

This slightly adapted version was published in *Dialogue* 40/1 (October 1997): 10-18.

## **Correspondence or Coherence? The Truth About Kant**

**Paul Copan**

### **Introduction**

In his book on the Holy Spirit, St. Basil wrote: “Truth is always a quarry hard to hunt, and therefore we must look everywhere for its tracks.”<sup>1</sup> Not only is the truth *itself* hard to hunt. How a certain *view* of truth has developed is somewhat elusive as well. Following the “tracks” of the shift from the correspondence view of truth to the coherence view of truth has been misunderstood---especially in relation to Immanuel Kant. He has been viewed as the founding father of the coherence view of truth by a number of prominent voices, and it is this subject I would like to probe.

First, I want to offer a brief historical sketch regarding the West’s understanding of truth and where Kant fits into the picture. Secondly, I shall focus on Kant’s view of truth. In this second section, I shall also show that Kant holds to a correspondence view of truth even though his transcendental idealism came to be associated with the coherence view.

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<sup>1</sup> *On the Spirit* 1.1.

## I. A Brief History of Truth (and Some Definitions)

How the West has understood the notion of truth has been significantly altered in the past two centuries. For Plato, truth had a reality beyond and independent of the human mind. In the *Phaedo*, for instance, Socrates speaks of discovering the truth about things (99e), assuming that something is true *independent* of the knowing human mind; it is true whether or not one believes it. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates, assuming a correspondence version of truth, rebukes Phaedrus, “For you it apparently makes a difference who the speaker is, and what country he comes from; you don’t merely ask whether what he says is true or false.”<sup>2</sup> Later, Aristotle would take the same approach to truth. In the *De Anima*, he claimed that knowledge and sensation are distinguished “to correspond with the realities.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the Greeks’ view of truth (with an occasional exception like Euclid) would set the stage for the “correspondence” theory of truth, which holds that a true proposition is one that corresponds to the real world. Brian Ellis points out that the correspondence theory of truth (“the absolutist conception of truth”) is one that we have inherited from the Greeks: “On this conception, whatever is true is so timelessly, and independently of human language, thought and reasoning--a view which is naturally suggested by the propositions of mathematics.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, some label this is a Platonic understanding of truth.

During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas spoke of truth in terms of the correspondence between the mind (*intellectus*) and the thing (*res*), implying that mind

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<sup>2</sup> *Phaedrus* 275c in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> 3.8, 431b24.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Ellis, *Truth and Objectivity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1-2.

and reality share a common structure. Thus in principle the knower has direct access to reality: “*Truth is the equation of thought and thing.*”<sup>5</sup> Leibniz also maintained that the truth is fixed and is independent of the truth seeker; it is fixed prior to any truth-seeker’s relationship to it.<sup>6</sup> He maintained that truth should be understood in “the relation between the *objects* of ideas, which causes one to be included or not to be included in the other.”<sup>7</sup>

When we come to Immanuel Kant, however, some people claim that a significant paradigm shift concerning truth emerges. For instance, W.P. Esterhuyse remarks, “a new era was born” with Kant<sup>8</sup>--namely, viewing truth as “coherence.” Hilary Putnam sees Kant as the first philosopher to “reject the idea of truth as correspondence to a pre-structured Reality.”<sup>9</sup>

Norman Kemp Smith argues that “Kant is the real founder of the *Coherence* theory of truth.”<sup>10</sup> George di Giovanni sees Kant as creating an axis shift regarding truth. Kant tried to undercut the assumption of the correspondence view of truth—that the mind is supposed to conform to the “thing in itself”: “He shifted the axis of the relation in

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<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologica* I.16.2, in *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, Anton C. Pegis, ed. (New York: Random House, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> See the comments of Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 16-17, 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Leibniz, “New Essays on the Understanding (1704),” in Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Leibniz Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 467.

<sup>8</sup> W.P. Esterhuyse, “From Plato to Kant: The Problem of Truth,” in Lewis White Beck, ed., *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972): 284.

<sup>9</sup> He asserts this in *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 43. He defends this proposal in *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 36.

which truth consists from the supposed space separating the thing in itself and the mind to a space within the mind.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, A.C. Ewing maintains,

Kant laid the foundations of the coherence theory of knowledge. For this theory is implicit in his doctrine that all knowledge or judgment involves systematisation, though it was developed much further by his successors.<sup>12</sup>

It is no secret that Kant found Hume’s radical and skeptical empiricism to be intellectually troubling, awakening him from his “dogmatic slumber.” As a result, he tried to establish the possibility of objective, certain human knowledge. Thus Kant attempted to show in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that human knowledge can be objective due to the very structure of human consciousness. The ultimate thrust of the first *Critique* is, of course, that synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible.

