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## Grasping the Grounds of Thought: The Thing-in-Itself, Actancy and Ecology

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### ABSTRACT

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The Thing-in-Itself has been contentious issue within Kantian philosophy. Initially, it seems like an unfortunate side-effect of Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena. This article deals with this issue in a different manner, attempting to re-situate the Thing-in-Itself within Kantian philosophy, albeit from an anthropological rather than a critical angle. The anthropological works of Kant fully recognize that subjectivity and lived experience, as well as a thoroughgoing cognitive gradualism are necessary to "orient ourselves in thinking". By reading the importance of the Thing-in-Itself from the anthropological viewpoint of Otto Friedrich Bollnow and the Kyoto School philosophy of Ueda Shizuteru, I argue that in all its negativity, the Thing-in-Itself constitutes the outer expanse of thought. Connecting this exposition with contemporary thinking on actancy and ecology, and following the Romantic tradition represented by Schopenhauer and Schelling, I argue that the Thing-in-Itself can be grasped indirectly and non-conceptually. As such, it constitutes the ground of thought. This insight makes Kant's initially problematic concept directly relevant for our current ecological predicament, through which we realize the necessity for epistemic humility and embracing the unknown or the noumenal dimension that we cannot conceptually represent.

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*[W]isdom too, true insight into life, the proper view and the apt judgment, stem from the way human beings grasp the intuitive world, and not from mere knowledge, i.e. not from abstract concepts (Schopenhauer 2018, 83).*

*The names, the shapes and forms we give Quality depend only partly on the Quality. (...) People differ about Quality, not because Quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience (Pirsig 2006, 318–319).*

*Thus, profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which whether we will or not—confers spatiality upon thought; if a metaphysician could not draw, what would he think? (Bachelard 1994, 212)*

## Introduction

Arguably one of the thorniest issues that Immanuel Kant bequeathed to modern philosophy is the nature and role of the Thing-in-Itself (*Ding an Sich*). It sparked already a row in the so-called 1782 “Göttingen review” of the first *Critique* and hasn’t stopped to be a philosophical stumble block ever since. Although the review by Feder and Garve largely mistook Kant’s transcendental idealism for Berkeleyan subjective idealism, some of their insistent criticism lingered.

During Kant’s later years and in the decades immediately following his death, the first generation of Neo-Kantians found themselves forced to either defend or reject the Thing-in-Itself. Conversely, the rising tradition of speculative idealism (represented by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel) tried to collapse the distinction between appearance and Thing-in-Itself, in favor of access to the Absolute or the Unconditioned. Schopenhauer took a different route and universalized it as the Will-to-Live, or the immanent drive behind the cosmic play of appearances. Later generations of Neo-Kantians either tried to integrate or politely ignore this issue, although it stubbornly lingered around in the margins of their philosophy.<sup>1</sup> For 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic and continental philosophy alike, the issue held limited importance outside Kant scholarship, where its reception ranged from trying to integrate the theory in the larger Kantian corpus to methodologically eliminating it. Recently, the rise of Object-Oriented Ontology, Onticology and Correlationism (Bryant 2011; Graham 2013, 2018; Meillassoux 2018) pulled it back into the center of philosophical attention, although the real issue is sidelined, and Kant is held to be just a philosopher of “human access to the world”.

Within Kant scholarship, we encounter so-called “one-world” readings, as well as “two-world” or “two-aspect” readings if we survey the available literature.<sup>2</sup> The one-world interpretation stresses that appearances and Thing-in-Themselves are in fact identical; the two-world reading

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<sup>1</sup> Beiser (2014, 88) points out that Jakob Friedrich Fries’ affective approach relegated the access to the Thing-in-Itself to the realm of feeling or approximation (*Ahndung*). Likewise, Friedrich Albert Lange’s broadly materialist conception held that Things-in-Themselves formed a kind of “common denominator” that grounds cognition (2014, 380). By contrast, Alois Riehl’s realist conception stressed that Things-in-Themselves are dual-aspect entities that appear partially to the perceiving subject, but that can be considered apart from their form of appearance (2014, 565).

<sup>2</sup> See Allison 2001 and Marshall 2013 for extensive discussions of this literature.

postulates two different worlds, in which each phenomenal appearance *here* has a noumenal correlate over *there*. The two-aspect view advocates that *phenomena* and *noumena* are simply two aspects of a single object, disagreeing about the degree to which we can cognize or otherwise detect them. These efforts seem stuck in a loop: the crux lies in how one treats the phenomena/noumena binary. Viewed as the opposition of two radically opposed domains that can in principle not causally touch, we saddle ourselves with the irresolvable problem of maintaining the distinction while still finding ways to render these domains causally connected.

Amid all the philosophical noise that has arisen around this topic, a new possibility can be found – one that makes Kant’s troublesome inheritance directly critically relevant to what has been recently called “ecological thought” and “rational anthropology” alike. Moreover, I avail myself of the opportunity to align Kantian philosophy and the so-called “spatial turn” in philosophy and sociology. This approach has tangibly Kantian roots, as Kant himself lectured on physical geography from 1756 until 1796, on anthropology from 1772 until 1796, and wrote the essays *On the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Regions in Space* (1768) and *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* (1786). Consequently, Kant’s thinking is not just concerned with formal distinctions and logical propositions as developed in his theoretical philosophy, but equally involves the study of the human being in space, or, embodied in an environment as espoused in his practical philosophy (Clewis, 2018).

This geographical undercurrent is especially present in the anthropological writings and in the lectures on physical geography. Although it is correct to attribute straightforwardly ecological views to Kant, his philosophy provides ample opportunity to build bridges between lived experience, ecology and “the movement of thinking”, or to construct a “rational anthropology” (Hanna, 2017a) for the Anthropocene or Symbiocene.

I examine the phenomenon/noumenon binary from a geographical and spatial – and by implication – anthropological perspective, moving away from readings that seemingly try to square a circle. What if we repositioned the issue, inscribing it in the practical philosophy of Kant, rather than in his theoretical works? We would acquire a fully Kantian account from our access to the world, this time not from a purely critical, but an anthropological angle.

### **1. The Anthropological Angle: An Argument**

preliminarily, I summarily state my overall approach. First, we should make a careful distinction between two different aspects of Kant’s overall philosophical project. Whereas notably the first *Critique* is concerned with delineating the “limits of sense and reason” as Kant said in his 1772 letter to Markus Herz (C 10, 129), the practical and anthropological works of Kant deal with how knowledge acquisition and growth develops in everyday life, notably in the social, moral and cultural domains. Put differently, the critical side of Kant’s philosophy deals with the conditions under which we can state we know X or Y, while the practical side deals with the process of how the gradually come to know or understand X or Y. Both sides are complementary: the process of

acquiring knowledge unfolds within the rules set out in the critical works. For good reason, the question “what can I know?”, and the question “what is the human being?” appear in the same series of basic questions that Kant regards as the mission of all philosophy (JL 9, 25) To understand the human being in its environment (*Welterkenntnis*) is to investigate how knowledge develops and how everyday practices support and direct this process.

To answer the question as to what the human being is, we require a shift in perspective. Instead of regarding the process of cognition from the viewpoint of criteria, we should – following the anthropological tradition – regard cognition as a living, organic process of real-time sensemaking. That this process has rules is clear. However, to understand how it unfolds we must invoke a first-person perspective instead of a non-perspectivist, critical-methodological one. While Kant’s theoretical philosophy deals with the *formal criteria* of objectivity, his practical philosophy deals with the *gradual process of arriving* at such objectivity (Paans, 2023).

