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## Givenness and Cognition

We are grateful to Stefanie Grüne and Andrew Chignell for their thoughtful commentaries on our paper. Both focus their remarks on the issue of “givenness”, which could seem like a relatively narrow topic within the much broader subject matter of cognition that we have attempted to describe in our paper. However, we think that givenness, properly understood, plays an important role in Kant’s account of cognition, since it is central to *both* of the conditions that Kant places on cognition (which we call the ‘givenness condition’ and the ‘thought condition’). In particular, we maintain that givenness is an independent condition on cognition, one that has a meaning and function distinct from what it contributes to the thought condition. Full consideration of the givenness condition allows one to see more clearly how it gives expression to one of Kant’s most fundamental concerns in the first *Critique*. For, in our view, the primary role of givenness is to help to explain how it is that representations can refer, or fail to refer, to objects in a specific, cognitively significant way, an achievement that Kant is marking with the term “cognition”. To make good on these claims and to substantiate this picture of the broader significance of givenness within Kant’s account of cognition, we address Grüne’s paper first, then Chignell’s.

### I. Response to Grüne

Stefanie Grüne takes issue with our claim that for an object to be given, this object must exist. On her view, givenness, according to Kant, does not require the existence of the object, but only its real possibility. She

develops her critique in three steps. First, she argues that the reason why Kant requires objects to be given in intuition is that otherwise our concepts would not have 'objective reality' and would thus not constitute cognitions. But since the objective reality of a concept corresponds to the real possibility of its object, this is supposed to show that givenness does not require existence. Second, she challenges our (somewhat speculative) remarks on mathematical cognition, claiming that in the case of a priori cognition in mathematics, givenness does not require existence, since according to Kant, space, time and mathematical objects do not exist, but still can be cognized. She grants that the passage at B147 to which we refer in a footnote can be read as saying that mathematical cognition requires the existence of empirical objects that instantiate the mathematical cognitions in question (or at least have spatio-temporal properties that make mathematics applicable to them). However, in a third step, she argues that due to other passages, such a reading cannot represent Kant's considered view of the issue. Thus, according to Grüne, givenness does not require the existence of the object being given.

Before we address each of the three steps of Grüne's argument, it will be helpful to indicate two differences between the way Grüne thinks about cognition in Kant and the framework we develop in our paper. First, Grüne seems to assume that the role givenness plays in Kant's account of cognition consists solely in supplying concepts with objective reality. By contrast, we have suggested that cognition (in the basic case) requires an object to be

given in intuition (givenness-condition) *and* the attribution of general features to this object by means of concepts (thought-condition). We agree with Grüne that the concepts by which we determine the given object need to have objective reality to amount to cognition, which in turn requires some suitable relation to objects given in intuition. But on our account, this is not sufficient for cognition (at least in basic cases), since what is additionally required is that an object is *actually* given to us in intuition – an object that can then be thought and cognized through concepts. Thus, while Grüne seems to acknowledge only one role that givenness plays in cognition, we insist that it plays two roles.

Moreover, on our reading the role of supplying the mind with some object to cognize is more fundamental than the role acknowledged by Grüne (that of supplying our concepts with objective reality), because at least in the empirical case, the only way in which the objective reality of a concept can be established is by appeal to an exemplar (cf. A 222/B 269; 5:351) – that is, by appeal to an actually existing object given in intuition. Relatedly, the basic case of *singular* empirical cognition (in which a particular object is both given in intuition *and* conceptually determined, e.g. *this ball is red*) is fundamental for the case of *general* empirical cognitions (e.g. *all balls in the yard are red*), since the availability of the latter depends on that of the former. Since for Kant the actualization of a priori cognition depends on empirical cognition (cf. B1), we take singular empirical cognition to be the

paradigmatic case of cognition (in the narrow sense), and the other cases to be modeled on it.

This first difference between Grüne's and our understanding of cognition leads directly to the second. Grüne claims that 'according to Kant cognitions are nothing else than concepts that have objective reality (or judgments that contain concepts that have objective reality)' (**p. 14**). While we agree that a concept's having objective reality is necessary for cognition, we deny that it is always sufficient. What is additionally required (in the case of singular cognition) is that the concept is used to determine an object given in intuition.<sup>1</sup> We think that this is implied in some of Kant's most characteristic passages about cognition in the narrow sense. Thus, after famously claiming "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind", Kant goes on to say: "It is thus just as necessary to make the mind's concepts sensible (i.e., to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e., to bring them under concepts). [...] Only from their [sensibility and understanding] unification can cognition arise" (A51/B75). That is, there are two discernable aspects involved in bringing about a cognition: 'making concepts sensible' (thereby providing them with objective reality) *and* 'making intuitions understandable' (that is, determining their object by means of concept-application). Grüne acknowledges the first aspect, but seems to miss the second.<sup>2</sup>

