
Kant's Things in Themselves

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“We have no insight whatsoever into the intrinsic nature of things” (A277/B333). This quotation from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, CPR, is the road sign that is often missed by philosophers hoping to extract what, exactly, the thing in itself is. Whether appearing in the text as noumenon, thing in itself, or transcendental object, how we interpret Kant's words has dramatic consequences regarding the rest of the *Critique*. Noumena are essential to his endeavor, because they are necessary if we are to have actual experiences of real objects. They are also the ground for our being able to think we are free. However, trying to make sense of the CPR has led to three different interpretations of things in themselves. I will call these the “two world,” “two aspect,” and “two perspective” views, and attempt to address the problems and solutions each suffers and offers.

In order to understand the interpretations of them, however, we must first know the basic requirements on things in themselves. Kant makes three claims about the *Ding an sich*, two metaphysical and one epistemological:

K1 Things in themselves exist (A249).

K2 Things in themselves are in relation to phenomenal appearances, otherwise we would have mere illusions. (Bxxvi, A251-2).

K3 We can have no knowledge of things in themselves (A277/B333).

The third claim has caused many philosophers, like Strawson, to see things in themselves as purely epistemological barriers, as an abstract concept of limitation, as “that which is beyond the bounds of sense” (Langton, 2). We cannot simply claim that Kant's entire task was to discover what faculties other than perception enable us to acquire knowledge (Höffding, 59). Limiting ourselves to the epistemic conditions required by humans would be to reduce the *Critique* to pure epistemology and this skims over the fact that Kant believes that there is an “intrinsic nature of things.” Clearly, we must look to all three claims about things in themselves. What follows from the three, though, is that

we are immediately forced to deal with the fact that K3 entails our not knowing K1 or K2. Here is our first problem.

Each solution must deal with Kant's three terms, representation, appearance, and thing in itself. The representation, as the representing, is our intuiting of the appearance as it appears to us under available concepts. It is the image of the appearance that we create in our minds. It can also be our conceiving of the appearance. The appearance is presented to us as an appearance by the thing in itself because of the manner in which the thing in itself stands in relation to the forms of intuition. It is only because of our standing in relation to the thing in itself that we see an appearance and thus a representation. Jacobi presented the first solution to Kant's K1-3 in the form of the two-world theory in 1787 (Robinson, 415).

Jacobi takes the three Kantian entities, representation, appearance, and thing in itself, and reduces the number to two by identifying the representation with the appearance. By making this move, Jacobi gives us two parallel and very separate worlds. One world includes humanity as spatio-temporal creatures and our representations of the objects that appear to us. The other world is inhabited by things in themselves and we have no way to interact with them and we know nothing about them. This creates a gap in the three Kantian terms since appearances have no role. Strawson defends Jacobi saying that Kant does not need a world of appearance because it "is really nothing apart from perception" (Robinson, 415).

The problem with Strawson's version is that this steers Kant into the very Berkeleyan phenomenalism he so ardently attempted to avoid. For, if the world were only filled with representings with nothing as represented, or appearances, what is to stop the claim that what exists is only there while it is being perceived? At the bottom of the issue, though, Jacobi is to blame because he eliminates the appearance by assimilating it to the representation, and enters into a problem of affection. How could an object as appearance, though here considered as mere representation, cause the sensory affection of the mind by that same representation? This could mean, then, that the object must be that which Kant explicitly states it cannot be, the thing in itself (Robinson 415). The two-world interpretation, then, fails to present a working

model of affection that keeps Kant away from a phenomenalism. Undoubtedly, a solution to these problems must be found if we are ever to have a consistent and feasible explanation of Kant.

Henry Allison's two-aspect view arises out of a desire to remedy the problems of the two-world theory. Allison's move is a methodological one. He notes that not all of Kant's claims are metaphysical and that such a misconstrual leads us to the two world view. Kant, he believes, is not interested in making existence claims. He wants to make methodology explicit, namely, in how "there are two ways of considering things" (Langton, 8). We can consider representations empirically, relating to certain epistemic conditions which they must meet in order to represent objects. Furthermore, we are able to consider the same object outside of its epistemic conditions, (space, time and the categories), transcendently as it is in itself (Robinson, 417). This is no different than "when doing science we sometimes consider a thing in abstraction from certain properties it has, such as weight: but this does not show that there are weightless things" (Langton, 9).

