Close Encounters of the Kantian Kind: Transcendental Idealism and the Interdimensional Hypothesis

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Abstract: Recent UFO disclosures and an increasing academic interest in so-called 'close encounters' have brought aliens as Extraterrestrials back to the forefront of public imagination, layperson and scholar alike. With eyes to the skies, we hope to catch a glimpse of visitors from another world. In spite of a plethora of unexplained events, there nevertheless remains no concrete evidence for the existence of life outside Earth. If the universe is so large and so old, we ought to see *something*—thus the Fermi Paradox. While countless solutions to and critiques of the Fermi Paradox have been brought forward, my aim is to look at the problem from a philosophical lens. Indeed, this project attempts to make sense of the Fermi Paradox through a reading of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetic." What I aim to do in the following is recapitulate and revitalize the admittedly archaic two-world interpretation of Transcendental Idealism and argue that if the *phenomenal* world is one wholly structured by human cognition and the categories of understanding, then we ought not be surprised to find that the only entities we see are those that agree with our faculties of understanding. To make sense of the UFO phenomenon, I zig-zag through Transcendental Idealism and Jacques Vallée's Interdimensional Hypothesis, ultimately concluding with a view that treats the *noumenal* as the ultimate Outside, a backdrop against which many different *phenomenal* worlds that teem with life foreign to our faculties of understanding exist.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, Jacques Vallée, Interdimensional Hypothesis, extra-terrestrial intelligence, transcendental aesthetic

Introduction

It was the summer of 1950 and Enrico Fermi, Emil Konopinski, Edward Teller, and Herbert York were having lunch at Los Alamos National Laboratory. During a perfectly comfortable conversation about the potential for faster-than-light travel, Fermi chimed in out of the blue and asked a question that would fundamentally structure the next 73 years of extraterrestrial research: "but where is everybody?"[1] While the history of what is now colloquially referred to as 'The Fermi Paradox' is long and convoluted,[2] what concerns us here is the contemporary formulation of the problem:

[1] Eric M. Jones, "'Where Is Everybody?' An Account of Fermi's Question," *Los Alamos National Laboratory, report LA-10311-MS* (1985), 3.
[2] For a critical overview, see Robert H. Gray, "The Fermi Paradox is Neither Fermi's Nor a Paradox," *Astrobiology* 15, No. 3 (2015): 195–199. The implications of Fermi's question were first drawn out by Michael H. Hart in "An Explanation for the Absence of Extraterrestrials on Earth," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 16 (1975): 128–135 while the earliest formulation might date back to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's unpublished manuscript from 1933, *Planet are Inhabited by Living Creatures* (https://www.tsiolkovsky.org/en/the-cosmic-philosophy/planets-are-inhabited-by-living-creatures-1933/).

> If technologically advanced civilizations have inhabited our Galaxy for timescales of approximately a billion years, and if some of these have engaged in interstellar travel and colonization, then why have we not seen physical evidence of their visits?[3]

Putting aside recent disclosure efforts and supposed evidence of UAPs from governmental sources, the question still holds and continues to vex those who 'want to believe.' Thus, in the decades following the formulation of the question, at least 75 different answers have been provided (and that number is, no doubt, conservative).[4] What I aim to do in this presentation is explicate a solution to the Fermi Paradox that I see as quite *novel* and, to the best of my knowledge, has only been discussed outside of its original context in an extremely short *Medium* post earlier this year.[5]

In 2015, Royal Holloway University's Adam Roberts published a delightful pulp sci-fi novel entitled *The Thing Itself*. Titled out of a love of "stupid Dad-joke puns,"[6] the start of the novel, taking its cue from John Carpenter's 1982 film *The Thing* and Immanuel Kant's things-in-themselves, notes that the solution to the Fermi Paradox is, quite simply, "Kant." A short excerpt from a longer section of dialogue providing justification is as follows:

> *We look out from our planet and see a universe of space, and time, of substance and causality, of plurality and totality, of possibility and probability – and we forget that what we're actually seeing are the ways* our minds structure *the Ding an sich according to the categories of space, and time, of substance and causality, of plurality and totality, of possibility and probability. We look out and we see no aliens, and are surprised. But the real surprise would be to see aliens in such a vista, because that would mean the aliens are in our structures of thought. Surely there* are *aliens. Of course there are! But they don't live in our minds. They live in the Ding an sich.*[7]

While perhaps a bit of a caricature, this account does track with one interpretation of Kant's critical idealism. Indeed, what I want to take seriously here is the claim that if one adopts the so-called 'two-world' interpretation of Kant, then Fermi's Paradox fades away.[8] Despite my endorsement, I will not actually be providing a robust justification for a two-world interpretation,

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[3] Paul Horowitz, "The Fermi Paradox," in *SETI 2020: A Roadmap for the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*, eds., Ronald D. Ekers, D. Kent Cullers, John Billingham, and Louis K. Scheffer, 373–374 (Mountain View, CA: SETI Press, 2002), 373.

[4] Stephen Webb, *If the Universe is Teeming with Aliens… WHERE IS EVERYBODY?: Seventy-Five Solutions to the Fermi Paradox and the Problem of Extraterrestrial Life* (Heidelberg, DE: Springer, 2015).

[5] Marcos Wagner, "A Kantian Approach to the Fermi Paradox," on *Medium*, published March 19, 2023. (https://medium.com/an-idea/a-kantian-approach-to-the-fermi-paradox-252924c2009c)

[6] Personal communication.

[7] Adam Roberts, *The Thing Itself* (London, UK: Gollancz, 2015), 21–22.

[8] Indeed, there is a stronger argument to be made as well—the existence of the Fermi Paradox itself provides justification for a two-world interpretation of Kant's critical idealism.

as such an attempt is far beyond my skillset and far outside the scope of this presentation;[9] instead I will merely explicate *my* reading of Kant.

Part 1: Kant's Two-Worlds

In contemporary Kantian scholarship, there are two ways to interpret Kant's critical idealism that are dominant.[10] On the one hand, we have the so-called two-aspect view, while on the other, we have the so-called two-world view. The former position (roughly) stakes out the claim that the classic division in Kant between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* is a division between how *a singular thing* is to be understood. Indeed, as per the two-aspect view, an appearance and its corresponding thing-in-itself are not two distinct 'entities,' rather the appearance of something and that something as it is in itself are merely two sides to the same coin. The latter view—that of two-worlds—stakes out, in its weakest formulation, that the appearance of a thing and the thing as it is in itself are actually two distinct 'entities.'[11] I take the position wherein the appearance of a thing and the thing as it is in itself are indeed distinct and ontologically unique but both 'exist' in the same world. [To concretize my position: there is a pen as it appears to me *and* a pen that exists in itself that is not reducible to its appearance to me. Following that, there may be some entity that exists outside the categories of human understanding and thus *does not* appear to me *and* exists in itself, irreducible to how it *might* appear. Phrased differently,] the universe is populated both by a multiplicity of different entities that appear *and do not* appear to us, and a multiplicity of different entities as they are in themselves. No doubt this reeks of quasi-neo-Platonism, but I play the hand Kant dealt.

Why claim this? As per Kant, our experience of the world is an experience mediated, synthesized, structured, and "thought in accordance with the unity of the categories" of understanding.[12] Indeed, Kant goes on: "All our representations are in fact related to some object through the understanding, and, since appearances are nothing but representations, the understanding thus relates them to a **something**."[13] There thus is some relationship between our experience of a thing and the thing as it is in itself, but crucially, that is all we can say about it. The mediation of our experience of an object thus filtered through the categories is the *only* way we can have empirical access to the world around us. Strictly speaking, the **something** that our appearance is related to—a thing-in-itself, a *noumenal* 'object'—is "merely a **boundary**

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[9] For those desiring a robust defense, I would point readers to Anja Jauernig's *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves in Critical Idealism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[10] This bipartite division, however, is not at all neat. See Jauernig, *The World According to Kant*, 1–15.

