

# *Kant's Distinction between Reasons and Causes Based on Engels' View*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates whether Immanuel Kant distinguishes between reasons (Gründe) and causes (Ursachen) within his transcendental philosophy, and how Friedrich Engels' critique of Kant's thing-in-itself thesis engages with this distinction. Kant explicitly separates the logical domain of reasons—pertaining to justification and rational grounding—from the causal domain of natural necessity, which belongs to phenomenal appearances. However, his agnosticism about the thing-in-itself blurs this distinction when extended to metaphysics. Drawing on recent Kant scholarship, this paper shows that Kant's distinction is analytically robust but ontologically limited. Engels, by contrast, appeals to practical activity (experiment and industry) to refute Kant's unknowable thing-in-itself, thereby demonstrating that reasons and causes are unified in successful human action. The paper reconstructs Engels' critique, addresses misunderstandings by Chernov and Lukács, and concludes that while Kant provides a powerful analytical distinction, Engels' practical materialism offers a compelling dialectical synthesis.

## 1. Introduction

One of the perennial questions in Kant scholarship is whether Kant distinguishes between reasons (grounds for belief or action, anchored in logic and rationality) and causes (efficient causes in the natural world). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously separates the domain of freedom (where reason operates) from the domain of nature (governed by causality). Yet within theoretical philosophy, Kant holds that all empirical events have causes, but reasons belong to the spontaneity of the understanding and reason. For Kant, a reason is a ground of justification (e.g., “I think therefore I am”), while a cause is a category of the understanding that connects appearances in time. He does not reduce reasons to causes, nor does he conflate them.

This distinction, however, is not merely a matter of terminology. It reflects Kant's deeper commitment to the irreducibility of logical normativity to natural mechanism. To give a reason for a belief is to stand within the space of justification, where one can be held rationally accountable. To cite a cause of an event is to situate it within the deterministic order of nature. The two belong to different “worlds” within Kant's critical system—the world of the understanding and the world of sense—yet they intersect in the act of judgment. When a scientist says, “The heating of the water is the cause of its boiling,” the statement is empirical. When the scientist then says, “The reason I believe this is that I observed a constant conjunction under controlled conditions,” the latter is a

rational justification. For Kant, the justification is not itself a cause of the belief in the psychological sense; rather, it is a normative ground.

However, his doctrine of the thing-in-itself—the unknowable noumenal ground of appearances—raises a critical question: can reasons reach the thing-in-itself, or are they confined to the phenomenal realm? This paper argues that while Kant analytically distinguishes reasons and causes, his agnosticism about the thing-in-itself prevents reason from knowing ultimate grounds. Engels, by contrast, uses practice to bridge this gap, showing that reasons (as human justifications) and causes (as natural laws) are unified in successful action. As we shall see, recent Kant scholarship has deepened our understanding of this distinction<sup>[1]</sup>, but also revealed its tensions. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss Kant’s analytical insight but to test its limits against the materialist critique grounded in human practice.

Engels’ lifelong engagement with Kant’s thing-in-itself thesis provides a unique lens through which to examine this distinction. From his early writings in 1841 to *Anti-Dühring* (1878) and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), Engels criticized Kant’s claim that we cannot know things as they are in themselves. For Engels, the thing-in-itself is not an eternal barrier but a problem solved by human practice. In what follows, I first reconstruct Kant’s distinction between reasons and causes with the help of contemporary commentators, then present Engels’ critique, and finally defend Engels against misinterpretations. Throughout, I pay close attention to the way that practice reframes the epistemological significance of the reasons-causes distinction.

## 2. Kant’s Distinction between Reasons and Causes: An Analytical Reconstruction

Kant’s critical philosophy rests on a sharp separation between the logical space of reasons and the causal order of nature. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the category of causality is one of the pure concepts of the understanding, applicable only to appearances. A cause, for Kant, is an object that determines another object in time according to a rule. Causes are part of the deterministic framework of nature. Reasons, by contrast, belong to the spontaneity of the understanding and reason. The principle of sufficient reason (*principium rationis sufficientis*) is not the same as the principle of causality: the first is logical, the second is transcendental.