Our original three claims are now replaced by these anodyne ones:

A1 We can consider things 'in themselves', i.e. in abstraction from the conditions of our sensibility.

A2 Things considered in abstraction from the conditions of our sensibility can be considered only as something that affects the mind. (Any statements about things in themselves, therefore, are statements abstracting from spatio-temporality and the categories)

A3 Things considered in abstraction from their relation to our sensibility are things considered in abstraction from their relation to our sensibility (Langton, 9).

Whereas the two-world view holds that there is a transcendental distinction that separates things in themselves and appearances into two distinct realms and reduces the appearance to the representation, the two aspect view contends that we have two ways of considering the same object and thus identifies the appearance and the thing in itself. We now have a situation wherein no thing is truly unknowable, since the question "what affects our mind" can *only* be answered empirically. This eliminates completely the problem of affection, because the thing in

itself is no longer relegated to a parallel world with no entrance into space and time. The familiar phenomenal object is the *same* object as the thing in itself, though the thing in itself must be considered abstractly (Langton, 9).

Having solved the problems the two-world interpretation suffers, we must now turn to the problems that the two-aspect interpretation faces. First, Allison misses the fact that Kant believed K3 to be a new and major philosophical discovery concerning knowledge. He states that we have an “inextinguishable desire to find firm footing somewhere beyond the bounds of experience” (A796/B824). In response to Allison’s tautological A3, then, we can say that “it is inconceivable that we could have an ‘inextinguishable desire’ to consider things abstractly without considering things abstractly” (Langton, 10). Furthermore, even if such an abstraction can lead us to any real knowledge, A3 says nothing about the unknowability of things in themselves.

The next problem is that of causality. A2 does not require a causal relation between our minds and non-spatial, atemporal, unknowable existents. However, in avoiding the traditional problem of affection, it ushers in another, because things in themselves must stand in some relation to appearances (B306). In asserting A2 we cannot stay on a purely transcendental level, because we can be fairly sure that we have genuine experiences of real objects and thus have not escaped space, time, and the categories. The further problem is that causality seems to have disappeared entirely. How can the first thing cause the second thing when the two are identical?

In order to say that the thing in itself and the appearance are two ways of considering the same thing, we must determine how they can be the *same* thing. One object would have to contain as-appearance and as-in-itself attributes. These traits could be labeled independent and dependent. However, Kant never tells us whether there are things in-themselves that correspond on a one-to-one basis to the objects of appearance. It could, for all we know, be that all of possible experience is caused by one object, with difference aspects of it being responsible for appearances.

In order for this to be true, we need a sort of filtration model. Imagine, though it is quite impossible, a thing in itself. We can assume

that, like any thing, it has certain properties, including ones we cannot stand in cognitive relation to. Now, some properties for some number of things in themselves *may* be able to be represented within the forms of intuition. We, as humans, would then be able to cognize these properties because they appear to us. In this way, one object can contain both independent and dependent properties coinciding with our consideration of that object as-in itself or as-appearance. Now, “To think a thing in itself, then, is to abstract from the latter features and concentrate on the former” (Robinson, 425) and, while this may be possible, it gives no recognition to Kant’s epistemological and metaphysical goals. Surely we can do better than this.

M.S. Gram reads Kant in an attempt to escape the problem of affection that has plagued the interpretations given so far and offers to help Allison. To Gram, noumena and appearances are distinguished by their relations to acts of perceiving. We need to separate properties which can possibly stand in relation to an act of perceiving from those that cannot. Obviously, any contents outside of space and time are unperceivable. Furthermore, an object must have characteristics which are dependent for their existence upon the existence of acts of perceivers (Gram, 2). Gram states that what Kant forgot to include is that perceiving such characteristics is a necessary condition of standing in relation to any perceptual object at all because “[a]n appearance is... an object of consciousness some of whose properties depend for their existence upon the existence of acts of perceiving. And a thing in itself is an object to which such characteristics do not belong” (Gram, 3). The thing in itself does not rely upon acts of perceiving, because it exists regardless of our relation to it. The appearance that arises from our relation to it and causes a representing of it in our minds is entirely dependent on such an act of perception. In this way Kant could be strengthening the two-aspect interpretation, albeit not in a very concise manner. However, the above quotation could be read as stating that the thing in itself and the appearance have disjoint set of properties and from such a reading Kant would be weakening the two-aspect interpretation.

