Kant’s Hylomorphism
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—First draft. All large claims very possibly untrue.—

In form resides the essence of the thing (forma dat esse rei, as the
Scholastics said), so far as this is to be known by reason. If this thing is
an object of the senses, then it is the form of things in intuition (as
appearances)... just so, metaphysics, as pure philosophy, founds its
cognition preeminently on forms of thought, under which each object
(matter of cognition) may subsequently be subsumed. Upon these
forms, the possibility of all synthetic cognition a priori depends.

Kant, “On a recently prominent tone of superiority in
philosophy” (1796), 8:404

1. Introduction: Taking the long view of the Critical philosophy

1.1 No attentive student of Kant’s philosophy can fail to notice the central role that
the concepts of form and matter play in his thinking. In the works of his Critical period,
these concepts are on the scene from the very outset, and define the terms in which the
entire project is framed and pursued. Kant’s principal invocations of them are well-
known. Restricting attention to his theoretical philosophy – as I will throughout this

1 References to works by Kant in what follows are to volume and page number in the Academy edition
(1922—), except in the case of the first Critique, where I give citations in the standard “A/B” form.
Translations are my own, though made with close consultation of the translations in the Cambridge
Edition of Kant’s works. I use the following abbreviations:

Discovery = “On a Discovery by which Any New Critique of Pure Reason Has Been Made
Superfluous by an Earlier One” (1790)
JL = Jäsche Logic (1800)
KrV = Critique of Pure Reason (1781/7)
KU = Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790)
KU1 = First Introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790/4)
ML2 = Metaphysik L2 (1790-91?)
MM = Metaphysik Mrongovius (1782-3)
MN = Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science (1786)
PM = Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (1783)
Progress = “What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and
Wolff?” (1791)
R = Reflexionen
Tone = “On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy” (1796)
essay – two of the most prominent are the following:

(1) The claim that space and time are pure forms of appearances, whose ground lies in the nature of our sensibility, and which therefore constitute an aspect of our intuition that is given prior to and independently of any sensible matter by which actually existing appearances are presented.

(2) The claim that the categorial concepts which have long been a central preoccupation of metaphysicians (substance, cause, unity, existence, etc.) are in fact concepts of an object in general grounded in the form of our faculty of understanding, and are therefore to be distinguished from the determinate cognitions that constitute the matter known through these forms.

The idea that these aspects of our cognition are “formal” plays a crucial role in Kant’s argument. Recognizing the formal character of our representations of space and time is supposed to be the key to avoiding the apparent dilemma between absolutist and relationist conceptions of these structures, and Kant famously takes this recognition to imply that the objects of which we can have cognition are only appearances, not “things in themselves.” Recognizing the formal character of the pure categories is supposed to be the key to understanding why we are not capable the kind of cognition of the supersensible pursued in speculative metaphysics. Together, these two dimensions of formality in our cognition are supposed to explain how it is possible for us to have synthetic a priori cognition, and thus to answer the guiding question of the first Critique.

1.2 The form/matter contrast is thus of pivotal importance to the Critical philosophy. Indeed, Kant came to think that the central thrust of his philosophical standpoint, the trait in virtue of which his idealism does not degenerate into the more familiar kind of “material idealism” that “doubts or denies the existence of external things,” is best captured by calling it “formal idealism” (KrV B519n, cp. PM 4:337, 375). Yet in spite of their centrality, the concepts of form and matter are, I believe, among the most obscure of Kantian notions. It is easy to say what things are forms, according to Kant, but what does it mean to say that these things are forms? What must something be to count as a form?

Precisely because the notions of form and matter figure so fundamentally in Kant’s thinking, it is difficult to get a grip on them. To study the Critical philosophy is to
grow used to speaking of “forms” of intuition, appearances, sensibility, understanding, thought, judgment, etc., but how would we explain the principle by which the forms of these various powers, acts, and objects of cognition are identified? It will not do to say that we recognize the form of sensibility or understanding by considering what remains when we abstract from any content sensed or understood, for the notion of content invoked here is clearly just the conceptual complement to the notion of form itself: “content”, in this sense, is just another word for “matter”, and we can have no understanding of this notion without understanding the notion with which it contrasts.

Nor will it do simply to define the form of cognitive power X as that character which acts of X necessarily possesses, or which we can know such acts to possess a priori. For Kant characteristically takes the fact that F is the form of X to explain why it is a necessary, a priori truth about acts of X that they exhibit various further features, and to explain this in a way crucially different from the way in which the fact that the content of a certain concept C analytically contains a mark M explains the necessity and a priority of the judgment that every C is M. Moreover, Kant evidently thinks we can adjudicate quite subtle questions about which necessary, a priori truths have their source merely in the form of a certain cognitive power, and which have a more complex basis. Thus he thinks we can determine, not merely that space and time are forms of our sensibility, but that they exhaust the basic forms of this power (KrV A41/B58), and he makes a similar claim concerning the forms of judgment, and the associated categories, that characterize our understanding (KrV A69/B95). In neither case does he deny that a full system of transcendental philosophy might identify further representations that apply necessarily and a priori to the objects presented by these powers, and further necessary, a priori truths that pertain to such objects. But he denies that such further representations and truths would belong to the basic characterization of the form of the cognitive power in question. Such determinations must evidently rest on a quite subtle and discriminating conception of what counts as a form. But can we articulate the relevant conception?

None of these difficulties constitutes an objection to Kant’s employment of the concepts of form and matter, but they do, I think, suggest that we should question how

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2 I will not attempt to document this in detail. Briefly, I take it that if Kant’s investigation of the forms of sensibility and understanding is supposed to provide the resources to explain how we can have synthetic a priori cognition of space, time, and various necessary principles of experience, then we cannot simply explain the notion of form itself by appeal to the idea of necessity or a priority.
well we understand the function of these concepts in his thinking. It is of course possible simply to follow the pattern of Kant’s usage of these terms without formulating an explicit account of it, and much commentary on the Critical philosophy, both sympathetic and censorious, proceeds in this way. It would be desirable, however, to do better than this, especially when we consider that a number of classic difficulties about Kant’s position – for instance, the famous “neglected alternative” objection which maintains that he has not ruled out the possibility that space and time might be both forms of our sensibility and structures of things in themselves, and the much-discussed question whether he has any warrant for claiming that his table of forms of judgment is complete – hinge in significant part on what it means to claim that these things are forms.

1.3 How then might we begin to get a handle on these notions? There are a few places in which Kant explicitly discusses the concepts of form and matter, notably a brief but suggestive passage in the Amphiboly chapter of the first Critique. We can also get some guidance by attending carefully to Kant’s use of these concepts in various contexts. But we should not overlook a further clue that Kant gives us: simply by employing these terms, he signals a relation to a specific philosophical tradition, a tradition with which he indicates his engagement in his few explicit remarks on the form/matter contrast. As he notes in the passage quoted at the head of this essay, these concepts play a prominent role in scholastic philosophy – specifically, of course, in the scholastic philosophical tradition that consists primarily of commentary on the works of Aristotle. Kant evidently thinks that his own insights into the forms of intuition and thought vindicate (or anyway vindicate one, possibly heterodox reading of) a dictum of this tradition, forma dat esse rei (form gives being to a thing). And this is only one of several indications that he takes his own employment of the form/matter contrast to be a contribution to a philosophical topic that descends from scholastic Aristotelianism. This suggests a strategy we might pursue in seeking to understand Kant’s use of the form/matter contrast: we might consider how his discussion takes up, and how it modifies, principles of classical