The issue of access to the Thing-in-Itself can be framed as a strictly logical problem, if we follow the critical approach set out in the first *Critique* and the *Prolegomena*. But once we adopt *that* approach, we end up in the situation described above, attempting to circumvent a self-imposed problem. But once we frame it as an anthropological problem, we find that the issue of access to ultimate reality takes on a pragmatic and practical hue: the issue is not *what* we can know, but *how* we are able to access or apprehend a domain currently beyond our grasp, but that still entices us to venture further. Kant was aware of reason’s propensity to explore beyond its own limits:

It is true: we cannot provide, beyond all possible experience, any determinate concept of what things in themselves may be. But we are nevertheless not free to hold back entirely in the face of inquiries about those things; for experience never fully satisfies reason. (Pro 4, 351)

Thus, the representation of noumena as beings of the understanding (Verstandeswesen) is “not merely permitted but also inevitable”. (Pro 4, 315)

The lived space of experience is anthropological in nature, as Marc Augé (2006) already noted. It possesses experiential depth, as personal and collective identities, worldviews and thought-shapers (Hanna & Panns, 2021) are all forged within its broad, intimately environmental and cultural frame of references. By situating the issue of access to the Thing-in-Itself within anthropological space, we accomplish what A.N. Whitehead described as a “concrete analysis of intuitive experience”:

The point before us is that this scientific field of thought is now, in the twentieth century, too narrow for the concrete facts which are before it for analysis (...) Thus, in order to understand the difficulties of modern scientific thought and also its reactions on the modern world, we should have in our minds some conception

of a wider field of abstraction, a more concrete analysis, which shall stand nearer to the complete concreteness of our intuitive experience. (Whitehead 1960, 65)

Conceived as a form of concrete, lived, first-person and organically developing analysis, we solve the following by addressing the status of the Thing-in-Itself in an anthropological manner:

First, we liberate ourselves of a few strange and questionable historical assumptions about what can be and can't be thought and how this *limit-of-thinking* is to be conceptualized from the perspective of lived experience.

Second, we can bring the *geographical orientation* in Kant's thinking into sharper relief so that we can usefully apply to current world problems, in particular our ecological predicament.

Third, it offers an opportunity to extend Kant's *cognitive gradualism* in a new direction – one that has direct moral implications for individual experience, and indeed for the practice of creative piety.

I re-interpret Kant's initial and problematic notion from two unfamiliar vantage points, respectively the philosophical anthropology of Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1903–1991), as elaborated in his 1963 book *Mensch und Raum* and the Kyoto School philosophy of Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019).<sup>1</sup> Before doing so, however, I examine (a) a selection of relevant textual evidence within the Kantian corpus that formulates the characteristics of the Thing-in-Itself and (b) demarcate a number of specific themes that surface later on.

Then, I provide a reformulation and position of the Thing-in-Itself with a recourse to the works of Bollnow, and Shizuteru, establishing bridges between the venturing nature of reason and Kantian cognitive gradualism. After doing so, I extend its range of application towards contemporary ecological thought. In a nutshell, I aim to show how a conceptual stumble-block in Kantian philosophy can be reinvigorated for its critical impetus and contemporary relevance.

## 2. Four Fundamental Notions

The fundamental Kantian distinction between things as they appear to us (*phenomena*) and things as they are in themselves (*noumena*) can be interpreted in various ways. However, a fundamental way in which the entire problematic can be framed is found in the very first line of the *Critique*:

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<sup>1</sup> I used the Dutch translation of Bollnow's work (titled *Mens en Ruimte*). The English translation titled *Human Space* seems to miss the finer points of Bollnow's German, while the Dutch translation captures its nuances better due to the close relationship between the two languages. Regarding Japanese philosophy in general and the Kyoto School in particular, I fully admit that my treatment of Shizuteru's thought is limited to the translations available to me. Much work of the Kyoto School has not been translated, providing us with a limited picture of what these philosophers intended and achieved. Yet, there seems to be enough material to construct a relatively reliable picture. I cite Bollnow's work parenthetically, using the abbreviation MR, followed by the page number. Shizuteru's essay is cited parenthetically, using the abbreviation HOH, followed by the page number.



Reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognition that it is burdened with questions that it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the very nature of reason itself, but which also it cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. (CPR Avii)

Apart from pre-empting the Existentialist notion that the problems of humanity are partially caused by the very fact that it has the capacity to problematize its own existence, Kant raises a point about the nature of reason itself. Simply put, our reasoning strategies lead into certain unavoidable problems. Problems, moreover, that are so fundamental that dismissing them topples the entire edifice of thought built upon them. To avoid those problems, philosophers and scientists alike often revert to “wishful-and-fearful thinking”. (Griffin 1998, 11–14) The issue of the Thing-in-Itself is a splendid case study.

### **2.1. Kantian Cognitive Gradualism (KCG)**

Kant’s simple formula is that for each appearance X, there must be some cause Y that causes it. But since the limits of our sense and reason demarcate what we can cognize (and thus claim to know), there is nothing left for us but to postulate some causally efficacious entity beyond our cognition, which furnishes our sensibility with *phenomena* or appearances.

That mysterious Y is the Thing-in-Itself (*Ding an Sich*) or *noumenon* that we cannot even truly know exists, save by inference to the principle that “for every effect, there must be cause.” (R, 18.353) So, we can postulate it as the logical termination of a casual chain.

Kant defines the position of appearances in his transcendental idealism as follows:

Everything intuited in space or in time, hence all objects of an experience possible for us, are nothing but appearances, i.e., mere representations, which, as they are represented, as extended beings or series of alterations, have outside our thoughts no existence grounded in itself. This doctrine I call transcendental idealism. (CPR A490–91/B518–519).

But Kant introduces quite some ambiguities as well as suggestive remarks here. First, appearances (*Erscheinungen*) are not the same as experiences (*Erfahrungen*). Kant seems to regard the latter as a more developed stage of the former. This is fully consistent with his cognitive gradualism, whereby judgements are gradually constructed through reflection. While such proto-judgements are not necessarily illusions, they are rudimentary, maturing over time. (AF 25:480; CPR B69–71; Pro 4, 293) This tells already something about Kant’s remarkably process-based (and anthropological) theory of cognition.

We have experiences, but these are not given as ready-made or finished impressions. We can relate to them in various ways and revise how we conceptualize or value them. This implies a certain critical distance: we have a choice to reflectively judge a certain appearance even if it is directly given to us, grounding our freedom and guaranteeing the space for moral action. (Pro

4:290; R, 17:635) To insist otherwise would rob agents of moral capacity and would lead straight into hard determinism. A familiar error in reasoning consists in taking initial appearances or proto-judgements for fully developed experiences. This may lead into illusions – or the faulty application of the categorial structures of understanding to intuitions. (A, 7:146) Importantly, Kant is concerned with the *objective validity of judgements*, a theme that is present throughout his entire critical philosophy. The distinction that Kant makes is that subjective judgements are *necessary* for reaching objective determination or universal assent. However, they are not *sufficient* to lay claim to objectivity. While privately, these subjective judgements are required to gradually form a judgement, they cannot claim “universal assent” or “objective determination.” Especially in the anthropological writings, we see that Kant stresses the importance of the subjective judgement, this time from the perspectivist, lived, first-person and indeed anthropological point of view.

The process of getting acquainted with our intuitions and what they imply for the understanding develops gradually. Kant frames this process as a combination of three syntheses in the first *Critique*, but as a process of reflection throughout the *Anthropology* and as a sequence (*progressus*) his *Reflexionen* (R, 18:379) but also reserves a role for the practical application of the faculty of reflection. This process plays out in real-time and is one of approximation and gradual clarification/exposition. I will have more to say on this later, especially in relation to the synthesis of the manifold through apprehension.

I call the process of (a) progressing from subjective to objective judgements and (b) the use of proto-judgements “Kantian cognitive gradualism” (KCG), and likewise, it will play a role later in my argument.