Moving back to Allison now, Gram sees that one object can have two sets of characteristics, more specifically, content that can be perceived by us in space and time and content that cannot. His move is

to question whether spatio-temporal characteristics only exist within the relation between object and subject. If so, there are then attributes that exist only in this relation and there could be a multitude of others unintuitable to us, somewhat like our filtration model (Gram, 8). Furthermore, if space and time turn out to be relational properties, which Kant did not believe, then it seems that they, as forms of intuition arising from our relations with things in themselves, block us from intuiting other properties of objects. This reverses our model for interacting with things in themselves. It is only when the object comes into relation with a subject that space and time are perceived. Space and time would not be the realms in which we perceive objects. They would be more akin to an opaque window that lets you see only a portion of what is on the other side. This shift seems small but is extremely important because this leads us away from Kant's explanation of space, time and noumena, causing the inner nature of things to become unknowable merely because space and time, now mere properties themselves, get in the way. K3, in this light, is no longer a statement concerning definitional unknowability but rather an obstacle of relation. Clearly, we aren't getting anywhere.

However, let us stay with a two-aspect interpretation, though not Allison's. Rae Langton's point of departure from Allison is that she sees the object as having two non-overlapping sets of properties. There are, she states, two kinds: those that are intrinsic to the object and those in contrast to them, purely relational properties. Furthermore, she believes that Kant uses 'phenomena' and 'noumena' to distinguish two classes of properties rather than entities. She supports this with strong textual evidence in both the CPR, including B69, B306, A284/B340, A147/B186, and A274/B330, and *Reflections on Metaphysics*, citing R5295 and R5292. In the current view, K1-3 become the following:

M1 There exist things in themselves, i.e. things that have intrinsic properties.

M2 The things that have intrinsic properties also have relational properties: causal powers that constitute phenomenal appearances.

M3 We have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of things (Langton, 12).

Perhaps our problems are now solved. K3 and K1 were seemingly incompatible. Now, “we can know *that* there are things that have intrinsic properties without knowing *what* those properties are” (Langton, 13). K3 also did not work with K2, but now there is no problem unless causal powers turn out to be intrinsic properties. Under this assumption we can, indeed, “know that things are in certain causal relations with other things without being able to ascribe to them any ‘distinctive and intrinsic predicates’” (A565/B593).

With Langton, we have actual entities, though we are unable to *know*, as opposed to *thinking*, them, which are in line with Kant’s metaphysical *and* epistemological statements. She is not focused purely on methodology in utilizing the in itself as a limiting concept of knowledge. Rather, she maintains a certain epistemic humility that respects the intrinsic properties of things as they really are, in themselves. With this conception, Kantian statements like the following are easy to make sense of:

“Now we should bear in mind that the concept of appearance... itself establishes the objective reality of noumena, and justifies the division of objects into phenomena and noumena, and indeed in such a way that the distinction does not refer simply to the logical form of our knowledge... but to the way in which they are themselves generally distinct from each other. For if the senses represent to us something that merely appears, this something must also be a thing in itself” (A249).

In summary, Langton interprets Kant’s things in themselves as substances with unknowable intrinsic properties that also have causal properties. These affect us in the form of phenomena when we are in relation to them. Because, as humans, we are limited to the forms of possible experience, this is all we can know, because all knowledge stems from sensible experience. We now have an interpretation that seems to be easily textually supported, includes metaphysical claims and epistemological humility. However, there is still another perspective to consider.