\[\text{3 For other indications, see KU1 20:215n, where he remarks on how his use of the form/matter contrast is related to that of the “Aristotelian School”, and ML2 28:575, where he comments on how “the ancients” understood the contrast. Compare also R 3850-52 (notes on the form/matter contrast recorded in Kant’s copy of Baumgarten’s Metaphysica, tentatively dated by Adickes to the late 1760s).}\]
Aristotelian hylomorphism. To take this approach to Kant’s use of the form/matter contrast amounts to taking what we might call “the long view” of the Critical philosophy: seeing it as a response, not merely to various positions prominent in modern philosophy, but to a much older point of view. Such an approach obviously needs some justification, for apart from a few well-known invocations of Aristotle’s logical doctrines, Kant rarely refers to Aristotle’s philosophy. Indeed, although he apparently owned an edition of Aristotle’s works, I know of no indication that he carefully studied any of Aristotle’s non-logical writings: certainly he gives no sign of any direct engagement with such central Aristotelian texts as the Physics, Metaphysics, and De Anima. In another way, however, Kant’s thinking clearly took place in an atmosphere saturated with Aristotelian ideas, inasmuch as these ideas constituted the received framework that had oriented philosophical discussion for centuries, and that continued to orient the German academic philosophy of Kant’s day. The transformative influence of thinkers such as Descartes, Newton, Locke, Leibniz and Hume notwithstanding, an agenda of ideas and topics descending from scholastic Aristotelianism – the ideas of substance, nature, essence, and form, the standard division of the mind into faculties and powers, the conception of systematic understanding articulated in Aristotle’s logic works, etc. – continued to be touchstones of philosophical discussion, and to supply the reference points in relation to which modern philosophical positions defined themselves. Given these facts about the intellectual environment in which Kant wrote, and given his explicit claim that his use of the form/matter contrast bears out certain scholastic doctrines, it seems reasonable to approach Kant’s use of this contrast with Aristotelianism in mind – not necessarily with the assumption that his employment of the contrast will be in conformity with this tradition, but in the expectation that it will be illuminating to see both where it is in conformity and where it is not.

Someone who approaches Kant’s use of the language of form and matter with

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4 This approach to Kant’s views on form and matter has important precedents. See especially the pioneering studies of Graubner 1972 and Pippin 1982. The more general relationship between Kant’s outlook and (scholastic) Aristotelianism has also been pursued in a number of more recent works: Longuenesse 1998, Engstrom 2005, Korsgaard 2009. My discussion is indebted to all of these works.

5 Worda 1922, p. 45.
Aristotle in mind will, I think, be struck by two things. First, that the relation between Kant’s usage and Aristotle’s is not merely verbal – that there are significant structural similarities between Kant’s way of thinking about form and matter and classical Aristotelian hylomorphism. But second, that the locus of such thinking shifts in a conspicuous way: whereas Aristotle invoked the form/matter distinction primarily in an analysis of substance, Kant invokes this distinction primarily in an analysis of our power of cognition. This simultaneous nearness to and distance from Aristotelian ways of thinking is intriguing. What does it show about Kant’s philosophical standpoint that this venerable piece of conceptual apparatus is retained but shifted in this way?

According to Béatrice Longuenesse, Kant’s interiorization of the topic of form – his shift from applying the form/matter contrast primarily in an account of being to applying it primarily in an account of knowing – reflects the characteristic “internalization within representation” of transcendental philosophy: its distinctive re-framing of topics of traditional metaphysics in a way that focuses attention, not on how our representations must reflect certain necessary features of objects, but rather on how certain apparently necessary features of objects are in fact grounded in the nature of our faculties of representation. I think Longuenesse is certainly right to see a connection here: Kant’s interiorization of the form/matter contrast is surely connected with the famous “Copernican turn” he proposes for philosophy, whereby the common assumption that our cognition must conform to objects is replaced by the assumption that, in certain basic respects, objects must conform to our cognition (cp. KrV Bxvi). But I want to suggest that the interiorization of the form/matter contrast is not merely one more instance of a pervasive Kantian reorientation, but a particularly central and revealing instance of it, and one that it is illuminating to place in relation to Aristotelian hylomorphism. I will argue that a number of central Kantian doctrines – in particular, his denial that we can know things in themselves, and the connection he sees between this point and the finitude of our cognitive power – take on a clearer and more definite significance when they are seen as embodying a distinctive response to Aristotelian ideas.

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6 I will give textual support for these two observations in due course. Here I state them in a rough and preliminary form, to be qualified later. Let me immediately grant that Aristotle’s form also has something to do with knowability, and that Kant’s notion of form has a bearing on the nature of objects of cognition. Nevertheless, I think there is a palpable contrast here, which I will seek to clarify below.

about the sort of intelligibility to be found in the natural world and the mode of our access to it.

The remainder of this essay proceeds as follows. In the next section (§2), I discuss the structural similarities between Kant’s general understanding of the form/matter contrast and the traditional Aristotelian understanding. I then turn (§3) to Kant’s interiorization of the contrast, seeking to understand its ground and what it shows about Kant’s general philosophical standpoint. I conclude (§4) with some brief and tentative remarks on the connection between form, finitude, and our ignorance of things in themselves.

2. Aristotelian and Kantian hylomorphism: structural similarities

2.1 To bring out how Kant’s employment of the form/matter contrast conforms to a broadly Aristotelian pattern, it will be useful to call to mind some well-known features of Aristotle’s hylomorphism. Aristotle’s remarks of form and matter contain many obscurities, but there are certain points that would appear in any textbook account of his position. What follows is highly selective summary, focusing on points that bring out the value of comparing his standpoint with Kant’s.8

Although a common narrative of Aristotle’s development takes the form/matter contrast to appear first as part of the account of change developed in his Physics, the contrast is ultimately invoked not merely in an account of coming to be but of being, and specifically, of the most basic kind of being, that of substances.9 Sublunary natural substances – those that are tangible to the senses and susceptible of change – are conceived as entities concerning which there is a single, most basic answer to each of two questions: first, what they are; second, of what they are constituted. Thus Socrates is fundamentally a man, and he is constituted of flesh and bone (of a certain, specifically human sort). The answer to the question what Socrates is gives his form or essence: he

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8 I try to stick to textbook platitudes, but inevitably some controversial interpretative claims will creep in. I make no detailed attempt to defend these claims, since my purpose here is simply to show how one reasonably plausible reading of Aristotle’s hylomorphism makes an interesting counterpoint to Kant’s views on form and matter.

9 For a forceful recent challenge to the idea that, even in the Physics, the form/matter contrast is introduced primarily to solve a problem about the possibility of change, see Kelsey 2010.
has human form; the answer to the question of what he is constituted gives his matter.\textsuperscript{10}

These points are often summarized by saying that Aristotle takes corporeal substances to be “hylomorphic compounds,” but this expression is apt only if the term “compound” bears a quite special sense. A substance is not a compound of form and matter in the sense in which bronze is a compound of copper and tin: it is not produced by combining elements which might in principle exist apart from such compounding. Neither the form nor the matter of a natural substance is an existent in its own right; they are distinguishable principles involved in the explanation of the existence of the one and only actual entity on the scene, namely an individual substance which is (formally) a such-and-such (materially) constituted of such-and-such stuff.\textsuperscript{11} The distinction between form and matter thus belongs to a conceptual, not a mereological, analysis of the being of substances: it characterize two dimensions in which one might ask intelligible questions about what it is for such beings to exist, and two corresponding roles in explicating the nature of their being.

Aristotle characterizes these two roles by drawing a series of contrasts:

(1) Form is the principle of unity: some matter constitutes one definite individual only

\textsuperscript{10} Some ascribe to Aristotle the view that Socrates has an \textit{individual} form of the human sort. I will not discuss the question whether Aristotle recognizes individual forms. The resemblances between Aristotle’s view and Kant’s will be clearest if we set aside this issue and simply focus on the “species forms” (or form-types) that are shared by all substances of a certain natural kind.

I also will not discuss subtle questions about Aristotle’s view of the relationship between form and essence. Aristotle seems in some places simply to equate form with essence (Met. Z. 7, 1032b1, 1032b14), but at other points he appears to distinguish between a formal aspect of essence and a further aspect of the essences of natural substances that pertains to the general kind of matter in which the relevant form is realized (e.g., Met. Z. 11, 1036b22-1037a8 and H. 2, 1043a11f). But form is at any rate the core of essence, the basic principle that makes a thing the sort of thing it is.