This takes us to her critique of our claim that givenness requires existence. We can now see why this claim must strike her as implausible. If

the only role givenness plays in cognition is that of providing our concepts with objective reality, it is unclear why givenness should require the existence of objects, since for a concept to have objective reality, there need not be actual objects that fall under it. All that is required is that its object is (not just logically, but) *really possible* (which, in the case of empirical objects, is guaranteed by their conforming to the conditions of possible experience). And in fact this is the result of the first step of Grüne's argument. We can now see that this result rests on missing the fundamental role givenness plays independently from supplying our concepts with objective reality—namely, supplying our minds with objects to cognize.

Grüne might respond that the two roles are not as distinct as we take them to be, and that the latter somehow reduces to the former. But, first, in the face of various passages where Kant distinguishes these roles, such a claim would need to be argued for; and, second, it does seem highly plausible that the role of making an object present to mind (such that we can refer to it and represent it through concepts) is distinct from the role of providing concepts with objective reality, even though the latter role depends on the former. After all, we can employ concepts that have empirical reality in judgments without any object being (presently) given to us in intuition (*all balls in the yard are red*, when thought without perceptual access to the yard), which differs in important ways from the more basic case in which an object is *given* and conceptually determined (*this ball is red*). – In sum, Grüne's insistence that the objective reality of concepts

requires real possibility does not undermine our claim that givenness requires existence.

This leaves the second and third steps of her argument, which focus on the case of mathematical cognition. While it may seem obvious that for an object to be given in empirical intuition this object must causally affect our senses and thus exist (cf. A19/B34), in the case of a priori intuitions (particularly in mathematics, but also more generally in the case of intuitions of space, time and spatial or temporal forms), it may seem unclear how Kant could require their objects to exist in order to be given. In a footnote dedicated to this issue, we make two points about how givenness in the case of a priori intuition might still require existence. First, the objects of a priori intuitions are what one might call purely formal objects that exist in a suitable sense of 'existence' different from the one pertinent to empirical objects. Second, for mathematical concepts to amount to cognition, Kant claims that we must apply them to empirical intuition and thus to existing empirical objects that instantiate (or at least approximate) the mathematical properties cognized in mathematical construction. Grüne argues that both ways of defending our claim that givenness requires existence fail.

Since the footnote in which we discussed these two points was brief, it may be useful to elaborate. Concerning the second point, despite some ambiguous formulations, we note that Kant's requirement that mathematical concepts must be applied to empirical intuition was not supposed to show that the givenness of mathematical objects entails their existence.<sup>3</sup> Our first

point directly addresses that issue. Instead, our second point was simply to note that the additional requirement that Kant places on the special case of mathematics does still involve an existence claim (even if not the existence of the given object). And Kant may have been led to this requirement precisely because the sense in which mathematical objects exist is different from that of empirical objects, since this requirement helps him save the (broadly empiricist) idea that all cognition must have some connection to empirical objects.

With respect to the first point (regarding whether purely formal objects can be said to exist in some sense), it is important to distinguish between (a) space and time as *forms* of intuition, (b) space and time (including regions in space and time) as formal *objects* of intuition, and (c) *mathematical objects* constructed in pure intuition. With respect to (a), we agree that Kant repeatedly claims that space and time do not exist. However, it is not at all clear that Kant thinks that space and time as forms of intuition are *given* in the relevant sense. To be sure, Kant says that space is represented as a ‘infinite *given* magnitude’ (B 38; cf. A 25), but in light of what Kant says in a (controversial) footnote at B160, he can be taken to mean space not as a form (a), but as an object (b) of intuition (of which Kant says, in the same footnote, that it is ‘given’). Grüne points to two passages in which Kant supposedly denies that space and time exist; but in both, he explicitly refers to them as *forms*, not as *objects* of intuition (cf. A291/B347; A431/B459).



Thus, these passages do not rule out the existence of space and time, insofar as they are given as *objects*.