The third interpretation is Hoke Robinson's two perspective view. "In brief, the Kantian theory, on this interpretation, takes appearances as objects seen from the human perspective; things in themselves are objects seen from the divine perspective" (Robinson, 428). Upon seeing an empirical object, I normally, or before reading Kant, assume that it really exists, in other words, that God would also see it as I do, though God's intuition is intellectual and aperspectival and would see all things as they are in themselves. It is upon reflection at the transcendental level that I realize the fallibility of my knowledge, including any past mistakes, doubts, or perhaps problems seeing, and I am able to recognize the object as an appearance. Furthermore, I understand that the object is only available to me within the confines of space and time and under the categories, i.e. in the human perspective and under Allison's epistemic conditions. The object as it is in reality, in itself, may be distinctively different or not exist at all when viewed from the divine perspective. As Kant says, "we can speak of space, of extended beings, etc. only from the standpoint of a human being" (A26/B42).

The representation and the empirical object it represents are held within the human perspective while the thing in itself is known only by the divine. This solves Allison's problem of appearances and things in themselves being two aspects of the same thing. The representing and the corresponding appearance which it intuits cannot, and indeed need not, follow the filtration model, and instead resides in an idealism where the appearance rises from the representation (Robinson, 429). This differs from Berkeley's perceiver and perceptions in that while the appearance "exists" through our representing of it, the appearance persists through time, as God thinks about it. Of course, this brings a new problem to the surface; if we see objects in terms of our representations, then would not the empirical world change if we changed our minds?

The answer is a big and fearless 'certainly.' This type of occurrence, for example, happens when a scientific theory is found to contain an error or is outright replaced by another. We, at one point, considered the world to be flat, and upon further study and evidence the thesis was altered to state the world is spherical. In the same way, I can look quickly around a room and see a green mug on my microwave,

though when I look again to make sure that it is a mug, it turns out, in fact, the mug is really a box of crackers. The way we view the world, empirical reality, changes in relation to our representations of it with our error-prone subjectivities, *even though* reality as it really is, comprised of objects in themselves outside of space and time, continues to stay the same. The world is spherical within space and time just as the green object on my microwave is a box of crackers, though I can mistake either for something else under certain circumstances. As Robinson states, “[a]t any given time the object as appearance must be ‘empirically real’ so long as we restrict consideration to the human perspective; for we have access to nothing ‘more real’ with which to contrast it” (Robinson, 430). Restricting ourselves to the human perspective and not attempting to acquire firm footing beyond the bounds of reason is important and is something the two-world and Allison’s two-aspect views fail to do.

The two-world and two-aspect views have the second world or aspect as parallel to the first. The two-world view takes the things in themselves to be in the real world, which is entirely different from the one in which we live, while the two-aspect view advocates two parallel ways of considering the same object, albeit the appearance is stressed. In the two-perspective view, the views are still parallel, yet, “as humans, we are hopelessly contained within the human perspective, and can only *think* what the divine perspective might be like; but even this thinking is done from within the human perspective” (Robinson, 430).

The further consequence of the current view is that it turns the traditional one on its head. Typically, the world appears to us because of relations between the things as they are in themselves and us as we are in ourselves. Reality exists prior to our interaction with it. How can this view hope to prove this, though, while it contains an unreachable God’s eye view? The two-perspective view holds that “the *conception* of things in themselves is indeed that of a world prior to and determinant of human experience; but this conception is itself built upon human experience, and arises in answer to its needs” (Robinson, 431). This gels with how Kant requires us to ‘think’ things in themselves while repeating that we should not give in to our natural inclination to go

beyond possible experience. We can only begin in our possible experience and *think* what might be behind it.

In addition, while it seems to take God and God's perspective as a necessary artifact of human cognition, which Kant would not have believed, God is still superexperiential and can only be thought from a human perspective because it is the *conception* of things in themselves and not the actual things themselves that is in question. Robinson's statement also lends an interpretative hand to statements such as, "[t]he concept of the noumenon is therefore not the concept of an object, but rather the problem, unavoidably connected with the limitation of our sensibility, of whether there may not be objects entirely exempt from intuition of our sensibility" (B344). In this way the *concept* of the noumenon is built upon human experience and from such a perspective, though noumena exist prior to it.