Finally, I will not discuss the notion of “sensible form” that appears in the account of perception Aristotle gives in \textit{De Anima}. The notion of form on which I will focus is the one connected with essence: that which makes a thing what it \textit{is}, not that which makes it \textit{appear} a certain way to the senses.

\textsuperscript{11} This point does \textit{not} hold true of artifacts: their matter can exist (non-homonymously so called) apart from the form the artisan gives it. But for precisely this reason, artifacts are only quasi-substances, and – I would argue – their “matter” and “form” imperfectly illustrate the Aristotelian concepts of matter and form. (This is consistent with their being useful examples by which to \textit{introduce} the concepts of matter and form. As always in Aristotle, we proceed from things more evident to us to things more knowable in themselves. I think a number of standard interpretative difficulties about Aristotle’s hylomorphism derive from an unwarranted assumption that the relation of an \textit{artifact} to its matter – a statue to clay, a bronze sphere to bronze – must hold for hylomorphic compounds generally.)
in virtue of bearing a certain form.\textsuperscript{12} By contrast, matter \textit{per se} is not individuated at all: considered simply as such, matter is not a “this.”\textsuperscript{13}

(2) Relatedly, form is the \textit{actuality} of a substance, whereas matter is mere \textit{potentiality}.\textsuperscript{14} We might gloss this by saying that the form of a substance is the structuring principle in virtue of which matter of a certain sort constitutes something actually existent, whereas matter is stuff whose existence can be understood only by reference to its contribution to the existence of a substance consisting of matter-bearing-a-certain-form. When we say what this actual substance is, we mention its form, not its matter.

(3) Aristotle is famously willing to think of both form and matter as kinds of cause or explanatory principle.\textsuperscript{15} They are, as we might put it, not merely aspects of the existence of a substance, but factors that figure in an account of what \textit{makes} a substance exist (hence the scholastic axiom \textit{forma dat esse rei}). In the scholastic elaboration of Aristotle’s view, they are often represented as, respectively, the \textit{active} and \textit{passive} principles of being. Form is that by which a being is “in act”: it actualizes matter in such a way as to determine it to be some definite thing.\textsuperscript{16} Matter is a cause in a subservient way, by being that whose receptivity of form makes this activity possible.\textsuperscript{17}

(4) Finally, form is the principle of \textit{intelligibility} in things: it is that whose presence makes it the case that there is an answer to the question \textit{what} something is, and Aristotle famously holds that it is in virtue of a substance’s being what it is that it is

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\textsuperscript{12} Met. Z. 17 1041b5f.

\textsuperscript{13} Met. Z. 3, 1029a20f.: “By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which being is determined.” Cp. De An. II. 1, 412a6f. (Quotations from Aristotle are from the translations in Aristotle 1984.)

\textsuperscript{14} De An. II. 1, 412a9.

\textsuperscript{15} Phys. II. 3; Met. A. 3, A. 2; Post. Anal. II. 11.

\textsuperscript{16} Met. Z. 8, 1033b21-3.

\textsuperscript{17} Cp. Aquinas, \textit{De Ente et Essentia} §II: “Through the form, surely, which is the act of the matter, the matter is made a being in act and a certain kind of thing”; \textit{De Principiis Naturae} §5: “Just as everything which is in potency can be called matter, so also everything from which something has existence whether that existence be substantial or accidental, can be called form... [B]ecause form causes existence in act, we say that the form is the act.”
intelligibly the subject of all other categories of predication.\textsuperscript{18} Matter, by contrast, is primarily an object of the \textit{senses}, and only indirectly an object of the intellect, insofar as it bears a certain form.\textsuperscript{19} This contrast is closely connected with certain general views Aristotle holds about what is knowable or intelligible in nature. What is intelligible in a thing is what is universal and necessary in it.\textsuperscript{20} Forms are intelligible to the extent that a form is something \textit{general} that is potentially common to a manifold of individuals. Relatedly, form is a principle of what is \textit{necessary} in individuals, a principle which gives the general answer to the question why such an individual must have just these parts and no others, and why these parts must be arranged thus-and-so.\textsuperscript{21} Matter, by contrast, is the principle of \textit{individuation} that makes one substance of form F different from another, and relatedly, it is that in virtue of which natural substances are \textit{contingent} existents, capable of being or not being.\textsuperscript{22} Matter is thus not intrinsically intelligible, and becomes an object of the intellect only indirectly, in virtue of bearing a certain form. Nevertheless, Aristotle holds, it is through encountering forms embodied in sensible matter that we come to know forms as such.\textsuperscript{23}

It is generally agreed that this set of views about the relations between form and matter reflects Aristotle’s attempt to resolve a dispute among his predecessors: a dispute between the early natural scientists, like Empedocles and Democritus, who (by Aristotle’s lights) recognized only matter in their account of the natural world,\textsuperscript{24} and the more recent philosophers influenced by Plato, who held that such intelligibility as there is in the natural world depends on the “participation” of natural bodies in intelligible forms, and who conceived of these forms as separate existents, which are knowable – if they are

\textsuperscript{18} Met Z. 1, 1028a10f.
\textsuperscript{19} Met Z. 10, 1036a8. Aristotle is also willing to speak of a kind of “intelligible matter” that we consider in mathematics by abstracting in a certain way from the sensible qualities of actual matter (Met. Z. 10, 1036a9-12 and K. 1059b14-1). It would be instructive to compare this idea with Kant's claim that our sensibility itself has forms that we can consider purely by abstracting from all actual sensible matter presented therein, but I cannot pursue this comparison here.
\textsuperscript{20} Cp. De An. II. 5, 417b21 and Nic. Eth. VI. 6, 1140b31.
\textsuperscript{21} Cp. Met. Z. 17, 1041a10f.
\textsuperscript{22} Met Z. 8, 1034a5-8 and Z. 15, 1039b20-1040a7.
\textsuperscript{24} Phys. II. 2, 194a19-194a21.
knowable by us at all – independently of the senses.\(^{25}\) To put matters very roughly: Aristotle holds that the latter position rightly recognizes the need for a further explanatory principle beyond sensible matter, but that its conception of this principle creates intolerable difficulties about what such forms could have to do with the natural world that is the primary object of our intellect. Aristotle’s project, we might say, is to articulate a conception of form that allows it to be a principle of unity, activity, and intelligibility distinct from sensible matter but not – in the case of the forms of natural substances at least – independent of such matter. Thus, although it has been popular for centuries to represent Aristotle as an empiricist who holds that “nothing is in the intellect which is not first in the senses,” his actual position seems to be more subtle: he attempts to reconcile an insight of ancient (Platonic) rationalism, to the effect that intelligibility demands a formal, nonsensible element, with an insight of a kind of ancient empiricism, to the effect that our knowledge is not independent of, but rather in its very nature dependent on and in important ways restricted by, our power to encounter sensible, material things. (I hope these formulations are starting to have a Kantian ring.)

A final significant feature of Aristotle’s hylomorphism, for our purposes, concerns its relation to his logical distinction between subject and predicate. In the Categories, where the form-matter distinction famously does not appear, Aristotle take concrete individuals – men, horses, etc. – to be “primary substances,” on the ground that all other modes of being are predicated of them “as subjects” while they are not themselves predicated of anything.\(^{26}\) The kinds that figure as answers to the question what such things are – man, horse, etc. – are taken to be “secondary substances” because they are predicated of the primary substances in a specially intimate way that “reveals the primary substance.”\(^{27}\) With the introduction of the form-matter distinction, however, Aristotle so to speak splits the atom that he had formerly taken to be the basic subject of predication. The concrete individuals that were formerly regarded as primary substances are now taken to contain in themselves a quasi-predicative structure: they consist of such-and-such-matter-bearing-such-and-such-a-form. But this structure is only quasi-predicative, for Aristotle maintains that matter per se is not a genuine subject

\(^{25}\) Met. M. 4-5.

\(^{26}\) Cat. §5, 2a34 and 2b15-18.