## 2.2. The Spatialization Argument of Cognition (SAC)

Kant notes that the Thing-in-Itself may well be an unintended or at least misleading side-effect generated by the understanding. The understanding poses a limit-concept of what it can reach. In doing so, it inadvertently also generates another object that is logically possible, but which is an “entirely undetermined concept”.

If, therefore, we wanted to apply the categories to objects that are not considered as appearances, then we would have to ground them on an intuition other than the sensible one, and then the object would be a noumenon in a positive sense. Now since such an intuition, namely intellectual intuition, lies absolutely outside our faculty of cognition, the use of the categories can by no means reach beyond the boundaries of the objects of experience. (CPR, B308)

An object which can be *thought* need not necessarily to *exist*. Kant calls this the “doctrine of the negative noumenon” – that is, an entity which is thought without any relation to our sensible intuition. (CPR, B307–308). To grasp the nature of a Thing-in-Itself, the understanding would have to apply the categories, which cannot be applied to the realm outside our cognition. While we can

have a consistent, logically possible conception of a Thing-in-Itself, this conception is necessarily misleading, as it applies the categories of the understanding in a domain where they hold no power.

What Kant indicates is crucial: the Thing-in-Itself represents the expanse beyond the boundary of cognition. The idea of such an outside expanse is already a stretch – we postulate it by means of a limit-concept, namely the *horizon* that separates the phenomenal and the noumenal. Whatever we may say about the “other side of the horizon” is then always already too much. We simply end up with “entirely underdetermined concepts”. Note also that it places a strict limit on the understanding, not necessarily on sensibility – if we did not have some causal connection to a deeper level of reality, we would be left with the question of how we could be affected at all (see also 3.4).

This insight by Kant that we must deal with two sides of an outer limit, I call the Spatialization Argument of Cognition (SAC). Like KCG, it resurfaces in due course of the argument.

### **2.3. Proto-Conceptuality**

We can take Kant’s point about undetermined concepts one step further. That a completely undetermined concept is an impossibility seems obvious – it is a contradiction in terms. But, assuming the validity of KCG, what about *partially* undetermined concepts? As Kant points out:

Consequently, on the one hand, we cannot know the complete concept of any given object because we never dispose of all possible predicates; on the other hand, since each pair of opposed predicates has some content that is either affirmed or denied, we can conceive a priori of one thing whose concept contains all and only positive attributes. This “idea of an All of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)” represents the concept of a most real being (*ens realissimum*), that is, “the concept of a thing in itself which is thoroughly determined”. [underlining added]. (CPR, A575–576/B603–604)

Here, we witness a Kantian move that possibly inspired Schopenhauer to equate the Thing-in-Itself with the totality of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*) as a universal Will. The “most real being” is that which contains all positive attributes – a kind of all-encompassing totality, the Unconditioned, the Hegelian Absolute, the Deleuzean virtual or Platonic realm of ideas. (Tomaszewska 2007, 79; CPR A702/B730) Kant borrows the Scholastic term *ens realissimum* – a notion usually reserved to designate the ultimate reality of the Divine.<sup>1</sup> To possess all the attributes of a concept would be to draw a map which *is* the territory. Concepts are instruments to navigate a reality that is remarkably more complex than what they describe. This full reality is a Thing-in-Itself or transcendental object,

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Kant postulated that only a Deity could possess such an intellectual intuition as to survey the whole of reality, as it is not bound to the *Anschauungsformen*. See: Allison 2004 and Winegar 2017 for a discussion of this theme.



fully determined.<sup>1</sup> However, such an entity can only be thought as a regulative ideal, but cannot be perceived.<sup>2</sup> At this point, it becomes so all-encompassing that it can only exist as a logical possibility.

KCG implies a form of proto-conceptuality in Kantian philosophy. For now, it suffices to say that we may usefully extend our conception of concepts from linguistic labels to affect-laden, intentional, practicable, evolving and therefore adaptive cognitive instruments that allow us to navigate the world.

#### 2.4. The Problem of Affection

Although Things-in-Themselves fall outside the scope of the innate structure of our minds (i.e. the principle of sufficient reason”), Kant still claims that they *affect* our cognition. This claim caused much philosophical headaches, as it involves a contradiction. There must be some causal connection between the Thing-in-Itself and our cognition if it is able to affect it. One could say here that the inconsistency lies in denying Things-in-Themselves any form of agency: either they affect us, and cause appearances to appear, or they do not. This is *problem of affection*.

Kant seems to defend the idea that the causal agency of Things-in-Themselves extends to our minds, but states that from observing these effects, we cannot learn anything about their constitution. (ML2, 28:567; CPR A42/B59) If Thing-in-Themselves are casually isolated from the world of appearances, how is it that our mind is affected by them, as this implies an efficacious causal connection? Kant seems to make at least two mistakes here:<sup>3</sup>

a) The categories cannot be applied to noumena, and as this applies to the category of “cause”, required for any form of causation, causality becomes impossible.

b) Causation implies a relation between two entities, but Kant says one of those entities is in principle unknowable, failing to provide proof that the “hidden member” is the actual *source* of causation.

We should discuss a second distinction here, namely between noumena in the positive and negative sense. (CPR, B306–309) A positive noumenon is an ideal and/or hypothetical object that can be only conceptually represented and is under that form intelligible. It is logically, although not metaphysically possible. A negative noumenon, on the other hand, is an empirical object considered without the cognitive frame that human cognition imposes upon it.

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<sup>1</sup> Allison (2004) and De Boer (2014), distinguish in their discussions between and transcendental object, Thing-in-Itself and noumenon. I approach the Thing-in-Itself as *the* transcendental object, as per the passage of the First *Critique* I cited above.

<sup>2</sup> Tomaszewska points out that the Kantian conception of the transcendent realm ultimately terminated with the agency of God as the “prime mover” or ultimate Mind, a position not uncommon to the Enlightenment. At least, it conformed to the religious sentiments of the time, without having to participate in ongoing theological debates. See for a discussion of intellectual intuition and the possibility of knowing Things-in-Themselves Winegar 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See for an extensive discussion of this topic: Tomaszewska 2007

Although the latter possibility seems blocked from the viewpoint of Kantian transcendental idealism, an entire tradition of Eastern philosophy fundamentally diverges on this point.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, recently, emerging frameworks of thinking like Onticology and Actor-Network Theory have also critically interrogated this point.

The very least we can say is that “thinking a transcendental object” provides us with little or no information or knowledge at all. At best, it sets an outer limit for our thought, as SAC indicates. Yet, the problem of affection remains.

Summarizing, I have introduced four notions pertaining to the phenomena/noumena distinction. First, KCG says that judgements are *reflectively developed* over time. Second, the Spatialization Argument of Cognition (SAC) says that there is a discernable demarcation between the sensible and transcendental realms, although this need not be a sharp demarcation (in line with KCG). Third, proto-conceptuality means that concepts develop organically (also in line with KCG). Fourth, the problem of affection highlights to problematic causal relation between *phenomena* and *noumena*.

### 3. The One-World Interpretation and Phenomenal Monism: A Commitment

I pause for a moment to introduce a fundamental philosophical commitment, as well as a related recent contribution to the phenomena-noumena debate that comes close to my position, although it diverges in a few important aspects.

I am committed to *monist metaphysics*, rather than dualism or Deleuze-inspired metaphysics of multiplicity. This commitment derives directly from the doctrine of neo-organicism, some details of which have been worked out elsewhere (Hanna and Paans, 2020, Paans 2022). Following that doctrine, I reject two-world interpretations of the phenomena-noumena distinction, as that would invite an undesirable ontological dualism in.

