

Book Review

**Langton, Rae, *Kantian Humility. Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*,
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, 232 pages, GBP 35.00 (hb),
GBP 14.99 (pb)**

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Rae Langton's first book, based on her Princeton PhD Thesis, is more than a contribution to the ongoing debate about what Kant means when he talks of things in themselves. The book is of systematic interest, because it works out premises that are shared by many philosophers today and which are supposed to lead to the conclusion that we are ignorant of the intrinsic nature of physical things. This review will therefore summarize the claims made about Kant and then focus on the systematic point.

One can distinguish two main ways of interpreting Kant's statements about things in themselves in the literature. According to the one position, which used to be the received reading, there are two classes of things, appearances and things-in-themselves. We have knowledge only about appearances, which are mind-dependent items. We cannot have any knowledge about things-in-themselves. The main problem for this position is that things-in-themselves are supposed to affect us, although causation is limited to the realm of appearances. According to the other, newer position (notably Prauss, Allison)¹, there are two ways of having epistemic access to things, considering things as appearances and considering them as they are in themselves. We can consider things only as they appear to us. There are thus not two classes of things, affection is nothing but an empirical relation, and there is no need to claim that we have knowledge only of mind-dependent items.

Langton steers a middle course between these two positions. The claim of her book is that, according to Kant, we can know only the relations in which things stand to each other and to us, but not their intrinsic nature. There are thus not two classes of things. Instead, there are two classes of properties of things: relational ones, which we can know, and intrinsic ones, of which we cannot have any knowledge (12–13). In this perspective, there is no idealism in Kant, but what Langton calls epistemic humility. Kant is a realist. His whole point is that our knowledge is constrained [400] by a limited accessibility of things. Langton takes Kant to infer epistemic humility from the following reasoning:

- (1) Our knowledge depends on sensibility, and sensibility is receptive: we can have knowledge of something only in so far as it affects us. In other words, the basis of our knowledge are relations that consist in the way in which things affect us (23).
- (2) Phenomena are real properties of substances, albeit relational ones. Over and above relational properties, substances have intrinsic properties (18–20, 205).
- (3) Relational properties, and in particular causal powers, do not supervene on intrinsic properties and are hence not reducible to intrinsic properties. Consequently, if substances affect us, they do not affect us by means of their intrinsic properties (3–5).
- (4) Therefore, we are ignorant of the intrinsic properties of substances.

Thus reconstructed, Kant's claim about our ignorance of things in themselves is logically independent of his claims about space and time as well as the deduction of the categories.

¹ Gerold Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich*, Bonn: Bouvier 1974; Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1983, Chapter 11.

Accordingly, Langton does not elaborate on these matters. But she considers the problem that according to her interpretation, things in themselves are substances, although “substance” is one of the categories and therefore applicable only to phenomena. Her reply is that we have to distinguish in Kant between phenomenal substance and the pure concept of substance, which stands for an independent thing. We can know that there are substances – things in themselves – without knowing what their nature is, that is, without knowing their intrinsic properties (Chapter 3).

The focus of Langton’s attention is (3), because (3) is crucial to derive our ignorance of things in themselves from the fact that our knowledge starts from affection. According to Langton, Kant gets to (3) in the context of his study of Leibniz. Whereas Leibniz takes relational properties to be reducible to intrinsic properties of the relata, Kant comes to the conclusion that relations – in particular causal relations – do not supervene on intrinsic properties of the relata. Therefore, knowledge of causal relations does not give us any access to intrinsic properties (Chapters 4 to 6).

Langton regards her book as a contribution to Kant scholarship in the first place (6, Chapter 10). But she is aware of the systematic relevance of the position that she ascribes to Kant. The argument for epistemic humility seems to be conclusive from a systematic point of view. The first premise about our receptivity in particular seems to be widely accepted. Therefore, Langton claims that far more philosophers are committed to epistemic humility than those who consider themselves as Kantians (2–3). A commitment to epistemic humility ensues even if one takes relational [401] properties – and in particular causal powers – to be grounded on intrinsic properties, but maintains that the connection between the intrinsic properties and their causal agency is contingent; in this case, knowledge of the relations does not give us any knowledge of the intrinsic properties either (175–180).