\(^{27}\) Cat. §5, 2b30.
of which things can be predicated. A genuine subject is present only where there is matter-informed.28

The resulting position is difficult to keep in clear focus, but it is also highly philosophically suggestive: the upshot seems to be that the possibility of the sort of unity of particular and general we capture in bringing a particular subject under a general predicate depends on a more basic sort of unity of particularity and generality, a unity in virtue of which there are possible subjects of predication at all. A substance’s having a certain form is thus radically unlike a thing’s having a property, if this is understood as the ontological counterpart of a subject’s falling under a predicate.29 A substance’s having a certain form is not a case of the kind of unity registered in a predicative thought, but of a more basic kind of unity, our comprehension of which has a correspondingly different structure. Aristotle accordingly recognizes an act of the intellect that is non-predicative in character:

Every assertion says something of something, as too does denial, and is true or false. But not every thought is such; that of what a thing is in respect of its essence ... does not say something of something. (De An. III. 6, 430b26f.)

The comprehension of the form of a given substance is a thought of the latter sort: not a thinking something-of-something, but simply a perspicuous comprehension of what something itself is.

2.2 How does Kant’s understanding of the form/matter contrast compare with the one just sketched?

A number of important features of Kant’s conception of this contrast can be gathered from his earliest invocation of it in the first Critique:

I call that in appearance which corresponds to sensation its matter, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the form of appearance. Since that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation, the matter of all appearance is indeed given to us only a posteriori, but its form must lie ready for it in the mind wholly a priori, and can therefore be considered separately from all sensation (KrV A20/B34).

28 Met. Z. 8, 1033b19f.

29 Cp. Met. Z. 6, 1031a28-30. My interpretation of Aristotle’s position on these issues is much indebted to the discussion of the dialectic of Metaphysics Z in Kosman 1984 and 1994, and to some lectures on Metaphysics Z that I heard Sebastian Rödl give in the fall of 2007.
Here the form/matter contrast is applied to *appearances*, where an appearance is “the undetermined object of an empirical intuition” (Ibid.). A few lines later, however, Kant begins to speak of “the pure form of sensible intuitions in general” or “pure form of sensibility” that is “found in the mind *a priori*” (Ibid.). Thus, from the very outset, Kant applies the form-matter distinction not only to objects but to the capacities by which we cognize objects. Indeed, he applies it to the former only insofar as they are objects of the latter: an “appearance” is an object considered, not simply as such, but just insofar as it is intuitable by us, and the forms Kant identifies in appearances are forms in virtue of which they are thus intuitable. He famously goes on to argue that these forms do *not* pertain to these same things considered simply as “things in themselves” (KrV A26/B42-A28/B44, A33/B49-A36/B53). Thus what I have called Kant’s interiorization of the form/matter contrast is present from its earliest invocation in the first *Critique*.30 And while this first invocation specifically concerns the forms objects bear *qua* sensible, the interiorization persists when Kant turns to the forms that object bear *qua* knowable by the understanding. The pure categorial concepts of the understanding – concepts whose ground lies in the nature of the basic act of our understanding, judgment – constitute “the intellectual form of all experience,” and through them alone is “determination of an object” possible (KrV A310/B367, cp. A128). Thus a form grounded in our power of understanding

   precedes all cognition of the object, as the intellectual form of this [cognition],
   and itself constitutes a formal cognition of all objects in general *a priori*, so far as
   they are thought. (KrV A129-130)

   In this respect, certainly, Kant’s employment of the form-matter distinction
   contrasts significantly with Aristotle’s. On Aristotle’s conception, while the form of a
   natural substance is indeed what makes this substance *intelligible*, and thus a potential
   object of our intellect, there is no suggestion that the *ground* of this intelligibility lies
   primarily in the nature of our cognitive capacities. Far from suggesting that the nature of
   our cognitive capacities is the source of the forms we find in the natural world, Aristotle

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30 Indeed, it is present in significant respects in Kant’s Inaugural Dissertation, though Kant does not here draw the conclusion that we cannot know things in themselves (see Pippin 1982, p. 25n33 for relevant citations). My focus, at any rate, will be on Kant’s views about form and matter in the Critical period. For interesting discussion of the history of Kant’s employment of the form/matter contrast in the pre-Critical period and its relation to his evolving views on our ability to know the real essences of things, see Graubner 1972, pp. 15-24 and 37-45.
seems to suggest – on a superficial reading, anyway – that our minds apprehend the intelligible forms of things through being affected by these forms.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, Aristotle certainly would not suggest that the forms we discern in things do not pertain to those things “in themselves.” On the contrary: to discern the form of a thing is for him \textit{precisely} to grasp what it is “in itself,” at least if this phrase translates Aristotle’s “\textit{kath’ hauto}” (as it commonly does in Aristotle translation). The investigation of form just is the investigation of what a thing \textit{itself} is. For, as we have noted, a thing’s form is precisely that way of being which is inseparable from its being at all.

Indeed, this idea about form is so prominent in the Aristotelian tradition, and this tradition remained such a prominent a part of the intellectual environment in which Kant wrote, that it seems worth considering the hypothesis that Kant’s claim about our ignorance of things “in themselves” should be understood, at least in part, as a response to this traditional idea.\textsuperscript{32} On this hypothesis, Kant’s claim that we do not know things “in themselves” would have a more determinate meaning than the one expressed by the usual – and, it seems to me, inscrutable – gloss according to which it means that we do not know what they are “independent of our cognition.” It would mean that we are not capable of knowing the structuring principles that ground the being of material objects, the sorts of principles that the Aristotelian tradition regards as the primary objects of natural science. Kant’s claim that we do know “appearances”, and that these objects have their own sort of “form”, would correspondingly amount to the suggestion that such structuring principles as we \textit{do} know to apply to sensible things have a more limited and

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\textsuperscript{31} De An. Ill. 3, 427a20f. and Ill. 4, 429a12f. Aristotle represents the idea that thinking is akin to perceiving as one of the \textit{endoxa}, or reputable opinions, which his account aims to respect. The ascription to him of the view that thought stands in a receptive relation to intelligible forms is made more complicated, however, by his brief and notoriously obscure remarks in De An. Ill. 5 on the need for an “active intellect”. At any rate, whatever the right interpretation of Aristotle’s position, \textit{Kant} apparently took him to hold that our cognition of the forms of things is receptive in character. Thus he regularly classifies Aristotle among the philosophers who hold a “hyperphysical influx” theory of our nonsensible cognition of the intelligible natures of things (by contrast with the “pre-established harmony” view held by Crusius, and with Kant’s own mature position, according to which the ground of such cognition lies in the fact that the objects we know must conform to the nature of our cognitive power). See for instance R4275 17:492.

\textsuperscript{32} I certainly do not mean to suggest that Kant’s denial that we can know things in themselves should be heard as having \textit{only} this resonance: reference to how things are “in themselves” is of course widespread in philosophy, and this language appears in suggestive ways in a number of the thinkers with whom Kant is more directly engaged (e.g., Newton, Leibniz, Locke). Of course, these writers were themselves writing in an intellectual environment in which Aristotelian ideas were in wide circulation.
superficial significance in respect of their being.

2.3 I intend this suggestion about how to understand Kant’s notion of a thing “in itself” as a hypothesis in the true sense: a thesis proposed for consideration, to be confirmed or disconfirmed by the light it sheds on the overall pattern of his thinking. I will say more about Kant’s reasons for interiorizing the form/matter contrast in §3, and about his conception of things in themselves in §4. For the moment, however, I want to focus on some significant similarities between Kant’s understanding of the form/matter contrast and the traditional Aristotelian understanding, similarities that come out if we turn our attention from this – admittedly dramatic – difference in the locus of application of the contrast to the kind of structure the contrast implies.

Notice, first of all, that each of the four Aristotelian ways of contrasting form and matter has a close parallel, mutatis mutandis, in Kant:

(1) Kant’s forms, like Aristotle’s, are principles of unity, albeit ones whose presence does not constitute the unity of a thing “in itself” but rather supplies the unity in a given manifold that constitutes an object for cognition. The matter of cognition, like Aristotle’s matter, is intrinsically without unity, in the sense that, considered simply as such, it presents to us no unity whatsoever.

