

The Relevance of the Incognoscibility of Kant's Things in Themselves for Modern Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract: This article develops a systematic application of Kant's doctrine of *things in themselves* to the practice of modern philosophical counseling. Building on my earlier reconstruction of Kant's transcendental metaphysics,¹ which draws on Anja Jauernig's² two-level ontology, I argue that the structural incognoscibility of *things in themselves* offers a productive normative-epistemic framework for counseling practice. Recent discussions in *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* have examined Kant's relevance for contemporary practical contexts, including autonomy in education³ and the ethics of duty in interpersonal relations, in Petkanič's terms.⁴ Extending this line of inquiry, I propose that the Kantian limit-concept of *the thing in itself*, properly understood, prevents dogmatic metaphysical claims about the client's essence and fosters epistemic humility in the counseling relationship. The article proceeds in four stages: first, I reconstruct the incognoscibility thesis using Jauernig's interpretation and my own account; second, I introduce the analogy between constructivist theories of visual perception and self-knowledge in counseling; third, I translate incognoscibility into normative principles for counseling practice; fourth, I develop concrete applications showing how respecting structural opacity protects client autonomy and resists paternalism.

Key words: Kant, *Things in themselves*, Incognoscibility, Philosophical counseling, Epistemic humility, Autonomy

¹ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*. București: Cartea Românească Educațional.

² Jauernig, A., 2021. *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ Marques, J. O. A., 2025. Autonomy as the foundation of learning in Kant and Paulo Freire. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 14(2), pp. 5–21.

⁴ Petkanič, M., 2025. Kant's and Kierkegaard's Ethics of Duty. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 14(2), pp. 257–280.

Introduction

Philosophical counseling, as a practice distinct from psychotherapy and life coaching, aims to help clients achieve conceptual clarity about their beliefs, values, and life-orienting commitments through sustained dialogue. Yet this dialogical practice confronts a fundamental tension: clients often seek definitive answers about who they truly are, what they should do, or what their lives ultimately mean, while the counselor must resist the temptation to provide metaphysical certainties that exceed the bounds of what can be known. Recent work in *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* has explored Kant's continued relevance for understanding autonomy in pedagogical contexts,⁵ the ethics of duty and respect for the moral law,⁶ moral formation as cultivation of self-legislative capacity,⁷ and the application of Kant's peace project to contemporary conflict resolution.⁸ Building on this reconstructive approach to Kant's practical philosophy, I argue that Kant's doctrine of *things in themselves* – specifically, the thesis of their structural incognoscibility – offers a principled solution to the counselor's dilemma.

My central claim is that the incognoscibility of *things in themselves*, when properly reconstructed, yields a normative-epistemic stance that should guide philosophical counselors in their work with clients. This stance has three components: (1) epistemic humility regarding what can be known about the client's ultimate grounds (motives, history, capacities); (2) respect for the opacity of the other as a limit-condition of ethical engagement; (3) resistance to paternalistic “insights” that presume transparent access to the client's essence. In my previous work, I have developed a systematic interpretation of Kant's *things in themselves* that emphasizes their role as transcendental grounds of experience which remain structurally beyond the reach of human cognition.⁹ Here, I will try to extend that account by showing how the logic of incognoscibility can be translated into the practice of philosophical counseling.

⁵ Marques, J. O. A., 2025. Autonomy as the foundation of learning in Kant and Paulo Freire, *ibid.*, pp. 237–249.

⁶ Petkanič, M., 2025. Kant's and Kierkegaard's Ethics of Duty, *ibid.*, pp. 257–280.

⁷ Miškocová, A., 2024. Moral formation in Kant's philosophy. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 13(2), pp. 227–244.

⁸ See Kupš, T., 2024. Kant's project of perpetual peace today. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 13(1), pp. 9–27. On the same topic, Šajda, P., 2024. Working for peace in situations of conflict: On Schmitt's reception of Kant. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana*, 13(1), pp. 28–44.

⁹ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, *ibid.*, pp. 10–16.

My paper is structured as follows:

Section 1: Kant's metaphysics of *things in themselves* – the reconstruction of the Kantian account of *things in themselves* and their incognoscibility, drawing on Jauernig's¹⁰ two-level ontology and my own interpretation¹¹). I distinguish structural incognoscibility (the *thing in itself* as a transcendental ground that cannot in principle be known) from contingent ignorance (empirical facts we do not yet know) and conceptual indeterminacy (vague or contested concepts).