We shall be looking at Kant’s view of truth in light of the two primary theories of truth. There is the *correspondence* theory of truth, which asserts that true propositions correspond to reality or to facts. Thomas Nenon offers a helpful summarization of the correspondence view:

The basic framework of the correspondence theory of truth is as follows: A distinct class of products of the human mind—these might be defined according to different versions of the theory such as ideas, perceptions, concepts, realizations, judgments, principles, declarations, or the like—distinguishes itself in this, *that the subjective should be brought into alignment with the non-subjective, the object.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> George di Giovanni, “The First Twenty Years of Critique: The Spinoza Connection,” in Paul Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 418.

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Ewing, *Idealism: A Critical Survey* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1934), 112.

<sup>13</sup> “*Das Grundmuster der Korrespondenztheorie der Wahrheit ist folgendes: Eine bestimmte Klasse der Produkte des menschlichen Geistes--diese mögen nach verschiedenen Fassungen der Theorie als Vorstellungen, Wahrnehmungen, Begriffe, Erkenntnisse, Urteile, Sätze, Aussagen oder Ähnliches bestimmt werden--zeichnet sich dadurch aus, daß dieses Subjektive sich an etwas Nicht-Subjektives, ein an Objekt anliehen sollte.*” Thomas Nenon, *Objectivität und endliche Erkenntnis: Kants*

In other words, a correspondence theory of truth *avoids* making truth something that depends upon us, the subjects. The correspondence view maintains that truth is an objective relational correspondence between the truth-bearer and reality. That there must be some structural “matching” or “fitting” of a proposition and fact to each other is the gist of what the correspondence theory is about. For example, my belief that there is an apple tree in my front yard is true just in case there exists a fact corresponding to it.

On the other hand, the *coherence* theory maintains that a true proposition is one that belongs to some designated coherent set of propositions.<sup>14</sup> According to Paul Horwich, verification is *holistic*; that is, “a belief is justified (i.e., verified) when it is part of an entire system of beliefs that is consistent and ‘harmonious.’”<sup>15</sup>

Typically, the coherence theory of truth is closely or deeply related to the knower or believer of propositions. According to Frederick Schmitt, some versions of the coherence view go so far as to say that truth is “wholly dependent on and in some sense constituted by the mind.”<sup>16</sup>

## II. Was Kant a Coherence Theorist?

As we noted earlier, Norman Kemp Smith and others have asserted that Kant is the founder of the coherence theory. Heimo Hofmeister makes a similar statement, “By

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*transzendentalphilosophische Korrespondenztheorie der Wahrheit* (Frieburg/München: Karl Alber, 1986), 47, my emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick F. Schmitt, *Truth: A Primer* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Horwich, “Truth, Theories of,” in Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa, eds., *A Companion to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 511.

<sup>16</sup> Schmitt, *Truth: A Primer*, 103.

basing truth on a transcendental foundation he undertook to bestow a new meaning upon it.”<sup>17</sup> George di Giovanni contends that Kant was “redefining the concept of truth.”<sup>18</sup>

Is this common portrayal of Kant actually accurate? Was he a coherence theorist? I do not believe this is so. Kant appears to assume correspondence theory of truth. Thus, Thomas Nenon is correct to remark that Kant “belongs to the representatives of a [kind of] correspondence theory of truth = [(Kant) zu den Vertretern einer ‘Korrespondenztheorie der Wahrheit’ gehört].”<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that Kant introduced absolutely nothing extraordinary to the topic of truth. He certainly did, as we shall see below. But what I hope to show is that Kant espoused a view of truth that unintentionally provided fertile ground for subsequent thinkers to embrace a coherence view of truth. But Kant himself, however, did not reject a correspondence view in favor of a coherence view.<sup>20</sup>

Someone might respond at this point, “But wasn’t Kant an *idealistic* philosopher? And don’t all idealists hold to a coherence view of truth?” Now it is no secret that idealistic philosophers have tended to hold to a coherence view of truth whereas those who are realists tend to hold to a correspondence view of truth. However, this is not *necessarily* the case as Kant himself exemplifies. In this light, Frederick F. Schmitt argues that Kant is a *unique* example of an idealist who holds to a correspondence theory of truth with some modifications.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Heimo E.M. Hofmeister, “The Problem of Truth in the ‘Critique of Pure Reason,’” in Lewis White Beck, ed., *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972): 320.