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33 This is particularly evident in the case of the form of the understanding: this is responsible for “the relation of cognitions to one another” (KrV A55/B79), and Kant famously argues that it is “the mere form of cognition”, which constitutes “the unity of consciousness” and is at the same time the ground in virtue of which a manifold of cognition is “unified” in an object (KrV B427, cp. B137-140).

The pure forms of inner and outer sensibility, time and space, are also characterized as forms “which allow the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations” (KrV A20/B34). Kant famously argues that these forms are wholes which cannot be constituted form their several parts, but rather are the ground in virtue of which their parts, and the relations among them, are possible (KrV A25/B39, A31-2/B47). As we later learn, however, these sensible forms themselves depend for their unity on the understanding, which constitutes each of these “forms of intuition” a “formal intuition” that is represented “with the determination of the unity of this manifold represented in [it] a priori” (KrV B160, cp. A118, B129). Thus the formal unity of the understanding is in a way more basic than that of sensibility, but it is true of Kant’s forms in general that they are essentially unities, and thereby unify the manifold brought under them in a manner that allows it to present an object for cognition. See KrV A266/B322 for further examples which confirm that, in general, form is for Kant that unifying principle in virtue of which a manifold of matter is ordered in definite relations.

34 I think this holds true at each level at which the concept of matter applies. Thus it is only in virtue of the forms of sensibility that sensible matter stands in the sorts of relations in virtue of which it constitutes intuition, i.e., that in our cognition which “relates immediately to an object” and “is singular” (KrV A19/B33, A320/B377), and similarly it is only in virtue of the forms of judgment that
(2) Kant does not ascribe to the forms he identifies the role of making objects actually existent. But, famously, he thinks that these forms are the ground of the relevant objects in another sense: they are “a priori determining” of objects not “according to existence” but in respect of their knowability (KrV A92/B125, cp. A127, B138). They are, we might say, the actuality of these objects qua objects for cognition. Kant’s matter is per se mere potentiality for this sort of actuality. 

(3) Kant’s forms are, like Aristotle’s, active principles, whereas his matter is a passive principle that explains the existence of objects for cognition just inasmuch as it is receptive of form. Across a variety of contexts, “matter” for Kant signifies what is given and thus determinable, whereas form is understood by contrast as that which determines, where this determining and bringing to order must involve an act of “spontaneity”.

(4) Finally, Kant’s forms are, like Aristotle’s, grounds of intelligibility in things. This should be clear from the preceding observations: for Kant, form is precisely that in virtue of which matter constitutes a knowable object. Moreover, the general
connections that Aristotle assumes between intelligibility, universality, and necessity continue to hold for Kant. Thus it is precisely through being the ground of lawful necessity and “strict universality” in appearances that the formal features of understanding make nature itself a possible object of systematic cognition.\(^{38}\)

Matter, by contrast, continues to be the factor associated with the dependence of our cognition on the senses, and it continues to be responsible for what is individual in our cognition, and for the extent of the contingency in the things we know.\(^{39}\)

As in Aristotle’s case, so too in Kant’s, the relation of a form to its matter is not a relation of two potentially independent existents. To accept that Kant’s matter can actually exist without form would be to accept the “Imposition Reading” of Kant’s idealism, according to which “the sensible given” exists in the first instance independent of the forms we impose on it, and we conjure an empirical world from this intrinsically meaningless data through a spontaneous act of form-giving.\(^{40}\) This sort of reading has a long history. But though Kant certainly does regard the formal element in cognition as in

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the latter actualizes (cp. KrV A50-51/B74-75). For illuminating and persuasive discussion of this idea, see Engstrom 2006.

\(^{38}\) Compare KrV A127-128 and MN 4:468-469, 472.

\(^{39}\) For the contrast between the contingency of matter and the necessity of form, see for instance KrV A42-3/B60, B139-142. The connection of matter with the senses and with individuality is most direct in the case of the matter of sensible intuition, namely sensation, which is “the effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it” (A20/B34), and which is that in virtue of which our representations are immediately related to an object in such a way as to present something singular (KrV A320/B377).

More generally, I believe that what Kant designates as “matter” is always particular and contingent in relation to what he designates as “form” in virtue of some connection of the former with sensible receptivity. An indication of this is his claim that the concepts of matter and form are “bound up with every use of the understanding,” inasmuch as “[t]he understanding ... demands first that something be given (at least in concept) in order to be able to determine it in a certain way” (KrV A266-7/B322-3). I take this remark to apply specifically to a finite understanding, one whose act of determining presupposes a given manifold of which it is not the source. If so, the implication appears to be that the application of the form-matter distinction is always connected with the dependence of our understanding on a distinct power of sensible receptivity. If this is right, then not merely the fact that our cognitive power must operate on a contingent manifold of sensory intuition, but also the fact that our understanding must unite distinct concepts in judgment, and the fact that our capacity for reason must connect distinct judgments in inference – all of which are, for Kant, instances of the form-matter relation – ultimately reflect the finite, sensible character of our understanding. (For related points about how the sensibly-conditioned character of our cognition is always the ground of the distinction between particular and universal, and the contingency of the former in relation to the latter, see KU §76, 5:401-404.)

\(^{40}\) I take the term “Imposition Reading” from Pippin 1982, which argues forcefully against it: see esp. Chapter 8.
some sense grounded “in us,” not in things, he is also quite clear that he is not positing any such process of form-imposition. Thus in the very first lines of the B-Introduction to the first Critique, he writes that

although all our cognition begins with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience. For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself, which addition we cannot distinguish from that fundamental material until long practice has made us attentive to it and skilled in separating it out. (KrV B1-2)

and similarly in the Prolegomena he remarks that

the discussion here is not about the genesis of experience, but about that which lies in experience. (PM §21a, 4:304)

I take these remarks to be explicit attempts to forestall the Imposition Reading by emphasizing that the primary object presented to our cognitive power is not formless matter (sensation) but matter-informed (experience, i.e., empirical cognition of an object). And again, this repeats, in a cognitive register, an Aristotelian thought: that natural substances are not fundamentally formless matter but matter-informed. So for both Kant and Aristotle, the form-matter distinction belong to a conceptual, not a mereological, analysis of the objects to which it applies.41

Furthermore, it is even clearer in Kant’s case than in Aristotle’s that the distinction between form and matter makes it possible to recognize something right in the rationalist idea that what makes cognition possible at all is a basic kind of cognition that is prior to all sensible receptivity, while also recognizing the force of the empiricist thought that our cognitive power is dependent on receptivity, and incapable of any cognition wholly unmoored from it. The principle of the solution is precisely the point we have just stated: that form and matter are distinct but interdependent principles, neither of which can be what it is except in relation to the other. It is this interdependence that makes it possible for Kant to explain how synthetic a priori cognition is possible for us while maintaining that such cognition is limited to possible objects of experience, and tells us nothing about the nature of things “in themselves.”42

41 It would also be worth comparing Aristotle’s criticism of the idea of separately existing (Platonic) forms with Kant’s criticism of the idea that the forms of understanding can supply us with a priori cognition independent of any relation to sensibility; but I cannot pursue this comparison here.

42 Thus Kant’s famous phrase: “Thoughts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are
Finally, this interdependence of intelligible form and sensible matter gives rise to a counterpart – again transposed to a cognitive register – to the Aristotelian idea of a unity of particular and general that is pre-predicative. For though Kant says that “the understanding can make no other use of concepts than to judge by means of them” (KrV A68/B93), he also famously holds that the same function of the understanding that makes possible the unity of a subject with a predicate in judgment also “gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations in an intuition” (KrV A79/B104). This unifying function is the general form of the understanding itself, whose application to possible intuition is articulated in the special formal concepts that Kant, following Aristotle, calls “categories” (cp. KrV A95/B128). Thus the very existence of knowable objects that can be the subject of further determinations in judgment depends on a prior, pre-predicative unity of the matter of cognition, sensible intuition, with the intelligible form in virtue of which this matter presents an object at all.