Section 2: I develop an analogy between constructivist theories of visual perception – specifically, Gregory's¹² hypothesis model – and the structure of self-knowledge in counseling contexts. Just as visual perception is indirect, constructive, and fallible, so too is the client's self-understanding built from partial evidence, past experience, and revisable interpretations.

Section 3: I translate the incognoscibility thesis into normative principles for counseling: the principle of epistemic humility, the principle of non-appropriation of the other, and the principle of acknowledged opacity.

Section 4: I apply these principles to concrete counseling scenarios, showing how respecting incognoscibility protects autonomy, prevents dogmatism, and reframes the client's demand for absolute certainty. In the end, I offer a brief conclusion which summarizes my paper and suggests possible directions for future research.

1. Kant on Things in Themselves and the Incognoscibility Thesis

1.1. The Two-Level Ontology: Jauernig's Reconstruction

According to Anja Jauernig, Kant's "world" comprises two irreducible levels of reality: the transcendental level, which is mind-independent and contains *things in themselves*, and the empirical level, which is mind-dependent and contains appearances (or representations). These two levels are not merely epistemic perspectives on a single set of objects; rather, they are ontologically distinct domains – *things in themselves* and appear-

¹⁰ Jauernig, A., 2021. *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves*, *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹¹ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, *ibid.*, pp. 106–116.

¹² Gregory, R. L., 1974. Perceptions as hypotheses. In: Brown, S. C., ed. *Philosophy of Psychology*. London: Macmillan, pp. 195–210.

ances are numerically distinct entities that do not overlap.¹³

This two-level ontology has several key features relevant to the incognoscibility thesis. First, *things in themselves* are characterized negatively: they are not spatio-temporal, not subject to the categories of the understanding, and not accessible to human sensibility.¹⁴ Second, *things in themselves* play a positive causal-explanatory role in Kant's system: they affect our sensibility at the transcendental level, giving rise to sensations which provide the material input for empirical representations.¹⁵

Third, the human mind is fundamentally finite and non-creative; it possesses a passive component – sensibility – that produces representations only in response to being affected by objects external to itself.¹⁶ This finitude is the ultimate ground of the incognoscibility thesis: because human cognition requires both sensory intuition and conceptual synthesis, and because we possess only a sensible (not intellectual) intuition, things as they are in themselves remain beyond our cognitive reach.¹⁷

1.2. Incognoscibility: What Exactly Cannot Be Known

Building on Jauernig's framework, I propose a more precise formulation of the incognoscibility thesis. By "incognoscibility of *things in themselves*" I mean the following: *things in themselves* are structurally inaccessible to human cognitive faculties, because such access would require a non-sensible (intellectual) intuition that we do not possess.¹⁸ This structural inaccessibility must be distinguished from three other epistemic limitations:

1) contingent ignorance: there are many empirical facts we do not currently know (the precise number of stars in a distant galaxy, the detailed neurochemistry of a person's brain states) but could in principle discover through further empirical investigation. Contingent ignorance is overcome by extending our empirical inquiry; it poses no principled barrier to knowledge.

¹³ Jauernig, A., 2021. *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves*, *ibid.*, pp. 78–112.

¹⁴ KrV, A 249/B 306. All references to Kant's works are to the Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Reimer/de Gruyter, 1900–), cited by volume and page (AA), except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is cited by A- and B-edition page numbers.

¹⁵ KrV, A 19–20/B 33–34. See Jauernig, A., 2021. *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves*, *ibid.*, pp. 145–178.

¹⁶ KrV, A 51/B 75.

¹⁷ KrV, A 249–253/B 305–309.

¹⁸ KrV, A 249/B 306.

2) conceptual indeterminacy: certain concepts are vague, contested, or context-dependent (for instance “happiness,” “justice,” or “authentic self-expression”), and this vagueness generates interpretive disputes. Conceptual indeterminacy can sometimes be reduced through philosophical clarification, though some degree of contestability may remain ineliminable in normative domains.

3) structural incognoscibility: *the thing in itself* names the transcendental ground of empirical experience – the mind-independent reality that affects our sensibility and thereby grounds the existence of appearances. Because this ground operates at a level prior to the application of our cognitive forms (space, time, categories),¹⁹ it cannot be brought under those forms and thus cannot be known by us.²⁰ Structural incognoscibility is not a gap to be filled by future inquiry or conceptual refinement; it is an intrinsic limit of finite human cognition.