<sup>18</sup> George di Giovanni, “The First Twenty Years of Critique,” 419.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Nenon makes this point in *Objectivität und endliche Erkenntnis*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Nenon is one such example, “Limitations of a Coherence Theory of Truth in Kant’s Critical Philosophy,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 26 (1994): 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Truth: A Primer*, 146.

This will become apparent as we examine (1) Kant's *noumena-phenomena* distinction, (2) his understanding of truth, and (3) his partial synthesis of the two views of truth.

### A. The *Noumena-Phenomena* Distinction

What sets Kant apart from the idealism of someone like Berkeley or Hegel, say? It appears that one crucial difference is that Kant holds to a *transcendental* idealism (in which the mind's categories impose a certain configuration upon the world) rather than a *subjective idealism* ("illusionism," according to Kant) of someone like Berkeley, who denied the real existence of external objects. The distinction is important and, I believe, prevents Kant from being considered a coherence theorist.

At the heart of Kant's great achievement lies the thing in itself.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Berkeley, Kant believes that there are *things in themselves*, not simply *appearances*. Although the point is debated, it seems inescapable that Kant believes there *are* things in themselves even if we cannot know them. He writes,

. . . though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears (B xxvi-xxvii).

Kant here maintains that the things in themselves furnish the *basis* for any appearance. Without the noumenal, there could be no phenomenal, for how can there be *appearances* of things if there are no *actual* things? Kant makes the same point later on in the first *Critique*: "For the world is a sum of appearances; and there must therefore be some

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<sup>22</sup> Merold Westphal, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," *Kant-Studien* 59 (1968): 119.

transcendental ground of the appearances, that is, a ground which is thinkable only by the pure understanding” (A 696/B 724).

In addition to arguing that the noumenal is necessary for the phenomenal, Kant goes on to contend that he is not speaking of *two* worlds, but of *one*:

But if our Critique is not in error in teaching that the object is to be taken *in a two-fold sense*, namely as appearance and as thing in itself, . . . and the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely in so far as they are objects of experience--**these same objects**, taken in the other sense, not being subject to the principle--then there is no contradiction in supposing that **one and the same will** is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the law of nature, and so far *not free*, while yet, as belonging to the thing in itself, it is not subject to that law, and is therefore *free* ((B xviii, my boldfacing).

For Kant, there are not two objects, but one. He is *not* speaking of two distinct worlds when he makes this distinction. Rather he is utilizing a *façon de parler* to conveniently refer to two possible *ways* of apprehending one set of objects.<sup>23</sup> If Kant *were* speaking of two worlds, then it would make sense to describe the appearances of things as the result of *our own noetic activity*. But this is not the case.

To illustrate the point, say that Dan Rather is wearing a red and blue tie. The producers and the camera crew in the CBS newsroom see the true colors of Dan Rather's tie, but I can only see various shades of grey because my television set is black-and-white. Although there is only *one* tie in question (the red and blue one), the tie *as known by me* owes its existence to the receiving apparatus--my antiquated TV--although the thing *as it is in itself* does not.

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<sup>23</sup> Merold Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," in C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993): 166. Some of my comments on the noumenal-phenomenal distinction are taken from this and Westphal's other essay, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," *Kant-Studien* 59 (1968): 118-41.

Similarly, our noetic apparatus, according to Kant, does not arrive at the thing in itself because it is a naturally-distorting filter. However, this does not negate the existence of the thing in itself. In fact, the *Ding an sich* furnishes the *ontological basis* for its appearances to us. In other words, *Kant's idealism is rooted in realism.*<sup>24</sup> Kant does not eliminate the thing in itself as later idealists did. So it is *our* world--not *the* world--that is dependent upon our apprehending them.

So the difference between the thing in itself and the thing as it appears is in the *diverse modes of knowing* one and the same object: "The appearance is the thing *as it appears* to our knowledge. The thing in itself is the same thing *as known* (possibly) in a different way."<sup>25</sup> A good case can be made for Kant's having believed that noumenal knowledge is *theoretically* possible. That is, a divine mind could at least know *noumena* through his intellectual intuition. Were God to exist, then the thing in itself is that thing as it would appear to God. Thus the noumenal as a limiting concept is not a limit to *thought* but to *sense* (A 255-6/B 311-12).<sup>26</sup> This further reinforces the belief that the thing in itself is not arbitrarily posited by Kant. Even though we humans cannot know it, it exists and furnishes the objective grounds for appearances.