My sympathies lie with a one-world/two-aspect interpretation of the phenomena-noumena binary, namely *phenomenal monism*:

There is one and only one class of apparent or phenomenal objects (i.e., one apparent or phenomenal world, hence phenomenal monism) such that each member of this class can be considered phenomenally or noumenally by us. (Hanna 2017b, 51)

The object should be taken in a twofold meaning, namely as appearance or as thing in itself. [underlining added] (CPR, Bxxvii)

The upshot of this variety of monism is that we can safely postulate that we can *think* noumena (as purely theoretical, logically possible) entities, while realizing fully well that we can never fully *cognize* or *consistently conceptualize* them. Moreover, there is only a single class of objects in the

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Reflexionen* (R, 18:227) there is at least a passage that suggests some cognitive form of access to the Thing-in-Itself.

world. There are many ways to access or experience these objects, but that does not detract from the fact that there is no substance dualism of any kind. If there is any dualism (for instance explanatory dualism or cognitive dualism) involved, it has never to do with postulating more than a single type of object.

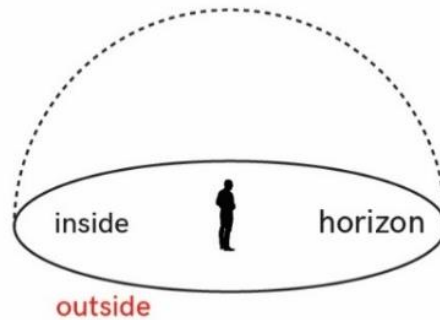
#### **4. The Noumenal Dimension and the Horizon-Structure**

A single important point remains: Kant distinguished between phenomena and noumena. Doing so, he drew a sharp line around the innate cognitive structure of the human mind. This boundary was well-demarcated, involving the *Anschauungsformen*, the categories and the rules of the schematism. But no matter how subsequent thinkers addressed this issue, the fact remained that a horizon had been postulated, dividing the world in an inside and an outside.

The concept of the horizon in relation to lived experience and cognition has been discussed in detail by Bollnow and Shizuteru alike. As Shizuteru builds his analysis on Bollnow's work, I discuss them in parallel, highlighting how their treatments illuminate each other. Arguably, Bollnow was one of the first post-war thinkers to deal with the relationship between human and space in such a detailed fashion. Granted, Heidegger (who was his teacher) had developed the notion of *Dasein* (Being), and conceived being-in-the-world as an inextricable condition for thinking about Being as such, or "the spatial scheme is in a metaphorical sense applicable to the entire human condition." (MR 88) His writings breathe the idea of the "spatiality of being" (Ireland, 2015), including meditations on the polarity between heaven and earth, dwelling and wandering. (MR 130–135; 182–185; 270–273)

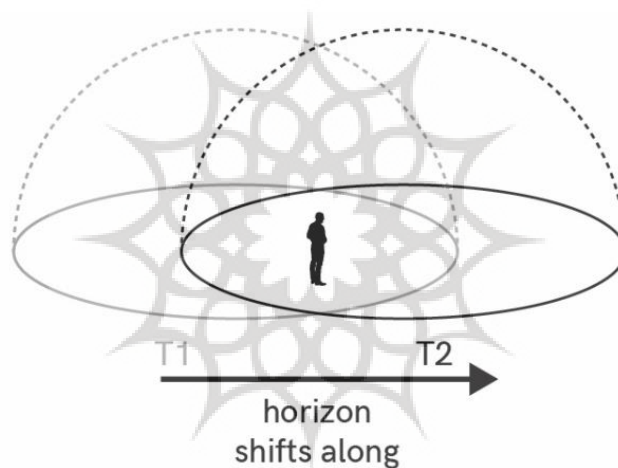
Moreover, Bollnow continues a line of geographical thinking that started with Ludwig Binswanger's 1942 *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* and Gaston Bachelard's 1958 *La poétique de L'espace*, in which the existential import of everyday spaces was analyzed. This line of thinking constructs conceptual bridges between the structure of the environment and the structure of human thinking. In other words, the thought-shaping character of the environment is fully recognized. Bollnow makes it explicit when he states that "the horizon belongs to the essence (*Wesen*) of the human being". (MR 125)

As part of the environment, the horizon is one of the fundamental features of lived, human experience. (MR 118–122; 124–126) Its spatial presence is a necessary consequence of being a bipedal species with stereoscopic vision and the upright constitution of our bodies that it holds such an important place in our thinking. (MR, 91–96) What Kant called "the subjective ground of differentiation" (OT 8:135) is directly related to how individuals experience and cognitively construe a horizon. Within it, three-dimensional spatial cognition is coherently organized. (MR 121)



**Figure 1.** The horizon as limit and demarcation.

However, this boundary is not static, but moves along with the observer. So, it is a dynamic limit on what we can experience and perceive. What at one point lies outside of the horizon may be enveloped by it once we move the vantage point. (MR 121–122)



**Figure 2.** The horizon as an integral, dynamic element of cognition - once the perspective changes, the horizon changes along.

For Bollnow as for Shizuteru, there is a certain methodological advantage in creatively utilizing the literal, geographical and physical meanings of the term “horizon” alongside figurative and metaphorical interpretations. Indeed, it is safe to say that for both thinkers, these two modes of meaning overlap and illuminate each other. So, the visual limitation of the horizon is directly taken as analogous to the limit of our experience.<sup>1</sup> Bollnow borrows from Kant’s philosophy to emphasize how the subject postulates a horizon, and how irreducibly perspectivist one’s subjective position therefore is. (MR 121, 124) Likewise, Shizuteru interprets the horizon as the limit and

<sup>1</sup> Kant himself makes similar conceptual leap in his 1786 essay *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* fluidly joining logic, mathematics and anthropology in the course of the discussion.

opening of lived experience. Literally, philosophy becomes in the hands of these two thinkers a *cognitive geography*.

Shizuteru shares Bollnow's conception that the area within the horizon is unified by its presence – without horizon, a world would not be imaginable. (MR 121) For Bollnow, the horizon organizes cognitive experience, while for Shizuteru all “thing-events” take place within it. Importantly, this thought has been more recently taken up in ecological thought and correlationism – as Morton puts it “we have only access to thing-positings” (Morton 2018, 13). But whether one conceptualizes objects as positings or events, they derive their organization from the fact that they appear inside a horizon-structure. Moreover, the horizon is the organizational background for an overall *Gestalt*, or intelligible experiential structure. (MR 125) Without this background, any form of cognitive organization is spinning in the void, and even acting becomes impossible. It is against the background of a limit that an “action space” (*Handlungsraum*) emerges.<sup>1</sup> (MR 125, 274–279)

Both thinkers view the inside of the horizon as the domain of *phenomena*. What appears there necessarily appears within the confines of a prior demarcation by the horizon. Like Kant, Shizuteru emphasizes that *beyond* the horizon exists an expanse which is negatively demarcated for those residing within it.

Shizuteru introduces a way of looking at the inside/outside or phenomena/noumena distinction typical of Kyoto School philosophy. Kyoto School thinkers like Kitarō Nishida and Keiji Nishitani adopted a philosophical perspective predicated on the notion of Nothingness instead of Being, subtly subverting many notions that Western philosophy assumes to be foundational, thereby providing a new perspective.

Shizuteru adopts a similar strategy. For Kant, the noumenon represented a *negative* limit on human sensibility and understanding. It could only be postulated as an “outside” or alternatively “the other side of the (cognitive) horizon”. For Shizuteru, this feature is positive:

Is it possible to see that there is an area where we cannot see? So that we can see where we can see. (HOH, 97).