3. Kant's interiorization of the form/matter contrast

3.1 A major part of the value of drawing these comparisons is that it sharpens our sense of what is distinctive in Kant's standpoint. For having seen these similarities between Kant's views on form and matter and classical Aristotelian hylomorphism, we can see that Kant does not just scrap the modes of thinking characteristic of the scholastic Aristotelian tradition and launch out upon a new philosophical project. On the contrary, many of his central philosophical claims can be seen as taking specific stands on topics that preoccupied this tradition.

In particular, Kant's characterization of his position as “formal idealism” can be understood, not merely as a comment on the nature of his idealism, but as an expression of his attitude toward forms. He clearly intends this label, in the first instance, as a comment on the former issue: his point is that, unlike “material idealism,” his view does not place in doubt the existence of nonmental things, but merely suggests that their formal aspect is grounded in the nature of our cognitive power (cp. KrV B519n). But the term he chooses also reveals something about his conception of form, something that comes out if we hear it as contrasting, not only with material idealism, but also with what
we might call “formal realism” – i.e., with the view that the forms we know in things belong to those things “in themselves”, as Aristotelians apparently suppose. And on further reflection, it should be clear that this is not a distortion of Kant’s meaning: for he introduces “formal idealism” as a synonym for “transcendental idealism,” and the latter is explicitly contrasted with “transcendental realism,” which maintains that the objects we cognize possess in themselves the forms under which we cognize them (KrV A490-491/B518-519, cp. A369, B519).

Kant’s formal idealism can thus be understood, I believe, as taking up a specific posture toward the traditional hylomorphic theory of the being of substances. It amounts, I want to suggest, to a denial that form can be both the source of intelligibility in our cognition of things and that which gives things being “in themselves.” I think there is evidence that Kant had the traditional hylomorphic theory in mind and meant his stance to be a response to it (though also, to be sure, a response to other kinds of philosophical position). But it is not crucial for my purposes that this historical claim be accepted. Even if Kant’s formal idealism was not conceived as a response to Aristotelian ideas about form, I think the parallels noted above give us sufficient reason to see Kant’s position as grounded in reflection on a set of issues, and a set of possible views about those issues, that is closely related to the set of issues and views that prompted Aristotle’s hylomorphism. If so, it should be fruitful to consider how the differences between Kant and Aristotle’s standpoints reflect different assessments of these matters.

The central and striking difference is, as I have already emphasized, Kant’s interiorization of the form/matter contrast: his application of it, in the first instance, to an analysis of our capacities to know objects, rather than to the being of objects themselves. But what exactly does this interiorization come to, and what is the reason for it?

3.2 In certain general respects, Kant’s views on the relation between forms and the natural world are shared by many early modern philosophers. It is, after all, a cliché about early modern philosophy that it takes an “epistemological turn,” shifting away from the traditional philosophical enterprise of speculating about the nature of being toward an investigation of the basis and limits of our knowledge of things. And it is another cliché that this reorientation goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of Aristotelian views of the natural world, and specifically, with a rejection of the idea that explanations of things
in nature should appeal to their intrinsic “forms” or “natures.” Crude: early modern philosophers generally hold that the primary object of natural science can only be matter, and that the behavior of natural bodies is ultimately to be explained by appeal to completely general laws of nature that govern all matter everywhere, not by appeal to natures intrinsic to particular kinds of natural bodies. They thus reject the idea that things possess “in themselves” the sorts of forms that Aristotle posits as crucial explanatory principles in nature.

At least in certain basic respects, Kant’s views about what we can know in empirical nature conform to this pattern. Thus he holds that phenomenal substance – the kind of substance of which we can have empirical cognition, by contrast with intelligible substance, the concept of which identifies for us a logical possibility for thought, but one we can employ in cognition only in via its phenomenal “schema” – is to be identified with matter (KrV 277/B333), and that it follows from the concept of matter that “every change of matter has an external cause,” since “matter has absolutely no internal determinations and grounds of determination” (MN 4:543, cp. KU §65, 5:374-5). Again, I think the significance of these views stands out particularly sharply if we note their contrast with Aristotelian ideas. As we noted above (§2.1), Aristotle rejects the identification of matter per se with substance. Natural substances for him consist of matter informed. Hence Aristotelian natural science concerns itself not just with matter but also with form, and indeed primarily with the latter (Phys. II.1, 193a28f.; II.2, 194a13f.), where “nature as form” is supposed to be precisely an “inner principle of motion and rest” (Phys. II.1, 192b20f.).

Against this background, it is hard not to hear Kant’s claim that what is knowable in the natural world has “absolutely no internal determinations” as a denial that empirical natural science can have such a topic.\(^{43}\) His comment on this point in the

\(^{43}\) Kant nevertheless thinks that empirical natural science rests on formal cognition of nature in another sense. As I will soon discuss (§3.4), he holds that it rests on an a priori cognition of a formal aspect of nature whose ground lies in the nature of our cognitive power itself. His complaint about Aristotle, in effect, is that he does not clearly distinguish this sort of formal cognition from cognition grounded in things themselves. Compare for instance the following characteristic remark, from a supplement to Kant’s “What Real Progress?” essay:

A mere philosopher like Aristotle [who was not also a great mathematician like Plato] would, however, not sufficiently notice the world of difference of the pure faculty of reason, insofar is it enlarges itself from itself, from that [faculty] which, led by empirical principles, proceeds through inferences to the more universal, and therefore also would
Amphiboly is worth quoting in full:

Matter is *substantia phenomenon*. What pertains to it internally I seek in all parts of space it occupies and in all effects it produces, ... which can certainly always be only appearances of outer sense. I therefore have nothing absolutely but only comparatively internal, which itself in turn consists of outer relations. But the absolutely internal in matter, according to pure understanding, is a mere fancy, for this is never an object for the pure understanding. The transcendental object, however, which might be the ground of this appearance that we call matter, is a mere something, and we would not have any understanding of what it is even if someone could tell us. For we cannot understand anything but what brings with it something in intuition corresponding to our words. If the complaints that *we have no insight into the inner in things* are supposed to mean that we do not understand through pure reason what the things that appear to us might be in themselves, then they are entirely improper and irrational. For [such a demand] would have us be able to cognize things, thus intuit them, even without senses, consequently [would require] that we have a faculty of cognition entirely distinct from the human not merely in degree but even in intuition and in kind, and thus that we ought to be not humans but beings that we cannot even say are possible, let alone how they are constituted. (KrV A277-278/B333-334)⁴⁴

This passage makes clear that Kant sees a connection between the thesis that we cannot have cognition of what is “absolutely internal” in phenomenal substance and the nature of our human power of cognition. To suppose that we might have insight into “the inner in things”, he holds, would require supposing that we have, not a finite, sensibly-conditioned power of cognition, but another sort of power altogether, “an understanding through whose representation the objects of this representation would at the same time exist” (KrV B139). Given that we do not have such an infinite understanding, we can only aspire to an ever more “comparatively internal” cognition of things – a cognition of how

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⁴⁴ In the notes to their translation of the first *Critique*, Guyer and Wood suggest that the italicized remark is a misquotation of a 1732 poem by Viktor Albrecht von Haller (1998, p. 735n111). I do not know the grounds for the attribution, but whatever the source of Kant’s phrase, this “complaint” has an older lineage. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, who generally attempts to follow Aristotle in his account of our knowledge of the natural world, holds that “substantial forms [are] in themselves unknown to us” and are only “known by their accidents” (*Summa Theologica* 1a.q77.a1 ad 7). Aquinas holds that the sensible nature of our cognition prevents us from ever knowing the essences of things, although our cognition may asymptotically approach such knowledge “from below,” so to speak. In these respects, Aquinas’s view seems not far from Kant’s, but Kant takes the point to have consequences for our very entitlement to employ such notions as essence, substantial form, etc. This is yet another comparison that I think would be worth pursuing, but that I cannot pursue here.
their more immediate sensible features and effects reflect more basic powers we hypothesize them to possess (cp. KrV A651/B679, MM 29:771-772). But this cognition will always itself “consist of outer relations,” and thus can never be a cognition of “the transcendental object... which might be the ground of this appearance that we call matter.” Kant’s thought seems to be that the powers we posit in matter must ultimately be characterized in terms of their sensible effects, effects exhibited in the outer relations of a given phenomenal substance to other such substances, and ultimately to our senses. But through such cognition, he holds, we can never reach the ground of such powers, which would be to cognize what is absolutely internal in them.45