[11] The stronger view is that the distinction between the appearance of something and the thing as it is in itself is in fact representative of two distinct 'realms' of existence. Both the aforementioned interpretations of Kant (two-aspect and two-world) have significant textual support. See Michael Oberst, "Two World *and* Two Aspects: on Kant's Distinction between Things in Themselves and Appearances," *Kantian Review* 20, No. 1 (2015): 53–75, 54–56.

[12] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed., Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 347 [A249].

[13] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 347–348 [A250].

concept."[14] To get a positive account of the world, we must flip back to the first section of the *Critique*, the "Transcendental Aesthetic." In the "Aesthetic," Kant makes the bold claim that space and time are not mind-independent things, but rather are constructs of human cognition that help to filter the deluge of sense data. For the sake of brevity, we will only look at space.

The argument for space being mind-dependent is relatively straightforward: we cannot represent objects without space, but we can easily think space without objects. Indeed, if we accept that we gain knowledge from our experiences, then entities are necessarily in physical relation to one another. Baked into such a claim, however, is the construct of space, as space is necessary for physical relationality to exist. In this sense, space is not a 'thing' so much as "[i]t is therefore to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances."[15] Kant goes further. If space is truly "the condition of the possibility of appearances," then it undergirds the objects which appear in it, uniquely locking them to the mind such that the entities we engage with are pure representations. The significance of this should be obvious: what we see when we look around is real in the sense that the world actually appears to us, but it appears to us *only in a certain way*. If, for example, our cognition is structured by three-dimensional space as we understand it, then anything existing outside that framework will either be invisible to us, or only visible cross-sectionally. If there are other living entities that exist, and if they exist in a higher dimension—or even a different *kind of* space—we are, quite literally, ships passing in the night. Kant seems to have understood this. In a few odd passages in the "Aesthetic," Kant permits the possibility that there are other "thinking beings" that are not "bound to the same conditions that limit our intuition and that are universally valid for us."[16] If this is true, then there is no reason why such thinking beings must inhabit the same type of world as us. While they exist in the same singular universe as us, not only might their faculties be so radically different that they perceive wholly different appearances of things, but they themselves might not be structured or conditioned by a category of three-dimensional space—or space at all, for that matter—and thus our existences are largely incommensurate. We may coexist alongside radically different entities and since we only have access to the world through our human-tailored categories of understanding, it is hardly a surprise that we don't see aliens.

Indeed, the Fermi Paradox, the question haunting all extraterrestrial research, seems to evaporate once we recognize that when we look out into the night sky, held in awe by 'the starry heavens above,' we are *not* looking at the universe as it actually is; rather, we're looking at the universe *as it is for us*.

Part 2: The Interdimensional Hypothesis

When one thinks of UFOs, one often thinks of little green men climbing out of spaceships that have traversed vast distances from another planet. This view, broadly speaking, is called the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis. While it is by no means the only explanation for UFOs, it is, in all

[14] Ibid., 362 [A255/B311].
[15] Ibid., 175 [A24/B39].
[16] Ibid., 177 [A27/B43].

probability, the most common.[17] Despite that, several prominent UFOlogists have broken with tradition and attempted to explain 'the phenomenon' through the so-called Interdimensional Hypothesis.

In his 1988 book *Dimensions*, Jacques Vallée "bluntly" notes that "the extraterrestrial theory is *not strange enough* to explain the facts," further adding that he would "be disappointed if UFOs turn out to be nothing more than visitors from another planet."[18] Instead, he takes a cue from quantum mechanics to argue that "UFOs may not come from ordinary space, but from a *multiverse* which is all around us," as entities popping into and out of 'existence.'[19] Further, in their joint report following the conclusion of Operation Bluebook, Jacques Vallée and J. Allen Hynek published *The Edge of Reality: A Progress Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* in 1975. In a conversation with Arthur Hastings and Vallée, Hynek proposed that "our space-time continuum could be a cross-section through a universe with many more dimensions."[20] In response to Hastings' questions of what this would look like, Hynek provides an illuminating example:

> Think what a hard time you would have proving to an [iron age person] that right now, through this room, TV pictures are passing! Yet, they're here. You have to have a transducer to see them—namely a TV set. Well, in the same sense *there may be interlocking universes right here!* We have this idea of space, we always think of another universe being *someplace else*. It may not. Maybe it's right here.[21]

Such changes in view have not always been met with positivity. In Steven Dick's monumental tome, *The Biological Universe*, he laments the shift away from the extraterrestrial hypothesis toward "wilder theories."[22] Indeed for him, the above mutations represent a shift *away* from science, towards "New Wave ideas" and "pseudoscience" that break with experimental rigor.[23] While a bit presumptuous, we might be able to take a step back and grant justification to Vallée *et al.* via "the **queen** of all the sciences," metaphysics.[24] If the two-world interpretation of Kant's critical idealism is to be accepted, then Vallée *et al.* needn't worry about charges of unscientificity per se because the Interdimensional Hypothesis quite nicely aligns with the above reading of Kant. Indeed, if this world of empirical objects that we see around us is a world of

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[17] For 17 different hypotheses, see Brad Steiger, "Eighteen Theories on UFOs," in *UFO*, eds., Milt Machlin and Tim Beckley, 55–57 (London, UK: Quick Fox, 1981).
[18] Jacques Vallée, *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact* (San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2008), 283. Emphasis my own. See also, Jacques Vallée, "Five Arguments Against the Extraterrestrial Origin of Unidentified Flying Objects," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 4, No. 1 (1990): 105–117.
[19] Vallée, *Dimensions*, 284. This is not a new position. John Keel advanced something similar in his 1970 book, *Operation Trojan Horse* (Lilburn, GA: IllumiNet Press, 1996), where he posited the existence of so-called 'ultraterrestrials' that manipulate space and time altogether.
[20] J. Allen Hynek and Jacques Vallée, *The Edge of Reality: A Progress Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regency Company, 1975), 261.
[21] Hynek and Vallée, *The Edge of* Reality, 262. Text slightly altered to avoid problematic language.
[22] Steven J. Dick, *The Biological Universe: The Twentieth-Century Extraterrestrial Life Debate and the Limits of Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 314.
[23] Dick, *The Biological Universe*, 315, 316.
[24] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 99 [Aviii].

appearances structured by human tailored categories, we are granted much more wiggle room as we can now 'make sense' of the recent UAP videos, where objects are seen deforming and blipping into and out of 'existence' insofar as they might more easily be understood as entities crossing over not only into our universe, but, for a brief time, conforming to our faculties of understanding.

By way of a convoluted analogy, we might think of our recent 'encounters' as similar to the third dimensional encounters in Edwin Abbott's novel *Flatland.* Specifically, in the 'romance of many dimensions,' a fine young square happily inhabits his two-dimensional world, Flatland, where he finds all kinds of other shapes, but is only able to visually perceive them as lines of various lengths. Sparing the details of Flatland and the nuances of its social hierarchy, a shocking event occurs just as the 19th century dawns: a 'sphere' enters Flatland. Although that's not quite right; a sphere, being three-dimensional, cannot 'enter' Flatland, rather it crosses it, appearing as a circle widening and tightening as it moves in the third dimension through the two-dimensional world. Shocked by what is occurring, our narrator interrogates the 'sphere' but is simply unable to comprehend the concepts of 'up' and 'down.' Thus, like the contactees whom Vallée describes in *Dimensions*, the square is abducted and raised into three-dimensional space wherein he can gaze upon the whole of Flatland. As he thinks through the implications of what is occurring and his recognition that there are more dimensions than he previously imagined, he asks the sphere about the Land of Four Dimensions. "There is no such land. The very idea of it is utterly inconceivable," retorts the sphere, himself locked within his own framework.[25] This is the situation, as per Vallée *et al*., in which we find ourselves. Locked in three dimensions, beholden to a specific view of the universe, we are contingently ignorant of other possibilities. My aim here has merely been to show that we needn't necessarily be ignorant. If we recognize that the world we see around us is only a small slice of the pie, then we might begin to understand anomalous phenomena that continue to vex humanity.

[25] Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963), 93.