As Henry Allison (2015) argues<sup>[1]</sup>, Kant’s distinction between *ratio* and *causa* is fundamental to his anti-Humean strategy. Hume reduced causality to habitual association; Kant restores it as an a priori condition of experience. Yet Kant insists that “the connection of causes and effects is a condition of the possibility of experience”. Reasons, however, are not conditions of experience but conditions of justification. When we say “A is the reason for B” in logic, we are not describing a temporal sequence but a grounding relation. Paul Guyer emphasizes that Kant’s transcendental idealism requires that reasons for the applicability of categories cannot themselves be causal<sup>[2]</sup>. This is why the “I think” must accompany all representations: the unity of apperception is a logical, not a physical, condition.

To appreciate the depth of Kant’s distinction, one must consider the role of judgment. For Kant, judgment is the act of subsuming a particular under a rule. The rule itself can be a causal law (e.g., “every change has a cause”) or a logical principle (e.g., the principle of contradiction). When a judge gives a legal verdict, she gives a reason; when a billiard ball moves another, it exerts a cause. The two orders are incommensurable. Kant’s famous example from the Second Analogy illustrates the difference in the empirical realm: the perception of a house involves a succession of representations that could be reversed, but the perception of a ship moving downstream involves an irreversible order, which we attribute to a cause<sup>[4]</sup>. The reason we call something a cause is

grounded in the a priori rule of the understanding. Thus, reasons justify causal judgments, but reasons themselves are not causes. This is an analytic distinction that Kant never abandons.

However, the thing-in-itself complicates this picture. Kant claims that things-in-themselves affect our sensibility, producing appearances. But “affection” is a causal notion. How can a noumenon cause an appearance without violating the limitation of causality to the phenomenal realm? Karl Ameriks notes that Kant struggles to avoid noumenal causality[3]. For if the thing-in-itself is not a cause, then the origin of sensations remains mysterious. Yet if it is a cause, we have applied a category beyond its legitimate bounds. This is the famous “Jacobi objection”: without the thing-in-itself, we cannot enter the system; with it, we cannot stay.

For our purposes, the crucial point is that Kant’s distinction between reasons and causes is internal to the phenomenal realm. Within appearances, we can give reasons for causal claims. But regarding the thing-in-itself, we can give no reasons at all—neither a reason to assert that it exists (except as a boundary concept) nor a reason to assert that it has specific properties. As Kant writes: “We can have no knowledge whatsoever of any object as a thing-in-itself, but only insofar as it is an object of sensible intuition”[4]. Thus, the distinction between reasons and causes, while clear within transcendental philosophy, collapses into agnosticism at the boundary of the noumenal.

### 3. The Fundamental Problem of Philosophy and Kant’s Thing-in-Itself

Engels, in Ludwig Feuerbach, states: “The great fundamental question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is the relation of thinking and being”[5]. This question has both ontological and epistemological aspects. Kant’s thing-in-itself thesis is the linchpin of his answer: we can know only appearances, not things as they are independently of our sensibility. Kant’s reasoning rests on the idea that space and time are a priori forms of intuition, and the categories (including causality) apply only to phenomena.

Engels recognized that Kant’s agnosticism stems from what we now call the “egocentric predicament”: we cannot compare our sensory impressions with things as they are outside the cognitive relation. This predicament is not merely a logical puzzle; it is a deep methodological assumption that shapes Kant’s entire critical project. By beginning with the subjective forms of intuition and categories, Kant effectively places the knowing subject at the center of the epistemic universe. Everything we know is mediated by these forms, and we have no direct access to a pre-formed world. The price of this Copernican turn is the permanent relegation of the thing-in-itself to the status of an unknowable X.

Kant’s Copernican Revolution—objects conform to our knowledge—reinforces this predicament. However, Engels argues that this difficulty arises only from a reflective, contemplative attitude. He writes: “Before people argue, they already act. ‘In the beginning was action’” [6]. Action, including scientific experiment and industrial production, directly engages with things-in-themselves. Engels does not deny that we have sense impressions; rather, he insists that the test of the truth of those impressions lies not in a transcendent comparison but in the successful transformation of the world.

Consider the distinction between reasons and causes here. For Kant, a reason is a logical ground for asserting a proposition (e.g., “this effect has a cause”). A cause is a real relation between events. In the phenomenal world, reasons can track causes. But Kant denies that we can have reasons for asserting anything about the thing-in-itself. Engels counters that when we successfully transform a substance—such as synthesizing alizarin from coal tar—our practical success provides a reason to believe we have known the thing-in-itself. The cause (chemical reaction) and the reason (scientific explanation) coincide in practice. Thus, Engels collapses the Kantian gap: what is unknowable in principle becomes known in action.

