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Quine's *Ding an sich*: Proxies, Structure, and Naturalism

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In the fourth Immanuel Kant Lecture, Quine summons the specter of Kant's *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself. Clearly antithetical to his naturalism, Quine quickly dismisses it as having feet of clay. Despite this short shrift, it is worth examining what he did say about the *Ding an sich*—in the Kant Lectures, in “Things and Their Place in Theories”, and in “Structure and Nature”. I offer a critical reading of these passages in the context of Quine's proxy functions, ontological relativity, and structure. I argue that Quine uses the *Ding an sich* as a foil for his anti-metaphysical, deflationary structuralism—a view that grounds objectivity in true statements, without any transcendental notion of objects, without the *Ding an sich*.

## 1. Introduction

W.V. Quine begins and ends his Immanuel Kant Lectures with brief references to the great philosopher. He opens Lecture I with the suggestion that Kant's question about synthetic *a priori* judgments “expresses much the same concern” as his own question about how we get from sensory triggering to full-blown theory. (Lecture I, 1) As any historian of philosophy would urge, these questions express the same concern only when considered rather abstractly. Quine quickly acknowledges the disparity by pointing out that he starts *his* inquiry as an unabashed physicalist, in stark *contrast* to Kant. After a brief mention at the end of Lecture I, Quine is silent on Kant until the closing of Lecture IV. There, in “Epilegomena: *What is it All About?*”, Quine summons the specter of Kant's *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself, only to dismiss it summarily as having feet of clay.

These references to Kant could seem merely a pro-forma gesture to the title figure of the lectures. All the more so, given that Quine is not known as a particularly acute historian of philosophy. Nor, one may suppose, was there any obligation to speak directly or at length about

Kant in the lecture series. Yet the discussion of the *Ding an sich* survives the lecture's multi-step transformation into "Things and Their Place in Theories" (1981b),<sup>1</sup> and congruent comments are made in a similar context as late as "Structure and Nature". (1992b) Below, I offer a critical reading of these passages in light of Quine's doctrines of proxy functions, ontological relativity, and ontological structuralism. The contrast with Kant illuminates Quine's anti-transcendentalism. It brings into focus his grounding of objectivity without any transcendental notion of objects—without the *Ding an sich*. Further, with the evolution of ontological relativity into ontological structuralism, Quine deflates objects to the role of parochial human contributions—neutral nodes in human theory structures. The true sentences of the theory structure are of utmost importance. Of course, Quine refrains from positing—or even speculating about—anything behind or beyond the structure and nodes of theory. He abjures the "sin of transcendental metaphysics". (1992b, 9) Ontology is immanent. Even truth is immanent—except in one very thin sense.

## 2. Feet of Clay

In the first three Kant lectures, Quine covers a lot of ground. He motivates and explains his physicalist, naturalist approach. He theorizes about how, starting initially with observation sentences, we eventually learn the apparatus of reference: plural predication and the relative clause. He regimented that as quantification over variables or in terms of functors. He attempts a physicalist analysis of our talk of perception. Lecture IV, finally, is a discussion of what objects we should take there to be; what objects we should admit as the values of our variables (or denotata of general terms). In a familiar sequence of discussion,<sup>2</sup> he considers common-sense bodies, moves to 4-d physical objects, then space-times. He includes numbers or, better and finally, sets. He then considers the inscrutability of reference for theoretical terms, and urges the

lack of a distinction between those and terms in general. The inscrutability runs throughout. Ascription of ontology is relative to a background theory and to how we map the relevant terms into that background. To emphasize his point, Quine offers a version of his proxy function argument (Lecture IV, 14ff.; to be examined in detail below). The result is that we can interpret our ongoing scientific theory as quantifying over only sets. On such an interpretation, only sets exist.

Quine then muses:

What precipitates this *débauche*, if *débauche* it be, is the loosening of the connection between perception and reference and the recognition that all reification is theoretical.

Here at nearly the end of my Immanuel Kant Lectures there is a grim fitness in having run up against his *Ding an sich*; for this has the look of it. But it is not a towering, awesome, inscrutable reality, shrouded in swirling mists. It is only an equilibrium of empty symmetries, a deadlock of distinctions without a difference. The *Ding an sich* has feet of clay.