This distinction is crucial for the counseling application, because counseling does not aim to overcome structural incognoscibility (which is impossible), but to acknowledge it and work within its constraints. The client's ultimate grounds – the transcendental conditions of their experience, the noumenal substrate of their agency, the *thing in itself* dimension of their selfhood – remain permanently opaque. What counseling can address is the empirical self (the self as appearance, constituted by experiences, beliefs, values, and narratives) and the conceptual frameworks through which the client interprets their life. For that to happen, it is the counselor who must resist the temptation to claim access to a deeper metaphysical “true self” that transcends these empirical and conceptual layers.

1.3. The Positive Role of Incognoscibility: Humility, Moral Space, and Respect

One might object that incognoscibility is a purely negative doctrine – a confession of ignorance with no constructive content. Against this view, I argue,²¹ following Jauernig,²² that the incognoscibility thesis plays several positive roles in Kant's critical system:

¹⁹ KrV, A 251–252/B 306–307.

²⁰ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, ibid., pp. 118–145.

²¹ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, ibid., pp. 167–189.

²² Jauernig, A., 2021. *The World According to Kant: Appearances and Things in Themselves*, ibid., pp. 312–354.

- **epistemic humility**: recognizing the limits of human cognition prevents dogmatic metaphysics - the pretense to knowledge of supersensible reality (God, immortality, the soul as substance) that exceeds our cognitive capacity.²³ The incognoscibility thesis thus safeguards the critical subject by marking the boundary beyond which theoretical reason cannot legitimately venture.

- **moral space**: by placing *things in themselves* beyond the reach of theoretical cognition, Kant secures conceptual room for moral faith and practical postulates.²⁴ The moral law commands unconditionally, and this command presupposes freedom; yet freedom cannot be theoretically demonstrated if the self is exhaustively determined by natural causality. The distinction between appearances and *things in themselves* allows Kant to reconcile natural determinism (in the empirical domain) with transcendental freedom (at the noumenal level) without contradiction.²⁵

- **the respect for the other**: the incognoscibility of *the thing in itself* grounds a specific ethical attitude toward other persons. If the other's noumenal reality – their freedom, their moral agency, their ultimate grounds – is structurally inaccessible to me, then I am prohibited from treating the other as a fully transparent object of theoretical cognition. Respecting the other as an end in itself²⁶ requires acknowledging what I cannot know about them, not merely what I do know. This theme has been explored in recent Kantian scholarship on duty and interpersonal ethics,²⁷ and I propose extending it into the counseling context.

If we consider these positive rules, we can describe incognoscibility not a defect, but a foundational feature of Kant's critical philosophy, because it establishes the proper scope and limits of human knowledge, protects the space for moral agency, and grounds an ethics of epistemic humility and respect. Basically, these functions make the incognoscibility thesis a promising resource for modern philosophical counseling and might actually improve the relation between a client and his counselor.

²³ KrV, A 295–296/B 352–353.

²⁴ AA 5:3–4.

²⁵ KrV, A 532–558/B 560–586.

²⁶ AA 4:428–430.

²⁷ Petkanić, M., 2025. Kant's and Kierkegaard's Ethics of Duty, *ibid*.

2. From Visual Perception to Self-Knowledge: An Analogy

2.1. Constructivist Theories of Visual Perception

To bridge Kant's metaphysics and counseling practice, I propose an analogy between the structure of visual perception and the structure of self-knowledge,²⁸ by examining how Kant's two-level ontology can be applied to contemporary empiricist theories of visual perception, specifically the constructivist approach developed by Richard Gregory. Gregory's central claim is that perceptions are hypotheses: sensory receptors receive signals from the external environment, these signals trigger neural events, and the brain constructs perceptual interpretations by integrating sensory input with stored knowledge, past experience, and contextual expectations.²⁹

Several features of Gregory's model are relevant for our purposes. First, perception is indirect: we do not have unmediated access to external objects; rather, we construct internal representations based on partial and often ambiguous sensory cues. Second, perception is constructive: the brain actively generates interpretations that go beyond the raw sensory input, filling in missing information, anticipating movement, and disambiguating perceptual scenes. Third, perception is fallible: because it relies on hypotheses built from past experience, perception is vulnerable to illusions, ambiguity, and error.³⁰ Fourth, perception requires a basis: constructive processes presuppose some initial input that triggers hypothesis-formation. Gregory himself acknowledges the problem of identifying this "starting point" of perception – the ground-level stimulus that sets the constructive process in motion.³¹

In my reconstruction,³² I argued that introducing Kant's *things in themselves* can address Gregory's starting-point problem. *Things in themselves*, as transcendental grounds that affect sensibility, provide the ultimate basis for sensory input without being themselves part of the perceptual representation: they ground the existence of sensations (the "raw material" of perception) while remaining outside the constructive, hypothesis-driven

²⁸ Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, *ibid.*, pp. 210–248.