#### 4. Egocentric Predicament and Action First

Engels' critique of the egocentric predicament is both epistemological and methodological. The agnostic says: "All our knowledge is based upon the information imparted to us by our senses. But how do we know that our senses give us the correct reflection of the things they perceive?" [6]. This argument seems difficult to refute by mere reasoning. But Engels insists that "the fiction of the difficulty was made by human intellect, long before human action solved it."

Here, Engels anticipates later pragmatist and practice-based epistemologies. By grounding knowledge in action, he shows that the distinction between reasons and causes is not an insurmountable divide. When we act on things and successfully produce desired outcomes, we have both a cause (the transformation) and a reason (the success) to claim knowledge. As Lenin later put it, "the viewpoint of practice is the first and fundamental viewpoint of dialectical materialist epistemology"[7].

This practical turn directly addresses the Kantian limitation. For Kant, reasons can only operate within the phenomenal realm, and causes are only applicable there. The thing-in-itself is a reminder of our finitude. For Engels, human practice continually expands the phenomenal realm, transforming unknown things-in-themselves into known things-for-us. The distinction between reasons and causes is real but not absolute; it is a distinction within knowledge, not a barrier to knowledge.

To make this argument more concrete, consider the history of chemistry. Before the synthesis of alizarin from coal tar, the chemical structure of the dye was a thing-in-itself—a problem and a target of research. After successful synthesis, chemists could not only describe the molecular structure but also produce the substance on demand. In this process, the causal mechanisms became transparent, and the reasons for accepting the molecular formula became overwhelming. Engels' point is that the "in-itself" of yesterday is the "for-us" of today. There is no fixed noumenal realm that forever resists human cognition; there are only problems not yet solved by practice.

#### 5. Kant's Response: Practice Overcome the Transcendental Limit

A Kantian might respond that Engels misses the transcendental force of Kant's distinction. Even if we successfully transform coal tar into alizarin, we are still dealing with appearances. The thing-in-itself remains the ground of the appearance, but we never encounter it directly. As Guyer [2]. argues, Kant distinguishes between phenomena (appearances as objects of possible experience) and noumena (things considered independently of the conditions of sensibility). Practical success does not give us intellectual intuition; we still have only sensible intuition.

But is this objection decisive? Engels could reply that the concept of "appearance" presupposes something that appears, but if we can systematically manipulate the appearance and predict its behavior with unlimited accuracy, the residual notion of an unknowable "in-itself" becomes an empty cognitive placeholder. In the language of modern philosophy of science, it is a theoretical entity that does no explanatory work. Engels anticipates this by insisting that the thing-in-itself "adds nothing to our scientific knowledge"[8].

Allison reinforces the epistemic reading of transcendental idealism[1]. The thing-in-itself is not a separate metaphysical entity but a way of considering objects abstracted from the conditions of human sensibility. On this reading, Kant might agree with Engels that we can know more and more about objects through empirical research, but he would insist that we never know them as they are "in themselves" because the very concept of an object is already tied to the forms of intuition. Thus, the distinction between reasons and causes is preserved: we have reasons for causal claims about appearances, but no possible reason to make claims about the thing-in-itself.

Nevertheless, a nuanced position allows for a synthesis. One can accept that our knowledge is always mediated by sensory and conceptual forms (as Kant argues) while denying that this mediation implies a permanent unknowable residue. This is the route taken by many post-Kantian philosophers, including Hegel and Engels, though Engels is more cautious. For Engels, the thing-in-itself is a limit concept that recedes with the progress of science, not a fixed ontological boundary.

Engels' reply, implicit in his writings, is that the Kantian "in itself" is an empty abstraction. If all our successful interventions in the world yield consistent, predictive, and transformative knowledge, then the gap between appearance and thing-in-itself becomes a relic of scholastic philosophy. As he writes in *Dialectics of Nature*, "the thing-in-itself is a product of fantasy" once we have demonstrated practical knowledge[8]. This pragmatic rejection of the noumenal is the core of Engels' materialist epistemology.

## 6. Dogmatism, Practice, and the Reasons-Causes Distinction

Engels' critique was attacked by the Russian Machist V. Chernov, who accused Engels of dogmatism—insisting on knowing the thing-in-itself without sufficient proof. Chernov mocked Engels' alizarin example as an "unheard-of discovery." Lenin, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), defended Engels, showing that Engels had transformed Kant's "unknowable" into "unknown," thereby making the thing-in-itself a provisional concept. From a practical standpoint, the transformation of the unknown into the known is exactly what scientific progress achieves.