Despite Kant's advocating a "Copernican revolution" with regard to human knowledge, what seems apparent is that he *rejects* the notion that inter-subjective agreement somehow constitutes truth or knowledge. While inter-subjective agreement may be a helpful criterion of truth, Kant maintains that the truth itself is to be found not within the human subject but rather in some relation between subject and object. As

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<sup>24</sup> Westphal, "Christian Philosophers and the Copernican Revolution," 166.

<sup>25</sup> Westphal, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," 121.

<sup>26</sup> B 68, 71-72, 145. See Westphal's defense of this thesis: "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," 121-26.

Susan Nieman writes, “Kant takes his definition of truth--the agreement of knowledge with its object--to be traditional and uncontroversial. . . . Kant’s attempts to answer the charges of idealism all involve his rejection of the imputation that he has changed the notions of truth and knowledge themselves.”<sup>27</sup> Kant’s maintaining that the object exists outside of the knower distinguishes him from his idealistic successors. Nicholas Rescher makes the same argument: post-Kantians turned their backs on Kant’s regulative and epistemological approach by positing that “the real is the rational.” They wanted to eliminate the object-knowledge distinction.<sup>28</sup>

### **B. Kant’s Understanding of Truth**

Now we are ready to see what Kant actually has to say specifically about *truth* (*Wahrheit*).

At the beginning of his section on Transcendental Logic, Kant brings up “the old and famous question . . . what is truth? [= (*die alte und berühmte Frage . . . Was ist Wahrheit?*)]” and asserts the following about truth:

What is truth? The nominal definition of truth, that it is the agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] of knowledge [here: *Wahrheit*, not *Erkenntnis*] with its object, is assumed as granted. . . . If truth consists in the agreement of knowledge with its object [*mit ihrem Gegenstände*], that object must thereby be distinguished from other objects; for knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] is false, if it does not agree [*übereinstimmt*] with the object to which it is related, even although it contains something which may be valid of other objects. Now a general criterion of truth [*Wahrheit*] must be such as would be valid in each and every instance of

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 9, 168-69. (169). Although Rescher makes this point, he appears to confuse the matter by saying that Kant breathed “new life” into the Euclidean notion that “all of truth as humans can come to have epistemic control of it” (168).

knowledge [*welches von allen Erkenntnissen*], however their subjects may vary. (A 58-59/B 82-83)

Those who maintain that Kant holds to a coherence view of truth, often based primarily on this famous passage, point out that Kant here and elsewhere does not refer to the verb *korrespondieren* when referring to the relationship between knowledge and its object. Rather he uses the verb *übereinstimmen* or its gerundive form *Übereinstimmung* (and sometimes *zusammenstimmen* or simply *stimmen*) in such contexts.<sup>29</sup> Although it is *not* the case that Kant *never* uses *korrespondieren* when speaking about knowledge and its object (e.g., in B xviii, where speaks of “*Begriffen . . . davon die korrespondierenden Gegenstände in der Erfahrung*”), Kant most often uses *übereinstimmen*. For instance, again in B xviii, he speaks of the objects of experience and the *a priori* judgments as having a necessary agreement (“*mit ihnen übereinstimmen müssen*”). Or again, Kant speaks of “the agreement of knowledge our knowledge with objects [*der Übereinstimmung unserer Erkenntnis mit Objekten*]” (A 337/B 296).

However, the *contemporary* usage of terms like *coherence* and *correspondence* should not blind us to what Kant is actually saying. Even if he does not regularly use *korrespondieren*, we should not rule out from the outset a correspondence view. (We could add that Kant does not use *Kohärenz* [coherence] in this connection either!)

To understand the lengthy quotation on truth (i.e., A 58-59/B 82-83), we must first determine what Kant means when he refers to *nominal* and *real* definitions of truth.

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion on this, see Nenon, “Limitations of a Coherence Theory of Truth,” 33-34 (and attendant footnote on 46). Robert Hanna translates *Übereinstimmung* as “correspondence” rather than “agreement” in order to capture the continuity of Kant’s theory of truth with the traditional view of truth. “Agreement” does not properly convey this, Hanna asserts: “The Trouble with Truth in Kant’s Theory of Meaning,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (January 1993): 17-18n.