Grüne also objects to our claim that purely formal objects can be said to exist, on the grounds that Kant would not have been justified in holding that they exist in the sense of unschematized category, since we cannot cognize objects falling under an unschematized category. But note that the impossibility of cognizing something as existing does not imply that we are not justified in claiming that it exists. Consider, for instance, the postulate of ‘God’s existence’ (5:124), where existence cannot be understood in the sense of the schematized category. Rather, Kant seems to rely on the more general sense of ‘absolute position’ he had developed in *The Only Possible Argument* and still used in his critical works (cf. e.g. A599-600/B627-28). Similarly, Kant makes a number of existence claims in the first *Critique*, most famously concerning things in themselves, that go beyond what we can cognize, but still are meaningful and can be justified by appeal to theoretical considerations within Kant’s transcendental philosophy (on this, cf. sec. 5 of our paper). Thus, the fact that space and time are not given and thus are not cognized in the same way that empirical objects are does not mean that Kant could not have been justified in holding that they exist.

Given that, as Grüne points out, Kant does not say explicitly that space, time, and other ‘formal’ (e.g. mathematical) objects exist, this finally raises the question of why we attribute to him the view that givenness requires existence even in the case of formal objects.

As Grüne rightly assumes, our central reason is that we take construction to imply existence (in some suitable sense). More precisely, we think that the role of construction in mathematics, according to Kant, is to provide an object that exhibits the features we think in a mathematical concept. For example, by constructing a triangle in pure intuition, we literally create an object with three sides, three angles that total 180 degrees, etc. If the object would not exist, it could not exhibit the features we attribute to it and thus could not ground mathematical proofs. Thus, mathematical objects given in construction must exist.

Various passages in Kant support this reading. For instance, in the context of his discussion of the ontological argument, Kant writes: ‘The above proposition [“a triangle has three angles”] does not say that three angles are absolutely necessary, but rather that under the condition that a triangle exists (is given), three angles also exist’ (A 594/B622). Note, first, that Kant here contrasts the *relative* positing of the three angles with the *absolute* positing of the triangle, thus confirming our suggestion that ‘existence’ with respect to formal objects can be understood as absolute position. Second, Kant aligns existence with givenness, suggesting that for a triangle to exist is for it to be given (presumably by construction in pure intuition), which confirms that givenness (in the case of formal objects) implies existence. -- Or consider the passage from the *Prolegomena*, where Kant says: “For in mathematics everything that I conceive through a concept as possible I can make for myself (construct) by means of my thought; to one

two I successively add the other two, and myself make the number four, or I draw in thought all kinds of lines from one point to the other” (4:370). In keeping with his famous passage about thinking a line by drawing it in thought (B154), Kant claims here that we literally create the objects that instantiate mathematical concepts and thereby are able to prove mathematical truths.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the sense in which formal objects such as triangles exist in pure intuition differs from the sense in which empirical objects exist, so that it would be good if more could be said about existence of formal objects. We see several options here: First, Kant might identify the formal object constructed with the act of constructing it (cf. e.g. A714/B742), so that the aspect of existence or actuality required for givenness was, in the case of formal objects, satisfied by their being the product of some actual mental act. Second, Kant might identify the formal object with our representation of it (cf. e.g. A713/B741), so that the existence of formal objects would consist in the existence of the particular intuition in which they are given or constructed. Finally, Kant might accept that there is a special, irreducible and undefinable sense in which formal objects can be said to exist. This is not the place to decide this issue. All we wish to claim is (i) that in various passages Kant clearly commits himself to the existence of formal objects, (ii) that this commitment is required by the role construction plays within his philosophy of mathematics, and (iii) that nothing in Kant’s views about existence excludes that he held that formal objects exist.

## II. Response to Chignell

We turn now to Andrew Chignell, who focuses on two main elements of our view in his comments: (1) what it means for an object to be given and (2) whether Kant's prohibition on (theoretical) cognition of things in themselves is motivated by considerations about givenness or by other issues. His discussion of the first point is divided into two main issues, one regarding the relation between givenness and presence to mind, the other regarding how it is that the representation by means of which an object is given can refer to that object. We discuss these first two points in turn, before moving to the issue regarding things in themselves.