²⁹ Gregory, R. L., 1974. Perceptions as hypotheses, *ibid.*, pp. 181–197. See also Gordon, I. E., 2004. *Theories of Visual Perception* (3rd ed.). New York: Psychology Press, pp. 181–197.

³⁰ Gregory, R. L., 1974. Perceptions as hypotheses, *ibid.*, pp. 186–190. See also Gordon, I. E., 2004. *Theories of Visual Perception*, *ibid.*, pp. 128–131.

³¹ Gordon, I. E., 2004. *Theories of Visual Perception*, *ibid.*, pp. 132–135.

³² Ghinea, D., 2025. *Lucrurile în sine la Immanuel Kant: Perspective de interpretare și reconstrucție contemporane*, *ibid.*, pp. 235–242.

perceptual process. This move preserves Gregory's empirical account, while adding a transcendental layer that explains why there is sensory input at all.

2.2. Self-Knowledge in Counseling as a Constructive Process

The analogy to counseling seems to be straightforward for me. Just as visual perception is an indirect, constructive, fallible process of hypothesis-formation, so too is the client's self-knowledge an interpretive construction built from partial evidence, past experiences, and revisable narratives. He does not enjoy transparent introspective access to their own motives, values, or identity; rather, they assemble a self-understanding through interpretation, often guided by cultural narratives, emotional responses, and significant life events. This self-understanding is hypothesis-like: it is a provisional, contestable interpretation that can be revised in light of new evidence, alternative frameworks, or dialogical challenge.

Philosophical counseling, on this model, facilitates the client's constructive process, because the counselor helps the client examine the coherence of their self-narrative, question unexamined assumptions, explore alternative interpretations, and clarify the conceptual categories they use to make sense of their experience.³³ But – crucially – the counselor does not claim privileged access to the client's "true self" or ultimate grounds. Just as the visual perceiver cannot access the *thing in itself* that grounds sensory input, the counselor cannot access the noumenal substrate of the client's agency. What is available for dialogical exploration is the empirical self (the self as appearance, constructed through interpretation) and the conceptual frameworks that shape this construction.

This analogy has important normative implications: if self-knowledge is constructive and fallible, then the counselor must adopt a stance of epistemic humility, recognizing that any interpretation – whether the client's or the counselor's – is provisional and revisable. If the ultimate grounds of the client's experience (the *thing-in-itself* dimension of self-hood) are structurally incognoscible, then the counselor must resist metaphysical dogmatism – the pretense to know the client's essence or "real" motivations. And if the client's self-understanding is hypothesis-like, then the counselor's primary task is not to deliver authoritative judgments, but to facilitate critical reflection, helping the client test, refine, and sometimes abandon inadequate self-interpretations.

³³ Achenbach, G. B., 2004. *Philosophical Practice*. Lexington Books, pp. 115–129.

2.3. The Starting-Point Problem in Counseling

Gregory's starting-point problem has a direct parallel in counseling. If the client's self-understanding is a constructive process built from interpretations of past experience, what grounds this process? *What is the ultimate basis for the client's experience of themselves?* One tempting answer is to posit a pre-interpretive, immediately given "authentic self" that grounds all subsequent self-narratives, which unfortunately collapses into metaphysical dogmatism: it assumes transparent introspective access to a stable essence, precisely the assumption that the constructivist model rejects.

A better answer, informed by Kant, is to recognize that the ultimate ground of the client's experience is a transcendental self – a *thing in itself* that affects the client's sensibility and thereby generates the experiential material from which the empirical self is constructed. This transcendental self is not an object of knowledge (neither for the client nor for the counselor); it is a limiting concept that marks the boundary of what can be known. Just as *things in themselves* ground sensory input without being part of empirical perception, the transcendental self-grounds the client's experience without being accessible to introspection or dialogue.

This move has a paradoxical, but liberating consequence: the client's "true self," understood as the noumenal ground of their agency, is permanently unknowable. What the client can know is only the empirical self – the self as it appears through the lens of interpretation, shaped by memory, narrative, and conceptual frameworks. Counseling thus becomes a practice of working with appearances, not a quest to uncover a hidden noumenal essence, which reduces the pressure on both client and counselor: the client is not required to achieve impossible self-transparency, and the counselor is not expected to deliver metaphysical certainties.