Kant thus sees a close connection between the two modern philosophical tendencies noted above: the new focus on how cognition is possible for us and the rejection of Aristotelian ideas about nature. He holds that careful reflection on the former issue mandates the latter step. And he thinks this holds true for reasons of principle: not merely because empirical observation does not bear out the Aristotelian world view, but because it could not. Moreover, he draws this conclusion while retaining a deep sympathy for the Aristotelian conception of what fully systematic cognition would be. For as we learn in the Transcendental Dialectic of the first Critique, the demand that our cognition should reach, beyond what finite cognition can supply, to the ultimate grounds of things – where the structure of such perfect cognition is conceived, in crucial respects, along lines that will be familiar to readers of Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics – this demand derives from the nature of reason itself, and that is to say, from what cognition in itself aims to be.46 This makes Kant’s position particularly interesting for someone sympathetic to Aristotelian ways of thinking about the natural world; for it amounts to a particularly principled and comprehending challenge to such ways of thinking. Our next task is to grasp the basis of this challenge.

45 Thus he is recorded as saying in one of his lectures on metaphysics:

The real essence is not the essence of the concept, but rather of the matter. E.g., the predicate of impenetrability belongs to the existence of body. Now I observe through experience much that belongs to its existence; e.g., extension in space, resistance against other bodies, etc. The inner ground of all this is the nature of the thing. We can infer the inner principle only from the properties known to us; therefore the real essence of a thing is inscrutable to us, although we cognize many essential aspects. We become acquainted with the powers of things bit by bit in experience. (ML2 28:553, cp. also MM 29:771-2)

46 See my “Kant on Logic and the Laws of Understanding” for further discussion.
3.3 Why should the finite, sensible character of our cognition rule out our knowing what is “absolutely inner” in things?

The basic reason, I think, turns on an incompatibility between what cognition of the absolutely inner in things would need to be and what sensibly-conditioned cognition can be. Cognition of the absolutely inner in things would be a cognition of the basic mode of being from which their further necessary attributes follow. It would be a cognition “from principles” in the sense that it would be cognition that does not hypothesize a unity of various perceived attributes and dispositions of a thing, but that begins from a cognition of the principle that necessitates the unity of these attributes and dispositions (cp. KrV A301/B358). This is what would be needed for a cognition of the “nature in the formal sense” of a thing, for such a nature must be “the first inner principle of all that belongs to the existence of a thing” (MN 4:467). And this does seem to capture what, in the Aristotelian tradition, knowledge of the forms of natural substances was supposed to be: it was supposed to be knowledge of the governing principle of their being, both in the sense that they would be the ultimate causes the necessary features of such substances, and in the sense that they would be rationally (though indeed not temporally) prior in the order of cognition to the more immediate sensible traits of such things. According to Kant, however, a finite, sensibly-conditioned intellect cannot know such forms.

47 "Attribute" is Kant’s technical term for a property that belong to the essence of a thing not as a ground, but as a consequence of more basic features of its essence: cp. JL 9:61, Discovery 8:229, ML2 28:553. Attributes in this sense are to be distinguished from accidental modes and relations that pertain to a given subject only contingently.

My understanding of how Kant thinks about cognition of the absolutely inner in things is indebted to a provocative paper by Houston Smit that connects Kant’s understanding of a priori cognition with the idea of cognition “from grounds.” According to Smit:

Our cognizing a thing ... a priori would ... consist in our cognizing it from its nature, in the formal sense—that is, ‘the first inner principle of everything that belongs to the being [Dasein] of a thing’—in determining the dynamical constitution that constitutes its being as a thing. For example, to cognize gold a priori would be to cognize the necessity with which its malleability, density, etc. follow from its nature. We cognize something a priori, then, when we cognize it in and through a rational perception of the way in which its nature or essence determines, so as to necessitate, its essential properties. (Smit 2009, p. 207)

My thought, in effect, is that Kant rejects the idea that we might know the forms of natural things “in themselves” because such knowledge would need to take the shape Smit species, and Kant holds that we can have such knowledge only of a form whose ground lies in us.

The reason for this comes out if we focus once again on how the form-matter distinction relates to the logical distinction between subject and predicate. Kant follows the Aristotelian logical tradition in conceiving of judgment (what Aristotle calls “assertion”, *apophansis*) as, in the fundamental case, an act of bringing a subject under a predicate. A judgment asserts “something of something,” where the subject is that about which the judgment is made, and the predicate, in the basic case in which the judgment expresses a genuine advance in cognition, “is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it,” thus “determining” the subject (KrV A598/B626, cp. Bix-x). Moreover, Kant holds specific views about how this logical structure in judgment is related to the nature of our cognition. The connection he sees comes out in many places, but perhaps most clearly in an important Reflexion:

We are acquainted with [kennen] any object only through predicates that we say or think of it. Antecedently, that which is to be met with in us is to be counted only as materials [Materialien: another word for “matter”] of representation, not as cognition. Thus an object is only a something in general, which we think to ourselves through certain predicates that constitute its concept. (R4634 17:616)

This remark sheds light on what Kant means when he says, in a more well-known passage, that our understanding can “make no other use of concepts than to judge by means of them” and that concepts therefore can be characterized as “predicates of possible judgments” (KrV A69/B94). The point is not merely that concepts are representations that can appear as predicates of possible judgments; it is that the fundamental nature of our concepts is to be understood in terms of their role in this position – i.e., in further determining an already given cognition of an object. This is confirmed in crucial passages of the Amphiboly chapter:

The understanding... demands first that something be given (at least in the concept) in order to be able to determine it in a certain way. Hence in the concept of pure understanding matter precedes form. (KrV A267/B323)

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49 For illuminating discussion of Kant's conception of judgment, see Engstrom 2006, esp. pp. 12-14. The applicability of the subject-predicate analysis is most evident in the case of categorical judgments, but Kant also applies it to the kinds of cognitive acts expressed in hypothetical and disjunctive judgments. For helpful discussion of how Kant generalizes the idea of subject-predicate structure beyond the categorical case, see Longuenesse 1998, Ch. 4, esp. pp. 85-93.

50 Adickes dates this note to 1772-1775, during the “silent decade” before Kant published the first *Critique*. I will shortly give evidence that the view expressed persists into the Critical period.

51 Shortly after saying this, Kant points out that there is a sense in which form can precede matter even for our understanding. I will discuss this sense in §3.4. I do not think it interferes with the point I am
The finitude of our understanding consists in just this: that it can only determine a given object, not represent in a way that itself grounds the determination of the object represented.

Now, an Aristotelian substantial form would, as we noted, be a way of being that grounded the being of the substance it informed. It would thus be a universal that must be thought “always as subject, never merely as predicate” in respect of the substance in question: that, in effect, is what we saw at the end of §2.1, when we observed that it must stand in a pre-predicative unity with the matter of such a substance. But then to know such a form would be to cognize a sort of universal that does not presuppose a given object to which it applies. It would be to cognize an object-constituting universal, or what Kant in the third Critique calls a “synthetic universal”:

Our understanding ... has the property that in its cognition ... it must go from the analytic universal (of concepts) to the particular (of the given empirical intuition), whereby it determines nothing with regard to the manifoldness of the latter, but must expect this determination for the power of judgment from the subsumption of the empirical intuition ... under the concept. We can, however, also conceive of an understanding that, since it is intuitive, not discursive like ours, goes from the synthetic universal (of the intuition of the whole as a such-and-such) to the particular – that is, from the whole to the parts. [In such an understanding], and in its representation of the whole, there is therefore no contingency in the combination of the parts by which a determinate form of the whole is made possible... In accordance with the constitution of our understanding, by contrast, a real whole of nature is to be regarded only as the effect of the concurrent moving forces of the parts. (KU §77, 5:407).