From the logician's point of view, the question of truth is adequately expressed in terms of a nominal definition of truth. What Kant means by a *nominal* (and *real*) definition of truth is explicated in his "Vienna Logic," which lecture series, incidentally, was given when the first *Critique* was being prepared for publication:

*A nominal definition* is that distinct concept which suffices for differentiation of a thing from others. *A real definition* is that distinct concept which suffices for cognizing and deriving everything that belongs to a thing[;] it suffices for explaining the thing internally, consequently, and for understanding what belongs to the thing.<sup>30</sup>

According to Kant, then, the nominal definition of a thing is "externally" sufficient in that it helps us distinguish the identity of one thing from another. However, it gives us no insight into the thing itself, into its essence. Nominal definitions are "arbitrarily" assigned whereas real definitions can always be cognized with certainty. By *arbitrary*, Kant does not mean "whimsical" or "without reason." He means the "conventional" or "common usage."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the distinction may be summarized in the following way:

*Nominal definition:* An explication of the name conventionally assigned regardless of its nature.

*Real definition:* An account of how something is possible

What Kant is doing in all of this is requiring a *real* or actual definition of the concept of truth, which furnishes us with a *criterion* for the proper application of that concept. A nominal definition will simply not suffice.

A second consideration in Kant's understanding of truth is that there are two sources of knowledge in his view: (a) *intuitions*, through which objects are given, and (b) *concepts*, through which an object is thought (A 50/B 74). Our intuitions are sensible

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<sup>30</sup> Immanuel Kant, "The Vienna Logic," in *Lectures on Logic*, trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), # 919 (361).

because of the constitution of our nature. On the other hand, the understanding is the faculty that enables us to *think* the object of sensible intuitions (A 51/B 75): “Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (A 51/B 75). Kant adds that the understanding can intuit nothing and the senses can think nothing. *Both* components--intuitions and concepts--are essential if we are to know anything. We cannot have partial knowledge if we only have sensible intuitions or if we only have concepts. There must be a *union* of them for us to know anything at all: “Only through their union can knowledge arise” (A 51/B 76).

At this point, those who consider Kant a coherentist might contend that if he holds any notion of “correspondence,” it is only in the inter-subjective link between intuitions and concepts. When something is said to be true, it is because there is agreement between the intuitions and the concepts. For instance, at the outset of the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant asserts that “truth or illusion [*Schein*] is not in the object [*im Gegenstände*], in so far as it is intuited, but in the judgment [*im Urteile*] about it, in so far as it is thought” (A 293/B 350).

However, it is not at all clear that Kant *restricts* his version of truth to this perspective. It is not the case that the correspondence between appearance and thought is all that is necessary for truth in Kant’s mind. Kant points out that “while the categories lead to truth, that is to the conformity of our concepts” (A 642/B670), this is not a guarantee of the truth. As Cicovacki maintains, “Coherence is important and needed for

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<sup>31</sup> Predrag Cicovacki, “Kant on the Nature of Truth,” in Hoke Robinson, ed., *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress*, vol. II (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995): 199.

our cognitive judgments, but it is short from being sufficient.”<sup>32</sup> The object, however, distorted it appears to us, is what we have to work with. It may not be what we would like (i.e., perfect!), but it is the best we can do.

Regarding the correspondence between intuition and thought, Kant points out that general logic (which is only concerned with the *form* of the truth) offers no *content* whatsoever (A 61/B 86). General logic is only a formal criterion, but there must be “information” as well—that is, related to the object:

We must first, independently of logic, obtain reliable information; only then are we in a position to enquire, in accordance with logical laws, into the use of this information and its connection in a coherent whole or rather to test it by these laws (A 60/B 85).

Again, logical consistency is a reasonable test or criterion for truth, but it is only serviceable in the context of an object. Internal or logical coherence may be meaningful within, say, a formal system like mathematics, but this is simply not the case when it comes to cognition, which must take objects into consideration as well. In his section on the antinomies, Kant makes this plain, “Possible experience is that which can alone give reality to our concepts; in its absence a concept is a mere idea, without truth, that is, without relation to any object” (A 489/B 517). Kant is not at all saying that truth is a purely inter-subjective notion, but rather that it is bound up with the *object*: “truth” is “the conformity [*Übereinstimmung*] of our concepts with the object” (A 642/B 670).