The distinction between interchangeable ontologies is a distinction without a difference either in perceptual evidence or in theoretical structure. (Lecture IV, 16)

The alleged *débauche* seems to be that the fabric of ontology has unraveled. From our common-sense notion of bodies, a sequence of philosophical analysis has yielded a world composed only of sets. Worse yet, that ontology of sets itself can be indefinitely reinterpreted in terms of any other objects. Only structure, it seems, is stable or invariant on this picture. So, Quine suggests that in this structure we have “run up against [Kant’s] *Ding an sich*”. Insofar as we might speculate about an underlying reality, it cannot be in the objects. The quantified variables—the locus of objectual reference—play only an empty role within that structure. Perhaps, then, it is the structure (itself). Quine immediately dismisses that idea. At best, we have found an “equilibrium of empty symmetries.” This is not the *Ding an sich* we had imagined. Had we succeeded discovering *that*, surely relativity would be mitigated; reference would be fixed. So, Quine concludes, there is no towering inscrutable reality that we fail to grasp. All there is to

ontology is the structure of the theory itself, indefinitely reinterpretable. The use of ‘feet of clay’ (from Daniel 2:31-33) further reinforces the metaphor of disillusionment: what we sought after, or admired, or assumed monumentally strong, is not; a hidden flaw reveals itself. Quine is rejecting the very notion of the *Ding an sich*.

Given that Quine is a naturalist and eschews transcendental metaphysics seemingly on principle, this swift dismissal of Kant is not surprising. It might even seem a facile quip, offered without argument. But this would be to miss the point. Quine playfully contrasts the notion of a mist-shrouded, towering reality (the *real Reality!*) with reinterpretable theory structure, alliteratively and dismissively described. He later goes on to talk up the importance of structure:

I am not banishing reality in favor of words. The richness of nature is undiminished, and it is expressed in true sentences independently of how we may choose to parcel it out or project it into objects denoted by terms. (Lecture IV, 16)

In view of the free-floating ways of ontology, it seems clear that a theory is properly to be appraised not by the objects that it posits but by the structural relations of its terms and sentences to the observation sentences and to one another. (Lecture IV, 17)

Here we see a stage in the development of Quine’s structuralism.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the idea of some underlying reality that would fix objectual reference, Quine wants to emphasize the primacy of sentences and the sentence-to-sentence structure that relates back to stimulation via observation sentences. Thus, Quine is not simply name-checking Kant, or trash-talking the *Ding an sich*. The feet of clay dismissal is based on a thoroughly argued view of what we can—and cannot—expect from ontological investigation.

“Things and Their Place in Theories” (1981b), which develops out of the Kant Lectures II and IV, also contains a discussion of the *Ding an sich*. The slightly different passage comes also within the context of the proxy function argument and a more emphatic statement of structuralism. Before examining it, I review the proxy function argument.

### 3. Proxy Functions

Getting clear on exactly what are the ontological commitments of our theories had been a concern of Quine's almost from the beginning of his career. It is, in large part, out of this concern that he develops his criterion of ontological commitment: to be is to be the value of a variable in a properly regimented first order theory. Application of this criterion in combination with Quine's views on the development and meaningfulness of language results in proxy functions, ontological relativity, and, ultimately, ontological structuralism.

Proxy functions, so-called, are first used by Quine in the 1964 "Ontological Reduction and the World of Numbers." (1976, orig. 1964) A proxy function maps the objects of one theory onto the objects of another theory, showing that one domain of objects can substitute—or go proxy for—the other domain. Early on, proxy functions were not required to be one-to-one. Rather, many-to-one proxy functions show that we can reduce one domain to a smaller domain, or two types of objects in a domain to one type, increasing ontological economy and simplicity.<sup>4</sup> By the second half of "Ontological Relativity" (1969b), Quine shifts to one-to-one proxy functions, and what I am calling the 'proxy function argument' first appears. There, the focus is ontological relativity. The argument gets full expression in its main form in "Things and Their Place in Theories" (1981b), where the emphasis begins to shift to structuralism. Of course, it is also in "Things" that we see another brief discussion of the *Ding an sich*. By the 1990s, Quine is routinely deploying the proxy function argument, and in 1992 Quine calls the resulting view ontological structuralism. Let's look at the argument.