Is it not possible for there to be a seeing that there is an area we cannot see in our way of seeing what we can see and that it permeates? (HOH, 97)

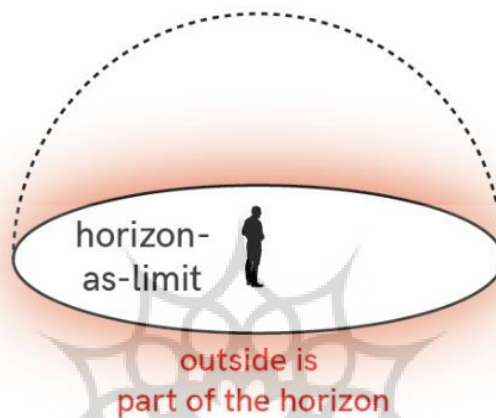
This line of thinking inverts Western thought. Usually, we limit ourselves to what we can sensibly perceive – indeed, this is the upshot of Kant's transcendental idealism. It aims to with set the “limits of sense and reason”, thereby setting boundaries on what may be claimed as “knowable and setting metaphysics on the path of a “secure science” The Kantian question “what can I know?” is the most direct expression of this philosophical orientation. Shizuteru invokes a methodological contrast: to demarcate the area where we *can* see, we require precision about where we *cannot* see.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, Bollnow is clearly indebted to Heidegger's notion of *Zuhandenheit*, invoking a relational theory of how objects appear to us in the space of phenomena.



*Prima facie*, this sounds vintage Kantian. But the added sting is that we have *to see the area where we cannot see*. Here, East and West part ways. The implicit claim is that there is a way of seeing that which we cannot see. Whereas the classical Kantian procedure demarcates the domain where we can see negatively by means of a limit-concept (the Thing-in-Itself), the Kyoto School procedure emphasizes that there is a continuity between the two domains. That which cannot be seen is nevertheless a part of what can be seen. So, to see where one cannot see is an integral part of seeing and indeed knowing.



**Figure 3.** The horizon as determined from both the inside and the outside.

Consequently, Shizuteru poses the question “whether there is a seeing to indicate an area that our way of seeing prevents us to see?”. The passive form (“a seeing”) derives directly from Buddhist philosophy. As per the classical dictum “the eye that sees cannot see itself”, the pure experience of seeing is regarded as more important than that which is discerned. This line of thinking is directly related to the thought of Shizuteru’s teacher Kitarō Nishida, who postulated the notion of “pure experience”. Put in Kantian terms, pure experience is a deep and thoroughgoing mode of experiencing before sensibility and understanding categorize, order and segment it. Buddhist thought spent considerable resources to detail how one could achieve such a deep and direct understanding. Before our customary frame of thought (up to and including the Kantian *a priori*) applies, pure experience exerts a deep, affective and lasting impact on individuals.

The correlated question that Shizuteru posits extends this idea. The issue is whether there is a way to transcend our customary way of seeing to see the domain where we cannot see. Simultaneously, Shizuteru suggests that we may also perceive a metaphysical continuity: the noumenal domain is not strictly isolated from the realm of phenomena, but “permeates” it. The wording is important: the influence of the noumenal is subtle, indirect and fragile – a dissecting,

analytic gaze quickly overlooks or disregards it.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion lingers in the air: can reason not grasp it because it is too rash, too direct, too forward, too much focused on the “determining judgement”?

I add some philosophical background to appreciate the plausibility of this viewpoint. From within the Kantian framework of thought, this is the issue that caused all the headaches. If the phenomenal and noumenal domains are causally isolated, Things-in-Themselves are merely thinkable, but their causal efficacy (i.e. the problem of affection) remains problematic.

Instead of the binary phenomena-noumena distinction, Japanese philosophy tends to favor a concentric model of cognition, with three concentric circles each signifying degrees of experiential intensity.

If we consider mental representations as theoretical cognitions of objects, as Hume and Kant both did, we place them either in the *field of sensibility* or in the *field of understanding/theoretical reason*. For Hume, this led to the skeptical conclusion that we are stuck with perceiving properties and inferring chains of cause and effects between them, without being able to justify our inferences rationally, but only by recourse to sensory experience and “habit” (Hume, 2008, 55–56, 66). For Hume, we are ineluctably stuck in the field of sensibility. For Kant, the Humean predicament was unpalatable, leading to a crucial refinement in how we conceive of sensibility and understanding/theoretical reason, but also to the ontological binary between *phenomena* and *noumena*.

Keiji Nishitani (1983) followed – in the footsteps of the Buddhist tradition and Nishida – a different path, enriching the taxonomy of experience with an additional step. We can imagine sensibility as the outer circumference of two concentric circles and understanding/theoretical reason as the inner one. We can refine and order sense impressions using understanding and/or theoretical reason, but we are ultimately unable to think objects apart from their Being.<sup>2</sup> But if we penetrate deeper into the heart of the concentric circle, we encounter objects in “the field of Emptiness.”

When we encounter objects in the field of Emptiness, we have left (Kantian) sensibility and its associated understanding/theoretical reason (*Erkenntnis*) well behind, and objects do not look like *objects* any longer, nor do they appear in a discursive space that we can analyze by using concepts or familiar scientific terminology.

Here, we arrive in the domain of *pure experience*, where concepts and words used theoretically or scientifically fall infinitely short of that pure experience itself. The only way we can speak meaningfully about them is obliquely or poetically.

<sup>1</sup> Once more invoking Bollnow: once we move from *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-hand) to *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-hand), we lose the relational view through the analytical gaze. Importantly, Kitarō Nishida developed a similar line of thinking, arguing against what he called “object logic” or trying to overconceptualize or categorize experience.

<sup>2</sup> This view has a close correlate in Kant’s remark that the Thing-in-Itself (*ens realissimum*) is existence (R, 18.236)

By using the term “experience,” I am not speaking about the type of everyday experience, or the everyday Kantian notion of *Erfahrung*.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I refer to a unique and primordial level of experience that pre-empts, encapsulates, inflects and enables “experience” in the mundane sense. This type of experience is indeed “a seeing”, as the confines of subjective perception have fallen away or weakened at this point.

We can now appreciate Shizuteru’s reasoning. The question is whether we can bypass or circumvent the confines of the phenomenal domain, represented by the horizon-structure of experience. This strategy doesn’t refute or subvert the classical Kantian distinction but extends its area of application. It could even be argued that Kant suggests an affective or speculative access to the realm beyond experience:

By analogy, one can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds of experience and finding no object of intuition at all, but merely space for intuition; for then it is no longer in a position to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to objective grounds of cognition, but solely to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the determination of its own faculty of judgment. This subjective means still remaining is nothing other than reason's feeling of its own need (OT 8, 136).

Through “pure reason” that we explore this space for intuition without any object, using our “subjective ground of differentiation”. This process is the outcome of reasons need to venture beyond its boundaries. But, viewed from the anthropological angle, it is the underlying cognitive gradualism that is at work here: through a sequence (*progressus*) of successive judgements, objectivity is approximated.

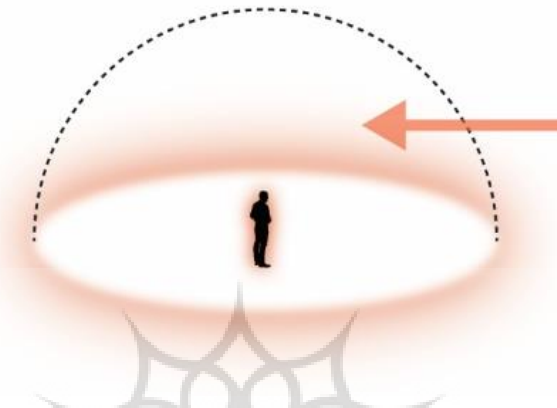
Shizuteru’s argument emphasizes *continuity* between phenomena and noumena. Again, this is a pervasive feature of Japanese philosophy: it emphasizes synthesis and continuity rather than decomposition and confrontation. In this case, this feature is used to “relax” an opposition rather than to emphasize it. (Jullien 2016, 120-122) This relaxation between opposites rejects the causal isolation usually associated with noumena, highlighting the problematic nature of the initial distinction. However, it does not simply *include* noumena within the realm of phenomena. The relation is one of indirect influence:

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<sup>1</sup> Kant introduced the troubled distinction between judgements of perception and judgements of experience in his 1783 *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*. Where “perception” represents for Kant the subjective observations, experiences etc., the notion of “experience” represents the systematic exposition of necessary features that can safely be ascribed to any object. In the Kantian framework, there is no explicit place for “the field of Emptiness”, save perhaps in aesthetic contemplation, the “free play of the imagination” or possibly in the speculation of pure reason.