Where are we left, then, concerning Kant’s examination of truth and its criterion? Kant flatly rejects that there is a *universal criterion for truth*: “it is quite impossible, and indeed absurd, to ask for a general test of the truth of such content [of knowledge]” (A 59/B 83). Again, “no general criterion can be demanded” because it, by its very nature,

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<sup>32</sup> Cicovacki, “Kant on the Nature of Truth,” 202.

would be “self-contradictory” (A 59/B 83). In other words, an absolutely universal criterion would have to be *simultaneously* general *and* sensitive to particular empirical conditions; it would have to embrace both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, which cannot be jointly satisfied.<sup>33</sup> Thus there is only a *partial* and *inadequate* criterion for truth. It is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for truth.<sup>34</sup>

### C. Kant’s Partial Synthesis

Although Kant is assuming a correspondence view of truth, it cannot be doubted that he is doing more than simply parroting what his predecessors said about the matter. Kant assumes that the human mind does not *create* appearances; they are not merely private sensations. Rather, they are based on something external to us. Yet Kant introduces an inter-subjective element into the discussion as well.

So what Kant presents is a *combination* or *synthesis* of a correspondence view and a coherence view of truth. We have seen that for Kant, a *mere coherence theory will not work*. It must be supplemented something mind-independent.

By examining Kant’s understanding of *noumena*—the objective *grounding* of all appearances, we have seen, for Kant, that the empirical dimension of our knowledge is not simply our invention. We do not simply create appearances *ex nihilo*; we *receive* them, he claims. A pure coherence view, in which knowledge and the object of knowledge are conflated into identity, will be inadequate. As the correspondence

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Hanna, “The Trouble with Truth in Kant’s Theory of Meaning,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 10 (January 1993): 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> Ermanno Bencivenga, “Understanding and Reason in the First Critique,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3 (April 1996): 195.

theory emphasizes, judgment involves the intention of knowing that which is other than ourselves, that to which our knowledge must correspond and we can thus never simply equate knowledge and the object of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Thus Ralph Walker is correct in saying that Kant is *both* a correspondence theorist and a coherence theorist—without being inconsistent.<sup>36</sup>

One may rightly wonder, however, if Kant has not done serious damage to the correspondence view of truth by eliminating the possibility of knowing things noumenally. For Kant, all we can do is try to ascertain how our thoughts match up to our appearances. Moreover, if we cannot express our knowledge publicly—if it is not communicable—and not open to argument and revision, then such noumenal “knowledge” cannot be rational and thus not true.<sup>37</sup>

What Kant, however, seems to be saying is this: the fact that an agreement of our cognitions with their objects is possible does not require that these objects be “originals” and that our cognitions be their “copies.” When we are being appeared to, the objects we receive through intuitions have an existence by themselves, independent of our constructions of them. They appear to us as having certain properties—properties which we have *not constructed*—even though these properties cannot be well-defined and are limited by our own “distorting filters” of intuitions and concepts.

Because of the limitations of the human mind, we cannot sort out things in themselves from their appearances. These appearances are *the best we can achieve*, however—tokens, as it were—even if we cannot arrive at the thing in itself. The

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<sup>35</sup> Nenon, “Limitations of a Coherence Theory of Truth,” 44.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Walker, “Empirical Realism and Transcendental Anti-Realism,” in *The Aristotelian Society*, sup. vol. 57 (1983): 161.

<sup>37</sup> Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, 98.

categories of thought are the filter or grid by which we interpret appearances, and their correspondence is also token-like. In terms of a correspondence view of truth, what we have, then, is a kind of token-token identity. As Cicovacki explains:

That is, it can be understood and established in terms of an [admittedly] ill-defined identity between tokens or instances of properties which we construct for and ascribe to the objects of cognition, and instances of unconstructable and unknowable properties which things regarded in themselves have. The objects which affect our senses are cognizable only because the instantiations of their unconstructable properties are cognizable as instances or tokens of constructed natural kinds. It is, then, in terms of the token-token identity that we can explain how truth consists in an agreement of our cognitions with their objects, with those objects conforming to our cognitions and not the other way around.<sup>38</sup>