Though we note that Kant uses the term "given" in various ways (e.g., sometimes to refer to representations being given rather than objects) and with various meanings (sometimes as equivalent to "existence", sometimes to "represented to us in intuition"), our primary analysis concerns what it means for an *object* to be given to us in *intuition*. In such a case, we think that an object is given iff "[i] the object is present to mind so as to [ii] guarantee that one's representation refers to it, and [iii] to make it possible to represent that particular object and (some of) its non-general features".<sup>5</sup> Now Chignell objects that he does not find it illuminating to explain "given to mind" in terms of "present to mind" (or "acquaintance" or "latching onto", etc.), since we are, he claims, simply using one metaphor to explain another. However, the goal of our analysis was not to provide a definitive account of

the “present to mind” element of cognition, e.g., by distinguishing how such a state might be similar to or different from, e.g., Russellian acquaintance. Instead, the main point was to indicate that this kind of element is *one* of the requirements that must be satisfied for an object to be given. That is, on our account, what is distinctive about an object being given is that it is present to mind (versus merely existing) *in such a way* that it is guaranteed that one’s representation refers to it (versus the cases of representing, conceiving, imagining, etc., which might not successfully refer) and that one represents *that* particular object and its *non-general* features (versus representing, by way of *general* features, *many* possible objects, which might not all be present to mind). So the explanatory work was supposed to be the result of a group effort. Even so, we were not completely silent about the “present to mind” element, since we did note that Kant views paradigmatic cases of cognition as involving conscious awareness, which one might understand in terms of some kind of acquaintance relation, even if, in other cases, he seems to acknowledge non-occurrent mental states of which we are not fully conscious. That is, Kant seems to allow for some flexibility on this point (which one might mistake for vagueness), and it is, we think, a virtue of our account that it is able to capture that flexibility.

This brings us to Chignell’s remarks on the reference relation that obtains, on our account, between the representation and the given object. Here, Chignell raises two main points. First, he rightly points to an ambiguity about which object we have in mind when discussing a causal interpretation

of the relation, a thing in itself or an empirical object. We note here that either option faces significant challenges. Though Kant is committed to a thing in itself 'affecting' us (at least in cases of empirical cognition), he rejects the idea that our cognition in such a case would be of the thing in itself that affects us, since that would contradict his view that we cannot have cognition of things in themselves. Indeed, this makes any explanation based on this causal relation less straightforward than one might like. But it may still not be impossible. Why, in a particular case, am I referring to *x* rather than *y*? Because the thing in itself that affects me appears to me as *x* rather than *y*. That is, if an appearance is in some sense an appearance of a thing in itself, then the fact that a thing in itself both affects me and stands in a specific relation to a certain appearance may also make it possible for me to refer to the appearance of the thing in itself that affects me.

Alternatively, one might think that it is the causality of *empirical* objects that makes it the case that a representation refers to the given object. Why do I refer to *x* rather than *y*? Because *x*, which is an empirical object, caused my representation of it. Yet as we have pointed out, mathematical objects, too, are given to us, which makes any explanation of givenness that is limited to causal relations involving empirical objects restricted in scope and thus unsuitable as a general account of the reference relation. Again, this is not to say that such a story is impossible. Perhaps mathematical cases can involve empirical objects in some complex, but still completely legitimate way. Regardless of which disambiguation one opts for,

one comes face to face with what has come to be called the problem of double-affection and solving it would require stating and defending an interpretation of Transcendental Idealism, which was not our aim in this paper. For that reason, we rest content with the ambiguity and have to leave the issue unresolved.

Second, Chignell notes that we do not clearly endorse either a causal or a semantic account of the reference relation, which can seem to leave our position unclear on a crucial point. But recall that we are attempting to provide an analysis of what it means for an object to be given, listing three conditions as a part of that analysis. It was not our aim to provide a complete analysis of all of the elements that are contained in this analysis.

Nevertheless, in our discussion of sensibility, we distinguish causal and non-causal interpretations of that faculty, noting the considerations that pull in different directions. In particular, we suggest that cases that result in empirical cognition would seem to fit better with a causal account, while cases that result in mathematical cognition would seem to favor a non-causal account.

We can now turn, finally, to Kant's argument for the claim that we cannot have cognition of things in themselves. In our paper, we explore in some detail the possibility that things in themselves could not be cognized because they fail to satisfy the givenness condition. In short, things in themselves are not given to us (and thus cannot be cognized), since intuitions are necessary and sufficient for an object to be given (and thus

necessary to be cognized) and we do not have intuitions of things in themselves. Chignell objects that this account begs the question against rationalist metaphysicians, or at least does not offer a sufficiently strong argument against this kind of opponent (who might think that clear and distinct perceptions or conceivability are viable alternative sources of cognition of things in themselves). Based on this objection, Chignell then suggests a different motivation for Kant's position, namely that givenness is necessary to establish the real, or metaphysical possibility of the object corresponding to some concept. He appeals both to Kant's pre-Critical texts (especially *The Only Possible Argument*) and to his philosophical development thereafter to provide an interpretation of terms such as "real repugnance" and "real possibility". These motivations then lead to the following argument regarding Kant's position on things in themselves: Without being able to appeal to intuition, one cannot establish that things in themselves are really possible, because concepts alone are insufficient to guarantee the real possibility of their objects.