Although nothing is added to the areas seen, would not a decisive, even if subdued, change occur in our comportment to the seen? (HOH 97)

Shizuteru raises the question whether the tacit presence of the “other side” of the horizon, once experienced, changes how things appear on “this side”. He suggests that a different “hue” or “tone” suffuses the most basic levels of our experience once we open up towards the noumenal realm.



**Figure 4.** The Shizuteruan proposal: the outside permeates the inside.

Elsewhere, I have written about the notion of “creative piety”, the attitude of consciously striving to experience the world in a different, livelier, informationally richer, humbler and more open sense (Hanna & Paans 2022).

Shizuteru’s suggestion closely resembles this notion, as it draws a link between cognitive faculties and the way in which things sensibly appear. While the cognitive faculties themselves might be usefully organized following the classical Kantian schema, the way in which things appear has to do with what these faculties can accomplish.

The critical point that can be raised here is that the problem of affection has been moved rather than solved. If “the other side of the horizon” is experienced by us, this means that noumena exert causal effects on our cognitive faculties and are *not* causally isolated. And if they are phenomenally experienced, that means that – all protestations to the contrary – noumena have been invited into the phenomenal realm. The rejoinder to this objection would be that nothing changes in the phenomenal domain. Things *appear* suffused to us, but nothing is added or subtracted. The hard-nosed critic might reply that *something* is causing the change and affecting the perception. If this *something* is a noumenon, then it turns into a phenomenon once we experience it. This reasoning conforms to the Kantian scheme: only phenomena can *appear* to us.

From the viewpoint of phenomenal monism, the distinction itself is already problematic, inviting ontological dualism where there doesn’t need to be one.

From the perspective of the horizon-structure of experience, it is equally problematic. The notion of the Thing-in-Itself is a limit-concept, as is the image of the horizon-structure. The

Shizuteruan response is that this limit presents also an opening – thereby extending our cognition. The objection that the noumenon becomes a phenomenon – and that this is problematic – denies the “relaxation of the opposites” its legitimacy. It also forecloses any consideration that the limits of our experience could be different than Kant imagined them to be. Tellingly, Kant understood every determination is a negation: “The person blind from birth cannot form the least representation of darkness, because he has no representation of light.” (CPR A575/B603) He realized very well that the outside is “part of the horizon”. Shizuteru emphasizes this: the horizon is negatively determined by what exists outside it. The “other side belongs negatively to the boundary”. (HOH 96)

If – following the broadly Kantian project – the aim is to investigate the structure of experience, we stop too early when we confine ourselves to what happens within the horizon-structure of experience. The outside of it is as much a part of it as the inside. (HOH 97).

The “possibility of the horizon is limited by the other side”, according to this argument. Shizuteru calls this model the “twofold world” (*nijū chichei*). This is not a form of dualism, but the simple recognition that we “can never know the whole”, just as Western philosophy held that the unconditioned or Absolute cannot be fully known or conceptually represented. To include non-knowing in the way of knowing results in a more informed and humbler picture:

That which is known by us can in no case be the whole. [B]y knowing this non-knowing (*fuchi*) together with knowledge (*chi*) on the basis of the twofold horizon, world knowledge is fundamentally relativized (HOH 99-100)

Sounding almost paradoxically, “the fact that we cannot know the whole becomes a way of knowing the whole” (HOH 100). Just like in the case of “seeing where we cannot see”, there is a way of experientially registering that which remains unknown. Once more, we see how Shizuteru uses this idea to emphasize a continuity between phenomena and noumena:

To know non-knowing means that experience percolates toward the unknown indeterminacy and at the same time the unknown indeterminacy permeates experience (HOH 100)

There is a two-way interaction between known and unknown. Experience “percolates towards” the unknown, while the unknown “permeates” experience. This is what Shizuteru means with things appearing “suffused” with a noumenal presence. All this sounds strikingly familiar from the viewpoint of Kantian non-conceptualism and creative piety. Experience in the full sense of the term encapsulates a forward impetus, a drive to know more and to explore the region that it knows to be outside its reach. As Kant himself well knew:

In fact, if we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, as is fitting, then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them, though we are



not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself, but only with its appearance. (Pro, 4, 314–15)

Experience points ceaselessly beyond itself; but reason must come to terms with this continuous expansion, this grasping for new frontiers. Given this navigational character, is it possible to conceive the Kantian categorical framework as a toolkit for adaptively structuring our experience? Its structures cannot always make sense of that which is encountered; hence a form of cognitive gradualism is required. Inevitably, human reason seeks to come to terms with what it discovered; but equally, we cannot know the “whole” or “Absolute”. Consequently, wouldn’t it be better to view the categories of the understanding as a system of cognitive probes rather than a Procrustean grid imposed on sensibility? For Shizuteru, this orientation in thinking paves the way to frame the relation between phenomenon and noumenon not as one of ontological exclusion, but of *cognitive continuity*. The noumenal inflects the phenomenal domain.

## 5. Actancy and Grasping the Grounds of Thought

This line of thinking is not entirely unique – it has close correlates in the Romantic conception of the Thing-in-Itself. Both Schopenhauer and Schelling felt compelled to allow some form of access to “the ultimate ground of reality”.

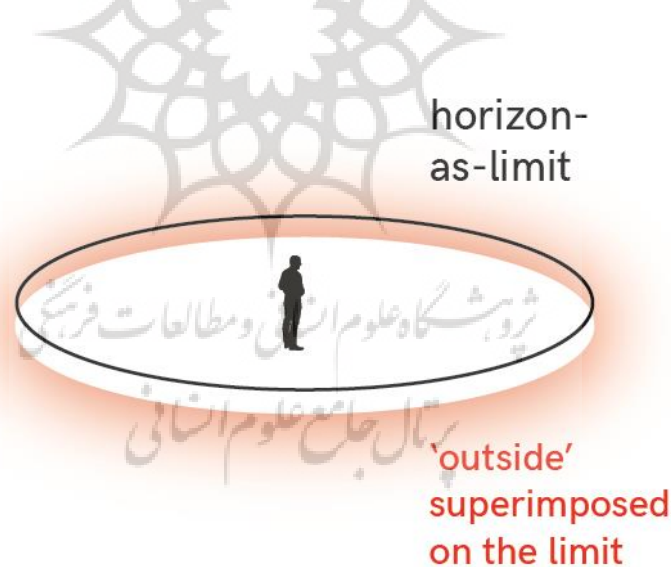
During the Romantic era, the strict phenomena/noumena distinction started to shift and evolve. The post-Kantian philosophies of Hegel, Schelling and Schopenhauer regarded the Thing-in-Itself not so much as a *formal* cause of appearances, but as a *ground* that existed outside the scope of representational thought. For Schopenhauer (2011, 174), this culminated in the “dark drive” of the Will, while for Schelling (2006, 68), it became an unrepresentable abyss (*Abgrund*) or non-ground (*Ungrund*). The *noumenal dimension* – in whatever way it was conceived became emotionally and existentially charged. It represented an experiential surplus that could be dimly apprehended, but not clearly conceptualized. Consequently, it became much more than just the logical upshot of Kantian transcendental idealism, evolving into an evocative description of a creative or generative realm giving rise to the manifestly real world that we perceive, but that itself remains largely invisible.