While there is much to disagree with Kant about regarding what human knowers have access to, Kant could correctly affirm with St. Paul: “We see in a mirror dimly.” We are limited in what we know, which is clouded by the make-up of our human minds. How can we affirm something true about an object--however inadequately--with any confidence? There is for Kant, first of all, an *existential* touchstone. We *continue* to measure reflection against the immediate content of our experience. The mind does not cease to reflect on appearances, bringing them to refinement and completion. Nenon writes that the “correspondence between thinking, as a spontaneous activity of the subject, and future intuitions as a test of the correctness of one’s thinking” serves as a reinforcing function that we are not creating appearances and their particular qualities, thus preserving us from error.<sup>39</sup>

A second reason to have a reasonable degree of confidence about our knowledge of the world (albeit inadequate) has to do with the *Ding an sich*, which unifies our

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<sup>38</sup> Cicovacki, “Kant on the Nature of Truth,” 202-4.

<sup>39</sup> Nenon, “Limitations of a Coherence Theory of Truth,” 33; also, di Giovanni, “The First Twenty Years of Critique,” 418-9.

experience and prevents individuals from having completely disparate judgments. Kant points this out in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* of 1783, where he maintains that when a judgment agrees with an object, then all judgments concerning the same object must agree with one another, rendering them objectively valid for everyone—“für jedermann gültig”: “For there would be no reason why the judgments of other persons must necessarily agree with mine, if it were not for the unity of the object to which they all refer, with which they agree; consequently, they must all agree with one another” (# 18).<sup>40</sup>

So, given these two factors, human thinkers are not at all left in a morass of subjectivity, Kant would maintain.

## Conclusion

While we can surely agree that a correspondence between intuitions and concepts is a necessary condition in Kant’s view of truth, it is not sufficient. (And here I shall not go into certain important criticisms of Kant’s views.)<sup>41</sup> What we see repeatedly in Kant is his affirming the connection between knowledge and the object (e.g., A 58/B 82). Kant does not seem to be advocating some new theory of truth in his first *Critique*. He seems to assume what Leibniz his predecessor did—namely, that no act of will or judgment can

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<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Prolegomena to Every Future Metaphysics That May Be Presented as a Science,” in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant’s Moral and Political Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1949), 71. For a further discussion, see Nenon’s section “Wahrheit und intersubjektive Gültigkeit der Kategorien in den *Prolegomena*” in his *Objektivität und endliche Erkenntnis*, 249-62.

<sup>41</sup> Since the publication of this piece, a critique of pure Kant (!) has been published by Alvin Plantinga in his *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-30.

play a role in determining the truth. In contrast to Leibniz, however, Kant maintains that arriving at the truth is a far more complicated matter than many of his predecessors thought.

Kant is, of course, a transcendental idealist rather than a subjective idealist. Consequently, he does not eliminate the existence of objects independent of the human mind—the *noumena* or things in themselves. (Without the existence of things in themselves, no grounding for appearances can exist at all.) He simply does not think that we can have knowledge of these objects.

While there is a place, then for *coherence* in Kant's view of truth, he never abandons the *correspondence* theory of truth. He is continually discussing truth in terms of the knower's association with an object, not in terms of inter-subjectivity. What appears to us is not of our own creation. As we try to discover the state of things—admittedly, as they appear to us rather than as they are in themselves, we are discovering that which is not simply subject to our own will or our minds.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Mike Vater for his enthusiasm about this essay and his encouragement to get it published.

The correspondence theory states that "a proposition must correspond with a fact or event" in order to be acknowledged as truth. For example, the statement "Hard work pays off" is an abstract assertion that would be true in the event a student performs well on a test after studying with focus and intensity. The statement, however, does not take into account other factors, such as influential teachers, clearly structured textbooks, or a manageable schedule. The coherence theory "measures coherence and consistency among statements within a system." Thus, the coherence theory claims that a belief or statement is true if and only if it logically flows within other beliefs that together form a comprehensive interpretation of reality. Kant's remarks on "truth" are sparse, and have given rise to questions such as whether he advocated a correspondence or a coherence theory of truth. There is one paragraph, however, in the introductory sections of the part on "Transcendental Logic" in the Critique of Pure Reason, which has given rise to conflicting interpretations. Some of the issues this paragraph raises concern the relation between formal and transcendental logic and the place of "truth" in each. I will begin by focusing upon this text. Keywords. Pure Reason Coherence Theory Interconnected Structure Material Criterion Object Putnam on Kant on Truth Correspondence or Coherence? << Previous Article. >> Next Article. Already a subscriber or member? Access to this document requires a subscription or membership. This document may be purchased. Purchase this article for.