great majority believed that Fichte’s ‘I’ was the ‘I’ of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and that this individual ‘I’ denied the existence of all other existences. ‘What impertinence!’ exclaimed the good people, ‘this man does not believe that we exist, we who are much bigger than he and who, as mayors and office-bearers, are actually his superiors!’ The ladies asked, ‘Does he not even believe in the existence of his own wife?’ ‘No! And Madame Fichte allows this?’” (Ibid., Heine 1834/1972: 205 ff.)

With ($\mathfrak{M}$) we speak about a “thing in itself”, namely a celestial body completely independent of us. But that is not all. If ($\mathfrak{M}$) is *true* (i.e., if it is made true by the external world), then we will learn something about this thing in itself from it. We will come to know one of its properties, namely the property of *being smaller than the Earth*, or – if we prefer – we will come to know a relation in which it stands to another thing in itself, namely the Earth. The claim that the Moon and the Earth are our representations or appearances in our mind is a theory. So too is the claim that we know only appearances and not things in themselves. Practice, however, shows something different: we speak about things we can safely call “things in themselves”, and we *know* them when we speak truly about them. We know many things about the Moon, for example. Some of these things are essential to it – such as being a natural satellite of the Earth – while others are inessential, such as having been visited by humans. Of course, there are also many things we do not know about the Moon – for instance, whether it has gold deposits or whether it has been visited by other rational beings. But neither are the things we know about it merely “appearances in our mind”, nor are the things we do not know the hidden “essences” of inaccessible or unknowable entities.