Now we have a new type of interpretation that seems to be holding up quite well, yet it still must deal with the classic problem of affection, and it also seems to uphold a Berkeleyan idealism on some level. If the empirical object is an appearance, believed to be an intentional object, which comes into being through the representation representing it, does this commit Kant to Berkeley's phenomenal idealism? Berkeley's relationship between a representation and its object is like that of a slide to its projected image. The existence of the image requires the presence of the slide just as the object exists only so long as the representation of it is in the mind. There is no unperceived existence (Robinson 432).

In contrast to this, let us now imagine an *engraving*, in glass or perhaps copper, where, in the absence of light projected through it, we would see nothing on the object to which the projection is pointed, as in the previous case of the slide. Here we no longer require the slide, because any form of light enables us to see the image and return to it. In addition, "a new projection might serve to modify the engraving, filling in undetermined area and correcting mistaken ones; in this way, different slides at different times could contribute to the same image" (433). In this example the engraving, an object, exists regardless of whether light is being projected through it, being perceived. To unite a past representation with a current one in order to constitute a present image

illustrates the engraving example's ability to free the time of representation from the time of the object.

Furthermore, affection disappears when we realize that the time of the object does not have to be the same as the time of its representing. The process of affection and representing takes place in two moments, the empirical with our senses, and a second moment where the sense data is sorted and placed under concepts as a representing. The second moment is supersensible simply because we are not aware that we are doing it as it happens, "I *think* a thing in itself for the appearance, and it is only in this sense that there 'is' a thing in itself for every appearance" (Robinson, 435). In other words, at any given point, our senses are bombarded with stimuli from objects in space and during time. The sensations in the manifold come in at once from several different locations, but our cognizance of them occurs in succession. This second moment goes unnoticed by us while the understanding places the objects and properties within the manifold under concepts.

This, of course, is no answer to whether things in themselves *really* exist. However, the second perspective of the two perspective view solves this problem, because for something to really exist would be for God to know it. The issue of spatiality and how spatial appearances could be of nonspatial things in themselves is easily resolved as well. Simply, the problem assumes an independent and parallel existence for two-worlds or two-aspects that the two perspective view does not contain. The two perspective view holds that the conception of an in itself perspective is built on and out of the human, since spatiality is required for humans, but the divine, consisting of intellectual intuition, has no such requirement even though things in themselves, as they are in themselves, are not dependent on us (Robinson, 438).

With Robinson's two perspectives we are left with a world where, like in a scientific inquiry, "objects are proposed to account for various observations, and in the course of experimentation these are treated as real; but reflection always reveals the possibility of a theoretical revision modifying or eliminating these objects in favor of others" (Robinson, 441). Appearances are the best we can do at any time. The possibility for error, then, forces us to appeal to the divine and 'think' things in themselves in order for the appearances to exist. In this way the thing in

itself also acts as a regulative ideal where it could be what we would know given the fullness of time.

In the end, we seem to have a choice between the two aspects of Langton's M1-3 where things in themselves, we believe, are truly there, complete with their intrinsic properties, and Robinson's two perspectives, though we really only have access to one and merely *think* the other, where the *Ding an sich* could simply be noble lies that ground our knowledge. However, Robinson's interpretation fits within Kant's model so well. K1-3 work perfectly from within the stance that they, Robinson and Kant, have no knowledge of the intrinsic nature of things while still requiring us to think of things in themselves and regulate our representations within the empirical world.

Ultimately, the two should be reconciled. What is the difference between being unable to know the intrinsic properties of things and only God knowing them? Only a divine perspective can know the whole story of the universe and we have only our representations of appearances, which give rise to the conception of things in themselves, in either case. Now, with the two combined, we are able to think objects, as they are in themselves, really do exist, though their intrinsic properties could only be known by the divine and that our appearances are the best we can do at anytime. And lastly, due to our error-prone, empirical subjectivities, we must appeal to the thing in itself as a regulative ideal in order to achieve the transcendental, ideal apprehension of the relational properties of things in themselves as appearances.

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