One-to-one proxy functions<sup>5</sup> gain us no ontological economy. Rather, they are supposed to yield insight into the structure of a theory and the nature of its evidential support. Here is how

they work. Suppose we have a theory stated in a regimented language. This will include a stock of predicates, e.g., ‘ $C$ ’ for ‘is a cat’, ‘ $M$ ’ for ‘is a mammal’, etc.; perhaps some terms: ‘ $b$ ’ for Boots, ‘ $t$ ’ for Tiger, etc.; and a domain,  $\mathbf{D}$ , of objects,  $x$ . We then introduce a proxy function,  $f$ , that does two things. One: it gives a one-to-one mapping of objects from the domain  $\mathbf{D}$  to a new domain  $\mathbf{D}'$ . Two: it reinterprets each of the predicates and each of the terms as applying not to objects in the original domain, but to their images, under the mapping, in the new domain. Thus, where originally we might claim  $Cb$ , Boots is a cat, or  $(\forall x)(Cx \rightarrow Mx)$ , all cats are mammals, we now claim  $f(C)f(b)$ , the proxy of Boots is a proxy of a cat, or  $(\forall x)(f(C)x \rightarrow f(M)x)$ , all proxies of cats are proxies of mammals. If, for example, we take  $f$  to map objects in  $\mathbf{D}$  to their space-time complements in  $\mathbf{D}'$ , our unwieldy symbolic claims may be read as (even less wieldy), the space-time complement of Boots is the space-time complement of a cat, all space-time complements of cats are space-time complements of mammals. Of course, we can drop the ‘ $f(\dots)$ ’ and ‘space-time complement of...’ in order to smooth discussion, keeping in mind the (now implicit) reinterpretation.

The proxy function completely alters the ontology of the theory, but the truth values of sentences remain unaltered, since the predicates are duly reinterpreted as well. We apparently have an entirely different theory, with an entirely different ontology. But, claims Quine, this new theory is supported or undermined by exactly the same observational evidence, and guides the same verbal behavior, as the previous theory. The implicational structure of the theory—what sets of sentences imply what further sentences—will carry over as is, and speakers’ utterances in response to stimulation also remain unchanged. (1981b, 19ff)

One might object<sup>6</sup> that this clearly cannot work, for when I see Boots and say ‘That’s a cat’ or ‘That’s a mammal’, I am clearly responding to the cat or the mammal in front of me and

not to some space-time complement of the cat or the mammal. It is important to recall that Quine takes observation sentences as holophrastic responses to stimulation. That is, observation sentences play their semantic and evidentiary roles each as a single whole unit—as if a single word sentence—without regard to any postulated reference of the terms. Objectual reference is fully developed only in sentences using relative clauses with pronouns, or in the quantified variable in a regimented language. However, in those very contexts reference is subject to free reinterpretation via the proxy function. Thus, all that matters to the evidential support and linguistic use of a theory are its implicational structure and the association of observation sentences (taken holophrastically) to ranges of stimulation. Proxy functions upset neither of these, so we can vary at will our interpretation of the objects.

Quine takes this to show that we cannot say in any absolute sense to what a speaker is referring or to what objects a theory is committed. We are free, in interpreting the speaker or the theory, to vary via a proxy function. Attribution of ontology is always relative to a background theory, and how we map objects and predicates into that background is subject to proxy functions. What's more, this applies even in interpreting our own speech and theories. Ontological relativity applies to our home theory just as much as to any theory. Such is the thrust of the second half of "Ontological Relativity" (1969b, 45ff). By the time we get to Lecture IV, and its offspring "Things and Their Place in Theories" (1980/81), Quine begins to stress structuralism (though without labeling it as such), and draw out the contrast with Kant's *Ding an sich*. By "Structure and Nature" in 1992, we see explicit commitment to structuralism.