While the textual basis for Chignell's interpretation has been widely discussed, we focus on two other points.<sup>6</sup> First, though Kant may have had some interest in metaphysical possibility, we think that his interest was more topical than systematic. For the notion of real possibility that Kant introduces, in opposition to at least some of his rationalist predecessors, is tracking not metaphysical possibility, but rather a broadly semantic notion. Kant's worry about either the categories or those concepts by means of



which one thinks of things in themselves is not that their objects are metaphysically impossible, but rather that they might not represent any objects at all or that we might not be able to show that they represent any objects.

One can imagine different kinds of obstacles. For example, one might think that certain concepts (e.g., that of the soul) lack sufficient determinate content to be able to refer to objects at all. Without a specific spatio-temporal content, it is unclear how such concepts could represent an object, rather than the mere logical form of an object. Or one might think that the concept has a content that is sufficiently determinate to represent properties that objects could have or fail to have, but that we do not have a sufficient grasp of its application conditions. If I do not know how an object could be given to me in such a way that I could apply the concept of God to it, then my concept of God would be determinate enough to *refer* to God, should God exist, but I would not be in a position to show that it applies to any object that might be given to me. (How could an object be given to me in such a way that I could apply the concepts of omnipotence, omniscience, or omnibenevolence to it?)<sup>7</sup> In both cases, the concern is not what is or is not the case in all possible worlds, but rather how our concepts relate to objects that could be given to us in this world. If our discussion of why things in themselves cannot be cognized had focused on the thought condition, as Chignell's does, we would have maintained that Kant's argument turns on issues quite distinct from metaphysical possibility.

Second, one reason for focusing here primarily on the givenness condition rather than the thought condition is that one of Kant's fundamental concerns with rationalist positions, such as Leibniz's, is that the "entirely new concepts" that they make use of could be "nothing but figments of the brain" (lauter Hirngespinnste, A222/B269). That is, "invented concepts of this sort cannot acquire the character of their possibility a priori [...] but only a posteriori, as ones given through experience itself" (A222/B269). Accordingly, Kant is stressing that only actual objects that we experience a posteriori can justify the possibility of applying these concepts (except for the categories, whose justification is a priori). But what this means is that even if Kant were interested in metaphysical possibility in a more systematic way, he is explicitly committed to the claim that one can infer possibility only from actuality. But if establishing possibility is dependent on establishing actuality, and actuality is established only if the givenness condition is satisfied, then even on Chignell's interpretation, Kant's argument depends on the givenness condition (and not simply on the thought condition). Thus, givenness plays a role in Kant's argument about cognition of things in themselves that is at once independent and indispensable.



<sup>1</sup> Grüne, **p. 3**, bases her reading on three quotes, none of which however speaks unequivocally for her reading and against ours.

<sup>2</sup> This may account for Grüne's puzzlement about our understanding of objective reality (**p. 5-6**). We do not claim that for a concept to have objective reality it must refer to an existing object, but only that it *can* serve to unify a given sensible manifold into the cognition of an (existing) object.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we think Grüne is right to criticize such a view.

<sup>4</sup> Also cf. A240/B299; 5:31. – There are also passages where Kant seems to be saying that mathematics is not concerned with the existence of objects (e.g. A 719/B 747; 4:469; 5:366 fn.), but these can all be read as denying only that mathematics concerns *empirical* existence.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers in brackets are Chignell's addition.

<sup>6</sup> See Uygur Abaci, "Kant's Only Possible Argument and Chignell's Real Harmony," *Kantian Review* 19 (2014): 1-25 and Peter Yong, "God, Totality, and Possibility in Kant's Only Possible Argument," *Kantian Review* 19 (2014): 27-51, along with Chignell's reply.

<sup>7</sup> Chignell acknowledges that Kant's interest in real possibility involves an epistemological element. However, referring to the note at Bxxvi, he links this immediately to metaphysical possibility by describing it as requiring that I have to be able to *prove* that x is metaphysically possible in order to cognize it. But note that there is a significant gap between such a proof-theoretic notion and the kind of broadly semantic notions that we mention here. Once one acknowledges a semantic element, the motivation for bringing metaphysical possibility into the story at all is much less clear.