Being the first thinker who championed what we nowadays call embodied thinking, Schopenhauer establishes a first criterion for noumenal experience: it must allow for *gradual development* and varying *degrees of intensity*. The intimacy of one’s own body sets any embodied experience apart from many others, if only by virtue of the intensity of the event. And since the world is experienced through the body, the noumenal dimension necessarily is joined at the root with the appearances that appear in the phenomenal realm. This viewpoint is fully consistent with the Kantian idea that sensible experiences that have degrees of intensity – or “intensive magnitudes.” (CPR (A168/B201)).

Shizuteru provides a second criterion for access to the ground of reality: it is *indirect* and *non-conceptual*. It is not concerned with that which appears within the horizon-structure of experience, but with that which inflects it:

If we were to take up an image of the twofold world, it would be the horizon colored by the morning glow before the sun rises from the other side of the horizon (...) like the hemming of the horizon, the horizon in such a way enveloped by the other side [HOH 101]

The glow of the rising sun illuminates the world in an incomparable manner. It suffuses the world-as-sensibly-perceived, allowing new ways of looking at it. This way of conceptualizing the bounds of sensibility and the influence of the noumenal domain fully extends Kantian cognitive gradualism: our sensible apparatus may be trained, habituated and accustomed to perceiving hitherto unknown or even formerly unthinkable properties, relations or experiences. That the understanding must support the faculty of sensibility to come to terms with these experiences seems obvious: here, as Kant indicated, do we encounter a case where reason must venture out towards its limits, extending what was formerly thought possible within its limits. As the Kantian theory of cognition allows for sensible experiences that have degrees of intensity – or “intensive magnitudes” (CPR(A168/B201), it seems fully possible that one can learn to recognize or sense different degrees of intensity.

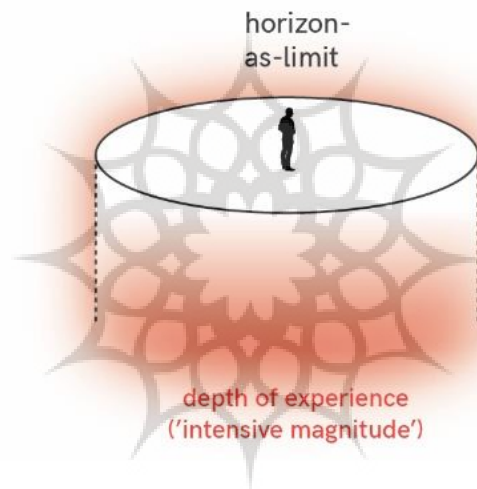


**Figure 5.** The twofold world: the bounds of "sense and reason" as well as the "outside" superimposed on these limits.

The variation in intensity points to the agency of the noumenal dimension, or its *actancy*. I will have more to say on this shortly. However, let's examine first where this emphasis on agency leads according to Shizuteru:

In that situation [of the twofold horizon], the horizon is what makes possible in principle the extent of experience in the horizontal direction, and the layering of the horizon and its other side is that which makes possible in principle the depth of experience in the vertical direction [HOH 99].

Something fundamental is at stake: while transcendental idealism maps out the margins of cognition (the extent), the noumenal domain (or “other side of the horizon”) enables the depth (or intensity) of experience. Like Schopenhauer and Schelling emphasized, there is a certain experiential intensity involved in the encounter with the “other side”. A fruitful way of reconceptualizing this encounter is via several new philosophical movements that have put objects back into the philosophical spotlight, like ecological thought, Object-Oriented Ontology, Onticology and Actor-Network Theory.



**Figure 6.** Within the basic cognitive frame, a degree of experiential intensity is possible.

Imagine that the entire world is made up of agents or assemblages of materials that have a degree of agency. An example would be a thermometer: a contraption of glass, mercury and a visual scale of marks has a degree of freedom to respond to temperature changes. Equally, we could imagine devices like metal detectors, combinations of chemical agents or catalysts as actants:

[A]n actant can be either human or nonhuman: it is that which does something, has sufficient coherence to perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations. (Bennett 2004, 355)

In scientific experiments, actants surface all the time. Indeed, when viewed from a Kantian viewpoint, actants are those devices that we use and indeed design to inquire into the structure of

nature itself.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, ecological thought has started to regard our wider living environment as an actant – one that we know only partially. From the ecological perspective, many factors, material constellations and phenomena function as actants. They appear as “the other side of the horizon”, providing a perceptual hue or coloring that is hard to conceptualize. This actant-power of objects, or “thing-power” as Bennett calls it, deserves to be taken seriously on its own terms. This means that the idealist response that such encounters are “cognitively mediated” must be methodically abandoned for a moment:

My view is that while humans do indeed encounter things only in a mediated way, there nonetheless remains something to be said for the naivete of naive realism. A moment of naivete is, I think, indispensable for any discernment of thing-power, if there is to be any chance of acknowledging the force of matter. (Bennett 2004, 357)

Temporarily suspending the (transcendent) idealistic worldview opens an attitude of receptivity or creative piety. The force of things can be perceived only once we open up to its actancy or material agency.<sup>2</sup> But always, it lingers at the cognitive periphery as an inevitable surplus, an in-itself that makes its presence felt. Once more, Bennett cites several theorists who in one form or the other have dealt with it, among them figures like Adorno (non-identity), Merleau-Ponty (the invisible) Deleuze (the virtual), attempting to formulate the “feeling of internal resistance”:

[T]hing-power makes itself known as an uneasy feeling of internal resistance, as an alien presence that is uncannily familiar. (...) Recent work in cultural theory has highlighted this force that is experienced as in but not quite of oneself. (Bennett 2004, 361)

Bennett’s examples obliquely point to this surplus, to the “other side of the horizon” that inflects what appears on this side. However, it is instructive to return to Schelling, who coined the term “indivisible remainder”, pre-empting more recent thinkers:

[E]verything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> See also Kant’s example of Evangelista Torricelli’s invention of the barometer in CPR Bxii–xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Kant pre-empted this point in his treatment of the Sublime: encountering the Sublime is actually a point where the transcendent-idealist structure seems to break down, rendering the work of the imagination necessary to construct a cognitively coherent picture.

resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground. (Schelling 2006, 29)

For Schelling, reality itself emerges from a surplus or ground-of-thought that reason cannot grasp. The categories of the understanding have indeed no power there. Yet, as an affective force, it threatens to “break through”. The Schellingian point here has to do with antecedence: the ground appears first and is itself chaotic and without rules (*Regellos*). Yet, what appears is ordered and structured only afterwards. (Dunham et al. 2014, 139–140) For Schelling as for Kant and Schopenhauer, an antecedent ground must be present for reality to arise in a minimally ordered, intelligible form. Yet, this ground can still be dimly grasped or approached rather than conceptualized. What Kant would have called the “limits of reason” is conceptualized as “personality” by Schelling:

[A]ll personality rests on a dark ground that indeed must therefore be the ground of cognition as well. But it is only the understanding that develops what is hidden and contained in this ground merely *potentialiter* [potentially] and raises it to actuality [*zum Aktus*]. This can only occur through division, thus through science and dialectic, of which we are convinced that they alone will hold fixed and bring permanently to cognition the system which has been there more often than we think but has always again slipped away, hovering before us and not yet fully grasped by anyone. (Schelling 2006, 75)

From the viewpoint of SAC, this is only to be expected, as the horizon-structure of experience is determined from the outside *and* the inside – it always hovers before us but resists conceptual closure. As every determination is a negation, a prior ground must be postulated for anything that is grounded by it to appear. This argument extends the reach of KCG, which says that many forms of experience develop gradually. This applies to learning new skills, getting acquainted with a body of knowledge or even bodily ingraining knowledge through gesture and mnemonics. But now, we can see that such gradual development is not just contingent, but necessary. The world is always larger than the perception of the perceiving agent – it appears temporally before them. Yet, to come to grips with in, an act (*Aktus*) is required. What is potentially present in the manifestly real world is through an act of the understanding developed into a cognitive handhold. Schelling – like Hegel – credits the differentiating nature of dialectical thought with this developmental process:

If the dialectical principle, that is, the understanding which is differentiating but thereby organically ordering and shaping things in conjunction with the archetype by which it steers itself. (Schelling 2006, 76)

The understanding organizes organically what comes before it through differentiation. The categories of the understanding form the structure along which this differentiation is accomplished.