#### 4. Evaporation

Immediately upon giving the proxy function argument in "Things", Quine writes:

The apparent change is twofold and sweeping. The original objects have been supplanted and the general terms reinterpreted. There has been a revision of ontology on the one hand and of ideology, so to say, on the other; they go together. Yet verbal behavior proceeds undisturbed, warranted by the same observations as before and elicited by the same observations. Nothing really has changed. (1981b, 19)

Talk of this twofold change—that is really no change at all—is a dramatic flourish reminiscent of the “débacle” Quine laments in Lecture IV. There seems to have been a radical undermining of ontology and, thereby, of the legitimacy of our theorizing. Given the indefinite reinterpretability of the values of our variables, we seem to have lost all traction on objects. Moreover, this goes not just for the posits of sophisticated science, but for all objects, even common-sense, medium-sized goods. Having reached the crescendo of the crisis,<sup>7</sup> Quine attempts to restore normalcy by appeal to structuralism, naturalism, and the distinction between ontology and epistemology.

Quine often distinguished two sides of the naturalistic project: the epistemological and the ontological. Moreover, for him, no one of these sides is prior to the other. They reciprocally contain each other (see Quine 1969a, 83). Yet the focus of each is different. The conclusion of the proxy function argument—that ontology can be reinterpreted without violence to sentence-to-sentence structure or its evidence—is an epistemological result. Indeed, it is a *startling* epistemological result.

Structure is what matters to a theory and not the choice of objects... The objects, or values of variables, serve merely as indices along the way and we may permute or supplant them as we please as long as the sentence-to-sentence structure is preserved. (1981b, 20)

When doing ontology, however—which is to say: when pursuing our scientific description of the world—we have no choice but to acquiesce in one interpretation or another. Better put: we simply *use* the language of the theory without regard to the issue of (re)interpretation:



The point is not that we ourselves are casting about in vain for a mooring. Staying aboard our own language and not rocking the boat, we are borne smoothly along on it and all is well... (1981b, 20)

Mistaking “ontological relativity” and “inscrutability of reference” for ontological doctrines, when they are in fact epistemological and semantic doctrines, must be forgiven. The names are confusing. However, they are about the nature and extent of the evidence for theory: “the methodology of ontology”.

Suspecting, perhaps, that not all is well with the reader, Quine attempts to clarify further. He assures us that the disruptive force of the proxy function argument does not undermine the traction of our theorizing:

The answer is naturalism: the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described.

The semantical considerations that seemed to undermine all this were concerned not with assessing reality but with analyzing method and evidence. They belong not to ontology but to the methodology of ontology, and thus to epistemology. Those considerations showed that I could indeed turn my back on my external things and classes and ride the proxy functions to something strange and different without doing violence to any evidence. But all ascription of reality must come rather from within one's theory of the world; it is incoherent otherwise. (1981b, 21)

Further discussion of naturalism ensues, ending with:

But it is a confusion to suppose that we can stand aloof and recognize all the alternative ontologies as true in their several ways, all the envisaged worlds as real. It is a confusion of truth with evidential support. Truth is immanent, and there is no higher. We must speak from within a theory, albeit any of various. (1981b, 21–22)

Here we see in thumbnail the solution developed through his previous paragraphs. Don't confuse epistemology and ontology. Epistemologically, structure is what matters; objects are mere indices. Take naturalism seriously. We must work from within and ontology is found in the variables. So, when speaking, when pursuing science, either simply use the language, or choose an interpretation and stick with it. The point is not that we must interpret to use the language. In

fact, we don't have to; but we can. When we do, the freedom of proxy functions applies. We have cycled back around to epistemology.

The space Quine devotes to explaining naturalism at this point in "Things" is interesting. I am not sure if it is suggestive of some difficulty Quine had in expressing it, or of him anticipating some difficulty—either in understanding or acceptance—on the part of his readers. At any rate, he is not done. He wants to drive home the anti-transcendentalism:

Transcendental argument, or what purports to be first philosophy, tends generally to take on rather this status of immanent epistemology insofar as I succeed in making sense of it. What evaporates is the transcendental question of the reality of the external world—the question whether or in how far our science measures up to the *Ding an sich*. (1981b, 22)

Here is the rejection of Kantian transcendentalism. The question evaporates. It might again seem off-hand and merely dismissive—as one might dispense with an annoying interlocutor: “you make no sense!” But it comes in the midst of a long and careful methodological examination of how far we can go in ontological investigation. It follows directly on a statement of naturalism. The fact that it survived Quine's multi-stage editing process to appear in print clearly indicates Quine saw it as important. Moreover, the metaphor changes significantly from Lecture IV to “Things and Their Place in Theories”.

