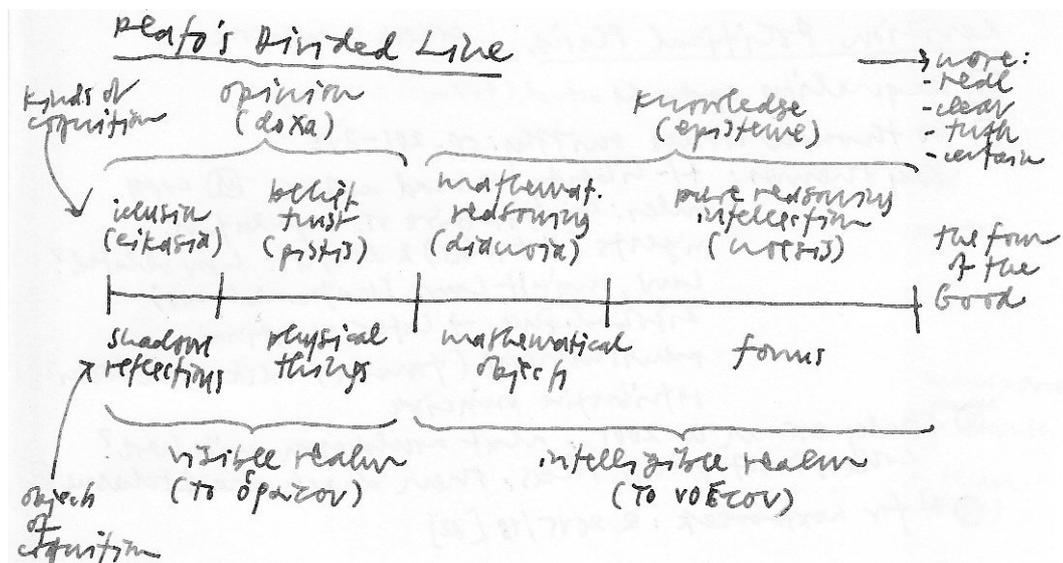


## Noumena: 'pure intelligible beings'

In *Prolegomena* §32 Kant introduces the distinction between the sensible world of *phenomena* and the intelligible world of *noumena* (4:314–5). This is (a) a clear allusion to Plato, and (b) relevant for Kant's view of things in themselves.

(a) Plato is one of the 'investigators of pure reason', i.e. a rationalist, defending the same distinction. For instance, in the *Republic* (507b) he argues that since there are a lot of beautiful and good things, there is something that underwrites what they have in common, *viz.* beauty itself (*αὐτὸ καλόν*) and goodness itself (*αὐτὸ ἀγαθόν*), in virtue of which the particular things are beautiful and good. For Plato, while the beautiful and good things are appearances, the entities that make them beautiful and good are most real, in that they exist independently of our cognition. Like Goodness, Beauty is an *idea* (*ἡ ἰδέα*), or a *form* (*τὸ εἶδος*, see, e.g., *Phaedo* 102b). Hence Plato introduces a visible realm (*ὄρατῶ τόπω*) and an intelligible realm (*νοητῶ τόπω*), and, accordingly, intelligible beings (*νοούμενα*) and visible beings (*ὀρώμενα*) (cf. *Rep.* 508b–c; 517b–c). The idea is then that the intelligible realm is the source (cause, reason) for truth and knowledge: to know what Beauty and Goodness is, is intellectually to grasp their forms; there is no knowledge of appearances, but only belief and opinion. The line (*Rep.* 509d ff.) illustrates this:



Plato's key thought then is that the noumenal realm is reality, while the visible realm is appearance, and, as Kant suggests, an illusion.

(b) Kant's point in §32 (as in §30, 4:312): since both the senses and the understanding deal with appearances, they cannot legitimately be used to cognise things in themselves. Once we conflate phenomena (appearances) and noumena (intelligible beings) 'everything would be transformed into mere appearance' (4:315), and hence illusory idealism looms.

So, Kant thinks that noumena cannot be objects of *intuition*. And neither could they be objects of *cognition*: we cannot form a determinate concept of such beings: "we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself, but only insofar as it is an

object of sensible intuition, i.e. as an appearance”, and consequently, speculative cognition ends with objects of possible experience. Yet, “even if we cannot **cognise** these same objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to **think** them as things in themselves.” In a footnote to this passage, Kant adds, “To **cognise** an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility (whether by the testimony of experience from its actuality or *a priori* through reason). But I can **think** whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance whether or not there is a corresponding object somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities” (*CPR* Bxxvi, Hatfield p. 148).

Hence Kant says in response to the idealism charge: “All cognition of things out of mere pure understanding or pure reason is nothing but sheer illusion, and there is truth only in experience” (*Prol.* Appendix ¶9, 4:374). In other words, unless some possible experience grounds a cognition, it is nothing but idle speculation. The pure concepts of the understanding (the categories) require sensory data to afford experience, and therefore, so does the cognition of some determinate object.

Yet, even if they cannot be distinctly cognised, things in themselves can be ‘objects’ of *thought*. The quotation marks indicate that such things are not genuine objects of cognition, but mere ‘somethings’. Nevertheless, they have a *positive* role in *limiting* the reach of the understanding, and thus indicate where reason deals with transcendental ideas, or noumena (cf. *Prol.* §45, 4:332–3). It is exactly such a transcendent use of pure reason that requires a critical examination in order to avoid illusion—this is a key aspect of Kant’s *critical* philosophy.

And so the noumena–phenomena distinction relates to Kant’s considerations about limits and boundaries in *Prol.* §59 (4:360–2), where Kant also implicitly rejects idealism: the understanding operates on sensory intuitions, and hence on *representations* or appearances. Since representations are always representations of something, the understanding presupposes *unrepresented* things, i.e. things in themselves.<sup>1</sup> While the understanding is cognitively closed to these things, *reason* has some tentative grasp of them by stretching out to the *boundary* of experience. (Unlike limits, a boundary consists in *two* separated domains; here, the *representing* and the *represented*.) Insofar as pure reason understands the boundary as *relational*, there is cognition of the noumenal realm. But even this cognition is limited: it is not of things in themselves as inhabitants of the ‘intelligible world’, but only as forms for such things (4:361).

*Relation* is key: things in themselves are thought by us, and so are *relative* to our epistemic and cognitive constitution (cf. *Prol.* §58, 4:357–8). This explains our cognitive closure: insofar as we ‘create’ objects of cognition, we can only grasp them in relation to this creative capacity; but we cannot apprehend their inner constitution (see passage *CPR* A277/B333), or *intrinsic* (non-relational) properties. We grasp things in themselves only by their relational properties, i.e. insofar as they affect us, and thus we only grasp appearances.<sup>2</sup>

1 Are things in themselves *noumena*? Some passages suggest so (e.g., §30, 4:312; §33, 4:315), others do not (e.g. §45, 4:332; §59, 4:360). I suppose that noumena ≠ things in themselves: as *objects of thought* [*Gedankendinge*] noumena could not exist independently of our thinking them.

2 See Langton, R. (1998). *Kantian Humility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