3. Normative Principles for Counseling: Translating Incognoscibility into Practice

3.1. The Principle of Epistemic Humility

The first normative implication of the incognoscibility thesis is epistemic humility. If the ultimate grounds of the client's experience (the *thing-in-itself* dimension of selfhood) are structurally beyond the reach of human cog-

nitition, then both client and counselor must accept that certain questions admit no final answer. *Who am I, really? What is my true purpose? What is the ultimate meaning of my suffering? What is the meaning of life in general?* – these questions, insofar as they demand access to noumenal reality, exceed the bounds of possible knowledge. The counselor's task is not to provide answers to these unanswerable inquiries, but to help the client recognize the limits of self-knowledge and learn to live well within them.

Epistemic humility has several practical dimensions – one is that the counselor refrains from dogmatic assertions about the client's "real" motivations, hidden desires, or unconscious conflicts. Psychoanalytic interpretations that claim to reveal a latent truth inaccessible to the client's conscious awareness may offer valuable hypotheses, but they cannot be presented as metaphysical certainties, which is why the counselor must always qualify interpretive claims with appropriate epistemic modesty: "One way to understand this pattern is..."; "It seems plausible that..."; "We might explore whether..."³⁴

Another is that the counselor helps the client distinguish between what can and cannot be known, since some questions are empirically answerable (*Do I enjoy this type of work? Have I been happier in relationships characterized by X or Y?*), some are conceptually clarifiable (*What do I mean by "authenticity"? Are my values consistent?*), and some are structurally unanswerable (*What is my noumenal essence? What would I choose under conditions of perfect self-transparency?*) – recognizing this distinction prevents anyone from investing futile effort in pursuing impossible self-knowledge.

The third dimension is that epistemic humility fosters openness to revision: if self-understanding is a constructive hypothesis rather than a discovered fact, then it is always provisional and subject to reinterpretation. The counselor encourages the client to hold their self-narrative lightly, treating it as a working model rather than a final verdict and this openness reduces existential anxiety: the client is not trapped in a fixed identity, but free to revise their self-interpretation as new experiences and insights emerge.

3.2. The Principle of Non-Appropriation of the Other

The second normative principle is non-appropriation of the other. If the client's noumenal reality is structurally incognoscible, then the counselor must resist the temptation to appropriate the client's experience by sub-

³⁴ Raabe, P. B., 2001. *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger, pp. 58–72.

suming it under a theoretical framework that claims totalizing explanatory power. To appropriate the other is to treat them as a fully transparent object of cognition, exhaustively describable by a theory (psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, etc.). But if *the thing-in-itself* dimension of the client's selfhood remains opaque, then any such theoretical appropriation necessarily falsifies the client's reality by reducing it to what can be known.

Non-appropriation is closely related to Kant's formula of humanity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means".³⁵

Respecting the client as an end in themselves requires acknowledging the limits of what can be known and the counselor must not treat him as a case study, a data point, or an instance of a general theory, instead, engage the client as a singular individual whose full reality exceeds any theoretical categorization.

Practically, non-appropriation means that the counselor listens more than theorize – he resists the impulse to impose premature interpretations and creates space for the client's own voice, allowing him to articulate the experience in his own terms. When the counselor does offer interpretive suggestions, these are presented as invitations for the client to consider, not as authoritative diagnoses.³⁶ The client retains the authority to accept, reject, or modify the counselor's interpretations, because his experience ultimately surpasses the counselor's conceptual grasp.

This principle resonates with recent work on the ethics of interpersonal relations: Petkanić³⁷ argues that Kant's account of duty provides a framework for understanding obligations that respect the other's autonomy without reducing them to objects of instrumental reason. Similarly, non-appropriation in counseling respects the client's autonomy by refusing to colonize their experience with the counselor's theoretical categories.

3.3. The Principle of Acknowledged Opacity

The third normative principle is acknowledged opacity, which requires the counselor to explicitly thematize the limits of self-knowledge in the counseling dialogue. Rather than treating incognoscibility as a private philosophical thesis, the counselor makes it a topic of conversation:

³⁵ AA 4:429, the Formula of Humanity.

³⁶ Achenbach, G. B., 1995. *Philosophical Practice*, *ibid.*, pp. 102–118.

³⁷ Petkanić, M., 2025. Kant's and Kierkegaard's Ethics of Duty, *ibid.*

“There are aspects of your experience that neither of us can fully understand”; “Some questions may not have definitive answers”; “Part of learning to live well is accepting what we cannot know about ourselves.”