In Lecture IV, Quine contrasts a monolithic, mist-shrouded *something-we-know-not-what* with an empty equilibrium. While this image downplays the notion of a *Ding an sich*, it still suggests that there is something that we have run up against. It just turns out to be quite a different and less impressive something than we had thought—it has feet of clay. Indeed, the Lecture IV metaphor suggests that the theory structure itself is the *Ding an sich*. Even though immediately dismissed, there was something. This aspect of the imagery is inconsistent with the lesson of proxy functions. In “Things and Their Place in Theories”, there is nothing we run up

against, and certainly nothing transcendental about our theory structures. Rather, a question we are tempted to ask—the transcendental question of in how far our science measures up to the *Ding an sich*—evaporates. There is no *something-we-know-not-what*. Instead, there is a question we want to ask, but it... what...? It goes away. It seemed to have substance, but it did not. In each case, Quine is at pains to reject Kant's transcendentalism, and we see him refining the figure of speech to reflect better the result of argument.

## 5. Self-Stultification

Even that image of evaporation is not fully appropriate. Liquids evaporate into gas, and even if that gas is widely dispersed, it is still an object—by Quine's own lights. The problem may be forgivable since we now have a metaphor, not for the *Ding an sich*, but for the failure of a question. However, by 1992, in "Structure and Nature", he changes the figure again. In a discussion immediately following the proxy function argument, he writes:

Science ventures its tentative answers in man-made concepts, perforce, couched in man-made language, but we can ask no better. The very notion of object, or of one and many, is indeed as parochially human as the parts of speech; to ask what reality is really like, however, apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters. Positivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless. (1992b, 9)

Quine packs a number of points into this paragraph, but consider first what he says about the attempt at transcendental inquiry. He does not mention the *Ding an sich* by name, but clearly that is what he has in mind following the semicolon. Rather than misty monoliths, or evaporation, we have a much more direct claim. In trying to ask the transcendental question, we actually trip ourselves up with our words. We undermine our own effort and look foolish. What appears to be a meaningful question is not. If reference arises only with the relative clause construction, and is clarified as quantification over variables, then clearly there is no way to speak of an object or

objects independently of those linguistic constructions. That much we could probably see even without the aid of proxy functions. Proxy functions serve to drive the point home even more forcefully: not only can we not talk about unconceptualized objects, but objects—insofar as we *do* talk about and conceptualize them—are neutral nodes subject to reinterpretation, useful only insofar as they contribute to structure. Asking for more is a fool’s game. One may be reminded of Kant’s opening to the Preface to the First Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. (Kant 1999, A vii)

Quine *does* dismiss such questions, and gives us reasons as to why. It is not because there is a meaningful question, the answer to which lies forever beyond our capabilities, as Kant suggests. Rather, Quine is claiming, it is precisely because what appears to be a meaningful question turns out not to be. Ontological structuralism shows us this.

Quine clearly senses the pull of the sort of questions that Kant identifies. That is why the initial result of the proxy function argument seems a “débacle” or a “twofold and sweeping” change. That is why he goes to lengths to explain how naturalism reconciles the “barren scene” (Quine 1981b, 21) resulting from the proxy function argument. But once we take on board naturalism and structuralism, it is not a debacle, “[n]othing really has changed”, talk of light rays and molecules and nerve endings is not undermined. Ontological structuralism is an epistemological position on the nature of theory and evidence—the values of the variables may be indefinitely reinterpreted. Of ultimate (epistemological) import is how well the sentence-to-sentence structure confronts the evidence of our senses via observation sentences.<sup>8</sup> Naturalism is supposed to remind us that in the course of theorizing—while using the theory—we can only take our ontological commitments at face value and realistically. What had appeared a

metaphysical crisis requiring a metaphysical response, is actually a (surprising and important but) non-catastrophic result when we take naturalism to heart. No matter how tenuous we have found to be the connection between evidence and theory, no matter how unsettling it is that objects are neutral nodes, we are stuck with that. There is no higher standard against which to measure our theory. If we recognize the meaninglessness of attempts to transcend that evidence, if we commit to live within our means, (Quine 1995b) what had seemed a debacle, a crisis, is business as usual.