The charge of dogmatism fails because Engels does not rely on pure reason but on practice. As he writes: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating"[5]. Here, the distinction between reasons and causes becomes less a metaphysical divide and more a functional distinction within inquiry. When we act successfully, our practical reasons for belief are grounded in real causal processes. The skeptic who demands a further guarantee—that our successful practice might still be systematically deluded—asks for a standard of certainty that even Kant did not claim to provide.

Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), claimed that Engels misunderstood practice by identifying it with experiment and industry, which he deemed "contemplative" under capitalism. Lukács's argument was that capitalist industry turns the worker into a passive object of natural laws, not an active subject. However, Lukács later retracted this view, admitting that industrial labor is indeed practical action.[9] Thus, even from a Hegelian-Marxist perspective, Engels' emphasis on practice vindicates the unity of reasons and causes.

Why did Lukács initially deny the practical character of experiment and industry? His reasoning was that experiment creates an artificial, controlled environment that eliminates the "irrational" factors of real life, thereby reducing the subject to a merely contemplative observer. This misconstrues the nature of experimental activity. Building an experiment requires active intervention, hypothesis testing, material manipulation, and iterative redesign. None of these are contemplative. The experimenter does not merely watch; she builds, measures, and modifies. Lukács's later self-criticism acknowledged this error, and his retraction stands as an important confirmation of Engels' original position.

Ameriks offers a third perspective: Kant's distinction between reasons and causes might be defensible within a modest transcendental framework, but Engels' critique shows that Kant overextends the unknowability claim[3]. If we can demonstrate causal knowledge through intervention, then we have reasons to assert knowledge of the thing-in-itself—not as an intellectual intuition, but as a regulative ideal of science. This synthesis respects Kant's analytical insight while accepting Engels' practical challenge.

To further clarify: the regulative ideal would be that science aims to reduce the unknown to the known. Engels agrees with this, but he goes further. He claims that the successful reduction is not merely a heuristic assumption but a demonstrated fact. When we synthesize a new chemical compound, we have crossed the boundary from the unknown to the known. The very distinction between “for us” and “in itself” becomes a historical distinction, not a permanent ontological one. This is the dialectical materialist reply to transcendental agnosticism.

## 7. Conclusion

So, are reasons and causes distinguished in Kant? Yes, unequivocally. Kant maintains a clear analytical separation: reasons belong to the logical space of justification, causes to the phenomenal order of nature. This distinction is a cornerstone of his transcendental idealism. The thing-in-itself, however, lies beyond both—it is not an object of possible experience, and thus neither reasons nor causes can be legitimately applied to it. In this sense, Kant’s distinction is both a strength and a limitation: a strength because it clarifies the difference between normative justification and natural causation; a limitation because it imprisons human knowledge within a phenomenal circle that can never be broken from within.

Engels, by contrast, argues that successful practice unites reasons and causes: we have good reasons to believe we know the thing-in-itself precisely because we can cause changes in it. Thus, Engels does not deny the distinction; rather, he shows that in materialist epistemology, the distinction is not an insurmountable barrier. The thing-in-itself becomes a thing-for-us through action. This conclusion not only refutes Kantian agnosticism but also provides a foundation for dialectical materialism.

By integrating recent Kant scholarship[1][2][3], we can see that the debate is not simply about the existence of the thing-in-itself, but about the limits of human reason. Kant’s distinction between reasons and causes captures a deep feature of our epistemic condition: justification and causation are not identical. However, Engels’ appeal to practice shows that this distinction does not entail agnosticism. On the contrary, human history demonstrates an ever-expanding circle of known objects. The thing-in-itself is not a wall but a horizon—and we are walking toward it.

The philosophical significance of this argument extends beyond the Marx-Kant debate. It raises the question of how any transcendental philosophy should relate to the empirical sciences and to human practice. If Kant’s critical system is to remain relevant, it must engage with the fact that practice generates knowledge that cannot be captured by a purely contemplative theory of justification. Whether that engagement leads to a revision of transcendental idealism or a reinterpretation of Engels’ materialism is a question for future research. What is clear, however, is that the distinction between reasons and causes-while real-does not imply a permanent separation between the known and the unknown.

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