Acknowledged opacity serves several functions:

- it normalizes the client's experience of uncertainty – many clients enter counseling with the anxious conviction that they should be able to achieve complete self-transparency and that their failure to do so reflects personal inadequacy. By explicitly naming structural incognoscibility, the counselor reassures the client that some degree of opacity is not a failure but an intrinsic feature of human selfhood.

- acknowledged opacity shifts the counseling goal from discovery to construction – if there is no hidden noumenal essence waiting to be uncovered, then the client's task is not to discover who they “really are”, but to construct a self-understanding that is coherent, meaningful, and conducive to flourishing. This constructivist reframing is empowering: the client is not a passive discoverer of pre-given truths, but an active author of their self-narrative.

- acknowledged opacity also prevents the counselor from overreaching, by reminding both parties that ultimate grounds remain inaccessible, by constraining the counselor's interpretive ambitions and by protecting the client from manipulative claims to insight. The counselor cannot say, “*I know the real reason you struggle with relationships,*” because such a claim presumes access to the client's noumenal reality, but instead, he will offer explanations such as: “*One possible pattern I notice is...*”, “*One could interpret this such as...*”, “*From what you are saying one can conclude that...*”, leaving room for the client's own judgment.

4. Application: Counseling Practice Guided by Incognoscibility

4.1. The Counselor's Stance: Epistemic Humility in Action

A very important question we must answer when we talk about counseling is: *How does a counselor who respects incognoscibility conduct the dialogue with his clients?* The counselor's stance is characterized by three interrelated practices:

(1) **question-posing over answer-giving**: the counselor prioritizes open-ended questions that invite the client to deepen their self-understanding rather than delivering authoritative interpretations. Socratic questioning—“What do you mean by ‘authentic’?”; “Can you think of

a time when you felt differently?"; "How would you describe your values in this domain?"—creates space for the client's own voice and acknowledges that the answers must come from the client's lived experience, not from the counselor's theory.³⁸ This method embodies epistemic humility, because the counselor does not presume to know the client's truth, but facilitates the client's exploration of their own experience.

(2) interpretive plurality over theoretical monism: the counselor offers multiple possible interpretations of the client's experience rather than insisting on a single "correct" reading. For example, if a client reports chronic dissatisfaction with their career, the counselor might suggest several lenses:

We could explore whether this dissatisfaction reflects a mismatch between your values and your work environment, or whether it stems from unrealistic expectations shaped by cultural narratives of success, or whether it signals a deeper existential concern about meaning and purpose.

By presenting alternatives, the counselor acknowledges the underdetermination of interpretation by evidence and invites the client to participate in selecting or synthesizing frameworks. This plurality respects the incognoscibility of the client's ultimate grounds: because we cannot access the noumenal truth of the client's situation, we must work with multiple provisional hypotheses.

(3) collaborative exploration over expert diagnosis: the counselor treats the counseling dialogue as a joint inquiry in which both parties bring distinct forms of expertise. The client is the expert on their own lived experience; the counselor is the expert on conceptual analysis, philosophical frameworks, and dialogical method, but neither party has privileged access to the client's noumenal reality. This collaboration embodies both epistemic humility (the counselor admits the limits of their insight) and respect for the client's autonomy (the client retains authority over their self-interpretation).³⁹

One article on autonomy and education offers a helpful parallel: Marques⁴⁰ argues that autonomy, for Kant, is not the imposition of external authority, but the cultivation of the capacity for self-directed critical thinking. If we extend these hypotheses to counseling, we reach the con-

³⁸ Raabe, P. B., 2001. *Philosophical Counseling: Theory and Practice*, *ibid.*, pp. 45–57.

³⁹ Achenbach, G. B., 1995. *Philosophical Practice*, *ibid.*, pp. 125–140.

⁴⁰ Marques, J. O. A., 2025. Autonomy as the foundation of learning in Kant and Paulo Freire, *ibid.*, pp. 237–249.

clusion that the counselor guided by incognoscibility does not impose interpretations, instead cultivates the client's capacity for critical self-reflection.

4.2. Working with Clients' Desire for Certainty

A common challenge in philosophical counseling is the client's demand for absolute certainty. Clients often seek definitive answers to questions like "What is my true calling?"; "Should I end this relationship?"; "What is the meaning of my life?"; "How am I going to raise my children?"; "Am I a good parent?" and the counselor who respects incognoscibility needs to help the client reframe it.

Consider a concrete scenario. A client, Oana, expresses deep anxiety about whether she has chosen the "right" career path (a CEO in a multinational company). She fears that she may be living inauthentically, pursuing a profession that does not reflect her "true self", which is why she asks the counselor: "How can I know if this is really who I am?"