Further, note that though Quine is agreeing with positivists regarding the meaninglessness of attempted transcendental inquiry, and though he was sympathetic to verificationist positivism, his argument to this conclusion is not based on a simple verificationist criterion. His holistic anti-reductionism and his rejection of analyticity lead him to his naturalistic version of realism. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> Quine *is* engaging in metaphysics, though not *transcendental* metaphysics. Science is our metaphysics in the sense that science delivers to us our ontology:

The world is as natural science says it is, insofar as natural science is right; and our judgment as to whether it is right, tentative always, is answerable to the experimental testing of predictions...

My global structuralism should not, therefore, be seen as a structuralist ontology. To see it thus would be to rise above naturalism and revert to the sin of transcendental metaphysics. (1992b, 9)

We do not reify the structure. Doing so would involve attempting to use the epistemological result of ontological relativity/structuralism to draw a metaphysical conclusion. But this would be to exceed the epistemological limits that generated that very result. We fall back on the face-value claims of our theory as we *use* it. That is our metaphysics: science itself.

Thus, Quine's naturalism *is* anti-transcendental, but it is *not* anti-metaphysical. His attitude toward what metaphysics we can do, however, is very deflationary. Metaphysics is more

or less our physics, our physical theory. And that, epistemological considerations tell us, is a sentence-to-sentence network linked by reinterpretable neutral nodes.

## 6. Deflationism and Anti-Transcendentalism

Let's come at this from a slightly different angle. In what does the objectivity of our theories consist? An initial and straightforward answer is: in our ability to know the objects of the world and to express this knowledge accurately in our theories. This is encouraged by our common-sense conception of bodies as objects and our common-sense notion of the real versus the unreal. We know that we can be wrong about things. Our expectations are sometimes foiled in small and large ways. So, we had it wrong, at least in part, and we try to adjust, we try to do better. We become more systematic, more sophisticated. Science evolves out of common-sense. Indeed, as curious creatures with the ability to engage in meta-evaluation of our evaluative processes, we start to systematize, not just our theory of the world, but our theory of how best to develop and test our theory of the world. That is, we engage in self-conscious epistemology. At the same time, recognizing that our access to the world is mediated by our senses and that we sometimes get it wrong here and there, we want to ask: what does it mean to *really* get it right, generally and globally? Can we get at the objects of the world while minimizing or even eliminating that mediation and potential for error? It is somewhere hereabouts that the transcendental question arises. We try to take that notion of improved, less mediated access to objects to the limit, to the max. We envision an access to or knowledge of objects that is not merely physical, but metaphysical—transcendental. Even if we are hard-nosed and grant that we cannot—even through pure reason—transcend our limits, it still seems there must be something beyond our limits, something transcendent, the *Ding an sich*, to which our theories are answerable. There

must be objects *out there* that are the ground of our empirical knowledge. We can, it seems, at least ask about them, even if our epistemic limits prevent us from answering that question. The thought that there must be something *beyond* those epistemic limits, even if we cannot access it, is tempting, and in a sense, natural. We articulated science out of common sense, and philosophy out of science, from a recognition that we can be wrong and could do better. When applied globally, to the whole of our enterprise of theorizing, we arrive at the thought that, even if we are barred from accessing it, there is a thing or things out there that ground our theorizing and against which our theory must measure up. We should be able to ask about it.

Quine's metaphysics is radically anti-transcendental in denying the meaningfulness of this question. The proxy function argument and ontological structuralism lay this bare: despite were we began with common-sense bodies, the success of our theorizing is not even about bodies or objects at all. It is, rather, true sentences within the sentence-to-sentence structure that are the be-all and end-all of successful theory. Thus, the objectivity of our theory consists in just this: true sentences. It does not consist in (mediated or unmediated) access to objects, certainly not in access to the *Ding an sich*. Quine makes precisely these points in the first paragraph of §12 in the Revised Edition of *Pursuit of Truth*.<sup>10</sup> The title of the section is "Indifference of ontology". (1992a, 31) In the second paragraph, he launches into the proxy function argument. Moreover, he titles the section that follows "Ontology defused". (1992a, 33) The view here is not merely a rejection of transcendental metaphysics. It is also a deflation of what even legitimate (i.e., scientific) metaphysics can get us. The very conception of objects, of the one and many, is parochially human. Objects (themselves) fall out as neutral nodes. Not only is there no sense to the transcendental question of the *Ding an sich*, but even within theory we see an intensely deflationary view of what ontological investigation yields. Objects are demoted to the role of

empty indices, neutral nodes, reinterpretable at will—but even this reinterpretation is unrevealing once we have seen the point about ontological structuralism. We have come a long way from our initial, unselfconscious reification of common-sense bodies. The result, by Quine’s lights, is initially jarring, but ultimately very little has changed, except that we see more clearly that all reification is theoretical.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately after the discussion of the *Ding an sich* in “Things and Their Place in Theories” Quine writes:

Our scientific theory can indeed go wrong, and precisely in the familiar way: through failure of predicted observation. But what if, happily and unbeknownst, we have achieved a theory that is conformable to every possible observation, past and future? In what sense could the world then be said to deviate from what the theory claims? Clearly in none, even if we can somehow make sense of the phrase ‘every possible observation’. Our overall scientific theory demands of the world only that it be so structured as to assure the sequences of stimulation that our theory gives us to expect. More concrete demands are empty, what with the freedom of proxy functions. (1981b, 22)

This paragraph of “Things” and many of the ones surrounding discussion of the *Ding an sich* come not from Lecture IV, but from Quine’s “Reply to Stroud” (1981a), wherein Quine is arguing that skepticism can only be meaningfully addressed immanently, from within our ongoing theory. Quine sees skepticism as arising from and being resolvable within ongoing theory.<sup>12</sup> It is striking that Quine immediately adverts to the proxy function argument in discussing Barry Stroud’s “possibility that the world is completely different in general from the way our sensory impacts and our internal makeup lead us to think of it.” (Quine 1981a, 473)

Sure, we can be wrong about the world locally, here and there, even in large part, perhaps. Science is fallible and our commitment is ever tentative. But the idea that we could be generally wrong, despite perfect predictive success is meaningless for Quine. The skeptic is overreacting. The best sense Quine can make of it is that we somehow have all the objects wrong. Given proxy functions, though, this is without import. The objects matter only as empty nodes. We can



interpret them as we wish. As long as the structure yields predictions borne out in observation, there is nothing more we can ask. There is no transcendental reality against which the theory can fail to match up. “Save the structure and you save all.” (Quine 1981a, 473)

## 7. Immanence to Transcendence

One hitch here is that this deflationary attitude and extreme anti-transcendentalism might appear to paint Quine’s naturalism into a corner. Quine spends the last few paragraphs of “Things” stressing immanence; a theme he repeats elsewhere as well. If we must always proceed from within and even the interpretation of objects is indifferent—if epistemology, ontology, and even truth are immanent—how does this avoid being a coherence theory or even some sort of idealism?<sup>13</sup> Quine gives an answer in 1995. In *From Stimulus to Science*:

We should and do currently accept the firmest scientific conclusions as true, but when one of these is dislodged by further research we do not say that it had been true but became false. We say that to our surprise it was not true after all. Science is seen as pursuing and discovering truth rather than as decreeing it. Such is the idiom of realism... (1995a, 67)

Moreover, in “Truth Immanent or Transcendent?”

To call a sentence true, I said, is to include it in our science, but this is not to say that science fixes truth. It can prove wrong. We go on testing our scientific theory by prediction and experiment, and modifying it as needed, in quest of the truth. Truth thus looms as a haven that we keep steering for and correcting to. It is an ideal of pure reason, in Kant’s phrase. Very well: immanent in those other respects, transcendent in this. (1995c, 353)<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it is just in the discovery that we were wrong—that what we had thought to be true turns out to have been false all along—and in our aim to correct that—it is just in this aspect of truth that Quine recognizes a thin sort of transcendence. This sort of fallibilism supports and defines Quine’s realism, and it is the best sense he can make of the impulse to transcendental inquiry.

When empirical theory implies predictions that fail, we have some false sentences in the

structure. We then alter the structure, in an attempt to correct course toward truth. This voyage is never ending, for we will never be in the situation, described above, of having a theory with perfect predictive success. Even if we were in that situation, we would not be able to know it.