The form of an Aristotelian natural substance would be just such a real whole that was not merely the effect, but the cause, of the unity of its parts – a whole in virtue of which the combination of those parts was not contingent. It would indeed depend on matter in the sense that it could not play this active, governing role except by informing some matter of an appropriate sort. But the relevant matter would be merely potentiality to this sort of form: it would not be something that might be given independently of this “determination.”

Kant maintains that to imagine that we might know such forms is to imagine that we might have the sort of cognition of which only an infinite understanding is capable. It is of course to imagine this without fully grasping what is being imagined: Aristotle surely does not mean to deny that our cognitive power is sensibly-conditioned. But that is making here.
precisely Kant’s complaint: that the Aristotelian conception of our cognition credits us confusedly with a kind of knowledge of things that, as finite knowers, we could not really possess.52

3.4 Kant nevertheless maintains that we do possess a kind of formal cognition of empirically-given things. He holds, however, that this formal cognition has its ground in the nature of our own cognitive power, and for just this reason, has a more limited significance in respect of the being of the things to which it pertains. Seeing this is, I believe, the key to understanding his interiorization of the form/matter contrast.

Consider again the remark quoted in the epigraph: “In form resides the essence of the thing ... so far as this is to be known by reason” (Tone 8:404). The qualification here spells out Kant’s view of what formal cognition would need to be: it would need to be cognition of a thing not by applying concepts of understanding to determine a sensibly-given object, but through the higher power of cognition, reason, “the faculty of principles,” by which we “cognize the particular in the universal through concepts,” independently of experience (KrV A300/B357). Now, Kant regards it as his own great achievement to have explained how, and within what limits, we can have such cognition. It is indeed the case that our understanding “demands first that something be given (at least in the concept) in order to be able to determine it in a certain way” (KrV A267/B323). But it does not follow that, for our understanding, given matter must precede all form. Kant takes “intellectualist philosophers” like Leibniz to assume this because they fail to appreciate the essential contribution of sensibility to our cognition. But their conclusion does not follow, since

sensible intuition is a wholly particular subjective condition, which is the a priori ground of all perception, and the form of which is original. Hence the form is given for itself alone, and so far is it from being the case that the matter (or the things themselves that appear) should be the ground (as one would have to judge according to mere concepts), that rather their possibility presupposes a formal intuition (space and time) as given. (KrV A268/B324)

What makes it possible for us to have a formal cognition of objects, in other words, is the fact that our power of sensible intuition itself has forms, space and time, which, when

52 A fuller consideration of this issue would shed light, I think, on Kant’s doubts about whether the concept of a living thing or “natural end” can be a constitutive concept for the understanding, rather than merely one that regulates its cognition. Cp. KU §§64–66, MN 4:544.
unified under the pure concepts of understanding, constitute a “formal intuition” that amounts to an immediate, nondiscursive cognition of objects *qua* intuitable by us.

I think we should hear the phrase “formal intuition” here as crediting us with something remarkable – an intuitive cognition of form, the sort of thing an infinite intellect would have and that Aristotle takes us to have through *noûs*. What makes this cognition possible for us, however, is precisely the fact that the relevant form pertains, not to the being of objects *per se*, but to their being *qua* knowable for us. This is still, in a sense, an object-constituting cognition; for as we noted in §2.3, it is not a cognition that determines an antecedently-given subject, but a pre-predicative cognition that constitutes of sensible matter a subject susceptible of determination in judgment at all. Thus Kant can say that this transcendental form is “not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object, but rather something under which every intuition must stand *in order to become an object for me*” (KrV B138). Nevertheless, this is not an object-constituting cognition in the sense in which knowledge of an Aristotelian form would be cognition of something object-constituting. For this transcendental form does not ground the being of the object in itself, but merely its being *qua* object of sensible cognition. It pertains, in short, merely to “appearances.” Hence the study of the forms of things, so far as they are knowable by us, cannot at the same time be what Aristotelians had supposed it to be, namely, a study that is under another aspect the science of being simply *qua* being. Thus, at the end of the constructive part of the first *Critique*, Kant summarizes his accomplishment as follows:

> The Transcendental Analytic has accordingly this important result: that the understanding can never accomplish more *a priori* than to anticipate the form of a possible experience in general, and, since that which is not appearance cannot be an object of experience: that the limits of sensibility, within which alone an object can be given to us, can never be overstepped. [The understanding’s] principles are mere principles of the exposition of experiences, and the proud name of an ontology that claims to provide, in a systematic doctrine, *synthetic* *a priori* cognitions of things in general, ... must make way for the humble [label] of a mere analytic of the pure understanding. (A247/B303)

4. **Conclusion: Kantian humility**

4.1 This essay grows, in part, out of an ongoing struggle to understand Kant’s notion of a thing “in itself.” Something I have learned in trying to teach the first *Critique* is that
there is no getting round this notion. One wants to bring out the incredible richness of Kant’s thought, the profundity of his reflections on the nature of space and time, on the subject-matter of logic, on the necessary relation between mind and world, etc. But all this is bound up with his claim that the things we know are appearances, not things in themselves; and minds are drawn toward this claim like moths toward a lamp, though they will surely be immolated if they touch it.

Confronted with this morbid tendency in myself and others, I find that – to switch metaphors entirely – I start to behave like a mob lawyer. On the one hand, I argue with great scrupulousness that none of the well-known charges against the thing in itself can be proved. “In themselves,” I argue, means something so recondite and specific that it should be uncontentious that, is this sense, we do not know things in themselves. On the other hand, I find myself wondering, when I go home at night, whether I haven’t betrayed the ideals that led me into my profession, while also feeling uneasily that I am already in this too deep to get out.

Even if we want, at the end of the day, to reject Kant’s claim that our cognition does not extend to things in themselves, we should want an account of what this claim means that makes it genuinely significant and genuinely attractive. Kant famously claims that

if we view the objects of the senses as mere appearances, … then we thereby admit at the very same time that a thing in itself underlies them, although we are not acquainted with this thing as it may be constituted in itself, but only with its appearance, i.e., with the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something. (PM §32, 4:314-5, cp. KrV Bxvi-xxvii).

Kant thus appears to hold that we must allow that things in themselves exist, but that any such thing must remain for us a mere “something we know not what” (“= X”, as he sometimes writes). And Kant famously claims of space and time, the formal structures in which sensible appearances are presented, not merely that we cannot know them to pertain to things in themselves, but that we can know that they do not pertain to things in themselves (KrV A28/B44, A36/B52). What could these claims mean?

4.2 In an important recent study of Kant’s views on things in themselves, Rae Langton has argued that Kant’s “humility” – his claim that we have no knowledge of things in themselves – is best understood as the claim that
**Humility:** We have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of substances.

and that this Humility thesis is supposed to follow somehow from another thesis:

**Receptivity:** Human knowledge depends on sensibility, and sensibility is receptive:
we can have knowledge of an object only in so far as it affects us.

perhaps together with further premises (cp. Langton 1998, Chapter 2). I think Langton
shows convincingly that this is the general shape of Kant’s thinking, and I think her
recasting of the question about our knowledge of things in themselves in terms of our
knowledge of the intrinsic properties of substances is persuasive and illuminating.

Langton’s own conception of an intrinsic property, however, derives from contemporary
analytic metaphysics: an intrinsic property is, roughly, one whose holding of a thing does
not imply that any other thing exists – a property compatible, as Langton puts it, with

I think this is anachronistic. My tentative suggestion in this paper has been that
the conception of an intrinsic property of a substance relevant to understanding Kant’s
claim that we do not know things in themselves is a conception that descends from
Aristotle. On this conception, what is intrinsic to a substance is the mode of being we
advert to in saying what it is for that substance to be at all – the mode of being that
constitutes its form or essence. I have tried in the foregoing to sketch a line of thought
leading from the idea that our cognition is receptive to the conclusion that we cannot
know the forms of things in this sense, and that the forms through which we do know
things must have a different sort of ground.  

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53 I’m indebted to Ian Blecher for conversation that provided a crucial stimulus to this paper.
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