A counselor committed to incognoscibility might respond as follows:

Oana, the question you're asking – *Is this really who I am?* – presupposes that there is a fixed, discoverable essence that constitutes your 'true self', independent of your choices and experiences. But what if the self is not something you discover but something you construct? What if there is no single 'right' answer waiting to be uncovered, but rather multiple possible ways of understanding yourself, each with its own coherence and costs? The anxiety you feel may stem from the belief that you should be able to achieve perfect self-transparency, to know with certainty who you 'really' are. But that kind of certainty may be impossible for finite beings like us. What if, instead of seeking certainty, we explore how you might live well with uncertainty – how you might make choices that are meaningful and revisable, without requiring metaphysical guarantees?

This response enacts all three principles: (1) epistemic humility: the counselor acknowledges that the "true self" is unknowable; (2) non-appropriation: the counselor does not impose a theoretical framework, but invites Oana to reconsider her assumptions and (3) acknowledged opacity: the counselor explicitly names the impossibility of perfect self-transparency and reframes it as a condition to be accepted rather than

a problem to be solved.

The dialogue might continue by exploring what Oana means by “authenticity,” whether her current career aligns with her stated values, and how she might revise her self-understanding in light of new experiences, all while the counselor consistently resists the temptation to deliver a verdict about Oana’s “true” identity, because such a verdict would presume access to her noumenal reality.

4.3. Ethical Implications: Respect, Autonomy, and Non-Paternalism

The incognoscibility thesis has profound ethical implications for the counseling relationship, because if the client’s noumenal reality is structurally inaccessible, then the counselor is ethically prohibited from claiming to know what is best for him. This prohibition grounds a strong anti-paternalism: the counselor cannot justify coercive or manipulative interventions on the grounds that “I know your true interests better than you do and I can definitely help”, because no such knowledge is possible.

Respecting incognoscibility means respecting the client’s autonomy in a specific, Kantian sense – autonomy, for Kant, is the capacity to give oneself the moral law, to act on principles that one can rationally endorse⁴¹ and as a result, the autonomous agent is not subject to heteronomous determination by external authorities or unexamined desires. In the counseling context, respecting autonomy means helping the client develop their capacity for critical self-reflection – their ability to examine their beliefs, values, and narratives and to revise them in light of reasoned deliberation, while the counselor does not impose their own values or interpretations, but facilitates the client’s autonomous self-determination.⁴²

Incognoscibility strengthens this account of autonomy by ruling out a subtle form of paternalism: the claim that the counselor, through superior theoretical insight, can access the client’s “real” motivations or interests that the client themselves cannot see. Such a claim treats the client as epistemically inferior, as someone who needs the counselor’s expertise to reveal truths hidden from introspection. But if the client’s noumenal reality is incognoscible to both parties, then this form

⁴¹ AA 4:440–445.

⁴² Marques, J. O. A., 2025. Autonomy as the foundation of learning in Kant and Paulo Freire, *ibid.*, pp.237-249.

of epistemic paternalism is unjustified, and they both stand on equal epistemic footing with respect to the client's ultimate grounds; neither has privileged access, no use can come at the end of the philosophical counseling session.

This does not mean the counselor has nothing to offer, because his expertise lies in conceptual analysis, logical coherence, and dialogical method – skills that help the client clarify their thinking without presupposing knowledge of his essence. The counselor might say, “I notice a tension between these two values you’ve articulated; can we explore how you might reconcile them?” or “This narrative seems to rest on an assumption we haven’t examined; what if we question it?” — these interventions respect the client’s autonomy by enhancing their critical capacities rather than substituting the counselor’s judgment for their own.

One recent paper has emphasized the connection between duty, respect, and the recognition of the other’s moral status.⁴³ Extending this line of thought, I suggest that respecting the incognoscibility of the other is a duty grounded in the recognition of their status as an end in themselves – to treat the client as an end is to acknowledge the limits of what can be known about them and to resist the totalizing gaze that reduces them to an object of theoretical cognition.

4.4. A Second Scenario: Counseling and Existential Uncertainty

Consider a second scenario that illustrates how acknowledged opacity can reduce existential anxiety. A client, Andrew, has recently experienced the death of a close friend and is struggling with questions of meaning and mortality, asking himself: “What is the point of anything if we all just die in the end? How can I know that my life matters?”