Quine, thus, admits a thin sense in which our talk of truth is transcendent. It is just that we take there to be sentences that are true, and, through negation, an equal number of sentences that are false. We pursue the former, avoid the latter. This leads to one final mention of the *Ding an sich*. In *From Stimulus to Science* (1995a), Quine is discussing how we should treat the truth values of undecidable statements of higher set theory and mathematics. He rejects the proposal to consider them meaningful but neither true nor false. This only reasserts the problem. We should, he suggests, take them to have truth values while recognizing that their truth or falsity makes no difference to observation or science, isolated as they are from implying any observation categorical.

I see nothing for it but to make our peace with the situation. We may simply concede that every statement in our language is true or false, but recognize that in these cases the choice between truth and falsity is indifferent both to our working conceptual apparatus and to nature as reflected in observation categoricals. It is like Kant's thing in itself, but seen as a matter of human usage rather than cosmic mystery. (1995a, 57)

This mention is different from the others I have considered at least because it does not come in the context of the proxy function argument (that comes later and Kant is nowhere to be seen at that point). What is more interesting is that here, Quine is dealing with undecidable truth values for statements he feels compelled to take as meaningful. It is, after all, in the true sentences of the sentence-to-sentence structure that objectivity lies—but we have evidence of truth only where there is either formal decidability or implication of observation categoricals. Here there is neither. In one sense, it is like the *Ding an sich* in that we cannot know the truth values of such statements. On the other hand, Quine undercuts this in the very same sentence by calling it a

choice of human usage “rather than cosmic mystery.” Such statements make no difference to physical theory<sup>15</sup> so we can just pick. It doesn’t really matter. So much for the *Ding an sich*.

## 8. Conclusion

I hope to have shed some light on Quine’s use of Kant’s *Ding an sich*. In particular, I hope to have shown why it crops up so often in the context of the proxy function argument. Quine uses it as a foil to help accentuate the implications of ontological relativity and structuralism. The contrast between the *Ding an sich* and objects as neutral nodes in a structure serves a number of purposes. It dramatizes the apparent debacle induced by the proxy function argument. It accentuates the anti-transcendental nature of Quine’s naturalism; an anti-transcendentalism that grows out of the same epistemological and semantic considerations as the proxy function argument. Finally, once naturalism shows the debacle was really no such thing, the contrast with the *Ding an sich* serves to further emphasize the deflated role of objects in Quine’s ontological structuralism.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail, see Quine’s introductory note to “Things”. (1981b)

<sup>2</sup> See my “Quine’s Deflationary Structuralism” for more detail. (forthcoming)

<sup>3</sup> Again, my (forthcoming) details the evolution of this view in Quine’s work.

<sup>4</sup> The example in “Ontological Reduction and the World of Numbers” is that of reducing impure numbers such as  $n$  degrees centigrade or  $n$  meters to the pure number  $n$  and new predicates. (1976, 207, orig. 1964)

<sup>5</sup> From here on out I will consider proxy functions to be one-to-one unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> My aim here is interpretive, not to defend the proxy function argument in detail. I offer this objection and response as a means of clarifying the view at hand.

<sup>7</sup> Quine exploits this rhetorical maneuver frequently: produce a dramatic conceptual crisis, only to restore balance and security via an appeal to naturalism. I think it is more than mere rhetoric. It plays an important argumentative, or at least expressive, role in Quine’s naturalism. But this is a topic for another essay.

<sup>8</sup> Actually, observation categoricals, see chapter 2 of (Gregory 2008), and e.g., (Quine 1992a, Ch. 1; Lecture IV, 19).

<sup>9</sup> See my (forthcoming, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Surely, it is no accident that by the 90s, Quine, who takes great care with his titles, is no longer talking about “Things and Their Place in Theories”, but about *Pursuit of Truth* and “Structure and Nature”.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in *From Stimulus to Science*, he describes ontological relativity as a “startling ontological triviality.” (1995a, 73)

<sup>12</sup> The resolution, according to Quine, is just to accept that theory is fallible and our commitment is tentative. I refrain from evaluating here either Quine’s reading of Stroud or his response to Stroud.

<sup>13</sup> Answering this question in full is an essay in itself. Here I merely gesture at an answer.

<sup>14</sup> Similar remarks appear in (Quine 1995b, 261).

<sup>15</sup> That is, they make no difference yet. Quine acknowledges that some (though not all, since they are infinite) such statements might someday enter into physical theory. In that case we would

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either legislate them as axioms or take them to be supported by the success of the whole theory structure.