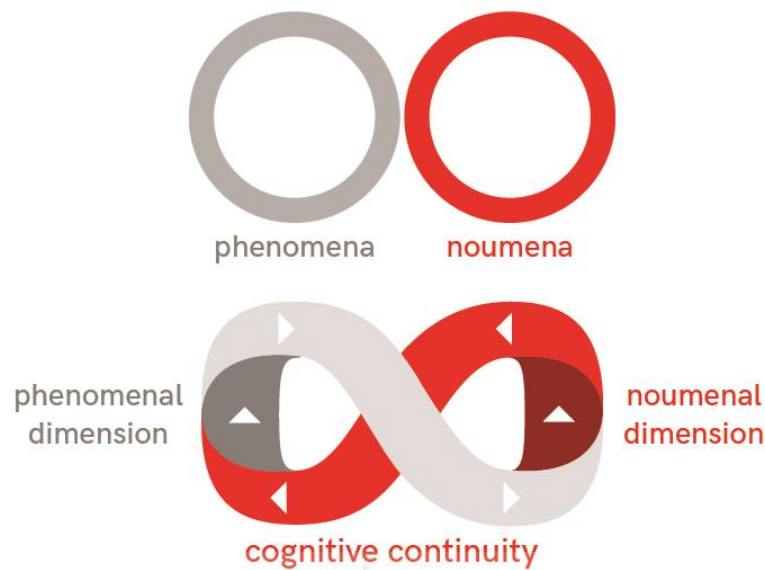
It is required for orienting oneself in thinking: instead of forming a rigid structure, the understanding organically orders intuitions, some of which are more developed than others. A version of this Schellingian thought can already be found in Kant, especially in the notion of transcendental reflection (CPR A261/B317). That faculty, according to Kant, is a state of mind that utilizes oppositional conceptual pairs to structure experience and determine whether an intuition belongs either sensibility or understanding. But apart from the formal structure that Kant proposes, we can clearly see the implication that thought-processes develop organically and through careful differentiation of its subject matter. Notably, such processes include non-conceptual and conceptual contents, therefore including concepts and affects as well as emotive impacts. This, then, allows us to grasp “the ground of thought”: it is composed of gradually enveloping experiences, some of which are experienced more intensely than others.

## **6. From the Things Themselves Towards Ecology**

I argued that the Kantian account of experience can be fruitfully extended with the Shizuteruan/anthropological approach. Instead of maintaining a strict division between noumena and phenomena, I proposed to consider Ueda Shizuteru’s model of the “horizon-structure of experience”. This model postulates a cognitive continuity between phenomena and noumena, allowing a noumenal dimension (or “Emptiness”) to permeate the phenomenal realm. So, the “great unknown” or noumenal domain becomes an integral part of our everyday experience. Consequently, our anthropological place in the world qualitatively changes and deepens due to this influence. By inviting the Things-in-Themselves in, we enrich our lived experience. In an insightful essay dealing with architecture and phenomenology, Jacques and Giroud write:

[A]rchitecture must pursue the task of securing its own possibility by longing for the thing. It is in this sense that phenomenology makes a valuable contribution to the work of architects, providing them with a means to recover the things themselves, on the ground of which rests the possibility of the discipline of “architecture”. (Jacques and Giraud 2012, 5).

But what applies to architecture applies as well to philosophy. To fully recover Things-in-Themselves, we should grant them their actancy in the world. The way in which we are affected by the depth of each object – no matter how mundane – lies within the faculty of sensibility, and is gradually worked out with proto-concepts. So, instead of regarding Things-in-Themselves as metaphysical redundancies, we should receptively and appreciatively open towards them.



**Figure 7.** From the standard model of two separated domains (top), to a situation of cognitive continuity (bottom).

The Kyoto School innovation is to fully recognize the actancy of the noumenal and integrating it within the structure of experience. So construed, the idea of a limit or horizon determines what we can experience, but it extends the bounds of sense. If we put it in Robert Pirsig's term: is there a "seeing" that sees Quality the elusive hue that suffuses everyday experience? Is there a register of experience that allows for unveiling and creating Quality? The process of furnishing experiences is gradual, as per KCG. It unfolds in real-time, allows of degrees of intensity, involves the practice of creative piety, and fully embraces non-conceptuality, as well as embodied forms of cognition. Thus, the relation between phenomena and noumena is better visualized as a Möbius strip or Klein bottle: it has separate sides or aspects but can be traversed as a continuum.

As Kant argued, notions and ideas must be worked out (*Ausprägen*). The sensible impression is conceptually grasped through the understanding, but the materials on which it exercises its structuring activity is variegated and phenomenologically deep. As Schelling put it, it is a "generative dialectic" or (proto-conceptual) differentiation that works out possibilities, venturing beyond its own boundaries. The sensibility that Kant speaks about extends towards a dimension that grounds all the rest. At this point, what Pirsig designated as "Quality" or experiential depth enters, if one possesses a sufficiently developed sensibility. As discussed, Kant noticed in his account of intensive magnitude that certain experiences allow of varying degrees of intensity, and so it is only prudent or at least epistemically humble to assume that certain types of experiences can be further developed than we currently know. We use routinely the category "Quality" to describe with the fact that our sensibility picks up on the varying degrees of intensive magnitudes.

Actually, this is simplification – a category that describes the fact that sensations register variety of intensity.

What emerges is a picture that is inherently relational yet still monistic. We can take the Thing-in-Itself under its phenomenal and noumenal aspect and consistently argue that these are two deeply intertwined domains fused in appearances, yet always containing an indivisible remainder. This requires that we postulate a deep and thoroughgoing relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal – in other words, we require the “other side of the horizon” or “ground of thought” to gradually advance our thinking. This means developing the skills and attitudinal dispositions to detect and access it. Creative piety is the attitudinal disposition required to achieve this access.

This last point is particularly relevant while thinking about ecology and organicism. The physical world appears perceptually before humanity and was there before human consciousness developed. But the presence of thing-power, or the agency that the environment exerts is largely unknown – yet not unperceived – by us. The resonance of for instance ecological thought, as well as Glenn Albrecht’s work on finding new words for a new world point towards the necessity of having to orient ourselves in thought once more (Albrecht 2009; Morton 2013, 2018). We live in what has been called an “Ignorance Society”, whereby the limits of what we do not know force ourselves on our collective consciousness. (Brey, Innerarity and Mayos 2009) The *omnitudio realitatis* becomes paradoxically “larger than we thought”. Likewise, our ecological predicament appears to us as the “great unknown”, yet it structures our experiences, and exerts its influence from the cognitive periphery. Our action space (*Handlungsraum*) is larger than we may realize, but it requires a refined and developed sensibility to explore its limits and possibly even attempting to think what lies beyond them.

Against this background, Kant’s plea for cultivating the sensibility for navigating the space of thought acquires renewed relevance. The philosophical project of transcendental idealism is more necessary than ever, if only to prevent humanity from disregarding its limitations and attempting to play God. Conversely, Kantian philosophy stresses the importance of limitations, leading to an attitude of epistemic humility and taking moral responsibility. At the point where we live this attitude collectively, we might well be able to answer that quintessential Kantian question “what can we hope for?”

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