A counselor committed to incognoscibility might respond:

Andrew, you’re asking two different kinds of questions. The first – ‘*What is the point of life?*’ – is a metaphysical question about ultimate meaning, and it may not have a definitive answer that finite beings like us can discover. The second – ‘*How can I live in a way that feels meaningful to me?*’ – is a practical question that you can address by reflecting on your values, commitments, and experiences. Kant would say that we cannot know the ultimate purpose of existence from a theoretical standpoint, because such knowledge would require access to a God’s-eye view of reality. But we can

⁴³ Petkanič, M., 2025. Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Duty, *ibid*.

act as though our actions matter, by committing ourselves to principles we can rationally endorse and by treating ourselves and others as ends in themselves. The uncertainty you feel about cosmic meaning is not something you can eliminate through philosophical argument or introspection, but you can learn to live meaningfully within that uncertainty, by focusing on what you can know and control – your choices, your relationships, your values.

This response exemplifies acknowledged opacity – the counselor does not pretend to answer the unanswerable metaphysical question but helps Andrew distinguish between what can and cannot be known. He redirects his attention from the impossible quest for noumenal certainty to the practical task of constructing a meaningful life within the bounds of finite human existence, and this method does not trivialize Andrew's existential concerns; rather, it honors them by taking seriously the limits of human knowledge.

The dialogue might proceed by exploring what values Andrew holds most dear, how his friend's death has reshaped his understanding of those values, and how he might honor his friend's memory through meaningful action. And the counselor will not offer a metaphysical theodicy to the subject of mortality, because they exceed the bounds of possible human knowledge and he will try to help the client by explaining such limit, so that Andrew could be redirected to those questions and problems which can have a solution or an answer.

This approach also resonates with a discussion⁴⁴ on Kant's relevance for situations of conflict and uncertainty, by examining how Kant's project of perpetual peace can inform contemporary practices of conflict resolution and reconciliation. The counseling relationship, understood as a peaceful dialogue that respects the opacity of the other, embodies the Kantian ideal of treating persons as ends in themselves even – or especially – when metaphysical certainties are unavailable. Just as perpetual peace requires acknowledging the limits of what we can know about others' intentions and ultimate grounds, philosophical counseling requires acknowledging the structural incognoscibility of the client's noumenal reality.

⁴⁴ See Kupś, T., 2024. Kant's project of perpetual peace today, *ibid.* On the same topic, Šajda, P., 2024. Working for peace in situations of conflict: On Schmitt's reception of Kant, *ibid.*

Final remarks and conclusion

In my article I have argued that Kant's doctrine of the incognoscibility of *things in themselves* offers a productive normative-epistemic framework for modern philosophical counseling. Building on Jauernig's two-level ontology and my own reconstruction of Kant's metaphysics, I have shown that the structural inaccessibility of *things in themselves* grounds three normative principles for counseling practice: epistemic humility, non-appropriation of the other, and acknowledged opacity. These principles protect client autonomy, resist paternalism, and reframe the client's demand for absolute certainty as a misguided quest for impossible self-transparency.

The analogy between constructivist theories of visual perception and self-knowledge in counseling illuminates the structure of the counseling dialogue: just as visual perception is an indirect, constructive, fallible process of hypothesis-formation, so too is the client's self-understanding a provisional interpretation built from partial evidence and revisable frameworks. The counselor's task is not to uncover a hidden noumenal essence, but to facilitate the client's critical reflection on their empirical self-narrative.

The argument has several limitations that suggest directions for future research:

- I have focused on the epistemic dimensions of incognoscibility without fully developing its connection to Kant's moral philosophy, which is why future work should explore how the incognoscibility thesis relates to the categorical imperative, the kingdom of ends, and the postulates of practical reason.

- not addressing the challenge of integrating Kantian principles with other counseling traditions (existentialist, phenomenological, narrative), as a more comprehensive account would show how incognoscibility complements or conflicts with alternative frameworks.

- a limited number of concrete scenarios – a fuller application would require a systematic case-study analysis examining diverse counseling contexts (grief, career choice, relationship conflict, trauma).

Despite these limitations, I believe that my paper has established a foundational claim: the incognoscibility of *things in themselves*, properly understood, is not an obstacle to philosophical counseling, but a guiding principle that shapes the counselor's stance, protects client autonomy, and fosters a practice of epistemic humility and respect. In

a cultural moment characterized by the promise of total self-optimization and the demand for perfect self-transparency, the Kantian doctrine of incognoscibility offers a salutary reminder: some aspects of human selfhood remain, and must remain, beyond the reach of knowledge. Learning to live well within these limits is not a counsel of despair but a condition of ethical counseling practice and also a challenge for each and every one of us trying to help the client reach those answers which could shape their understanding of their life and the world.

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