In fact, Frank Jackson, for instance, takes a position of epistemic humility in consideration when he expresses a widespread view about the sort of knowledge that the natural sciences yield in his John Locke lectures. He writes:

When physicists tell us about the properties they take to be fundamental, they tell us what these properties *do*. This is no accident. We know about what things are like essentially through the way they impinge on us and our measuring instruments. ... [This] leads to the uncomfortable idea that we may know next to nothing about the intrinsic nature of the world. We know only its causal cum relational nature. I think we should acknowledge as a possible, interesting position one we might call Kantian physicalism. It holds that a large part (possibly all) of the intrinsic nature of our world is irretrievably beyond our reach, but that all the nature we know about supervenes on the (mostly or entirely) causal cum relational nature that the physical sciences tell us about.²

In Jackson, as in Langton’s Kant, there is no sort of idealism or relativism. The claim is not that we know only the way in which things behave relative to us. The claim is that we know only the relations in which things stand to each other. Relations in which things stand to persons and their sensibility are nothing but a particular case of such relations (Langton, 184–185). From this it is then inferred that we do not know the intrinsic nature of things.

Let us accept for the sake of this review that all the properties of which physics can give us knowledge are in fact relational. Is it correct to infer from this that there is something of

² Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics. A Defence of Conceptual Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 23–24.

which we cannot have any knowledge, namely the intrinsic nature of things? The common argument, which Langton adopts on behalf of Kant (17–22, 120, 157), is that relations presuppose relata whose existence is independent of the relations. The relata must therefore have some intrinsic properties.

This argument may have a point as far as causal powers and causal relations are concerned. Nonetheless, it is not generally true. To recall a familiar example, if there are space–time points, one can maintain that all the qualitative properties of any space–time point consist in relations to other space–time points. There is no need for an intrinsic nature of space–time points. (The same is arguably true of numbers). Imagine a world in which all physical properties are realized as geometrical properties of space–time points. In such a world, we can in principle know all the types of physical properties, they are all relational, and there is no need for intrinsic properties, because the relata are space–time points. In fact, such a [402] position was proposed as a further development of Einstein’s physics of general relativity under the name of “geometrodynamics”.³ Furthermore, a similar argument can be set out with respect to the quantum correlations of entanglement: there is no intrinsic nature beyond the correlations that quantum systems exhibit.⁴

Thus, even if we assume that causal powers and causal relations cannot be all there is in the physical realm, there are at least two possible ways open. Instead of there being intrinsic properties beyond the causal powers, the bedrock of our world may consist in spatio–temporal relations or quantum correlations. In this case, there is no conclusive argument for an intrinsic nature of which we are ignorant. Hence, the argument from relations to an intrinsic nature of the relata does not seem to be a question of metaphysics, but depend on which physics is true of our world.

That argument faces a further systematic problem if we consider Langton’s reconstruction of Kant’s philosophy of physics. At first glance, one may take the argument to claim that there is a plurality of relata such as trees, stones, molecules and the like that are substances and that have an intrinsic nature of which we are ignorant. However, according to Langton, trees, stones, molecules and the like are not substances in Kant’s view. They are properties of phenomenal substance. Phenomenal substance is matter as a whole; for only matter as a whole persists throughout all changes. Persisting throughout all changes is a necessary and sufficient condition for a substance in the phenomenal realm. Trees, stones, molecules and the like are properties of phenomenal substance in the sense that they are determinations of phenomenal substance. Moreover, according to Langton, Kant adopts a dynamical theory of matter from Leibniz. Matter consists in forces. The overall quantity of these forces remains the same throughout all changes. Phenomenal substance thus is the conserved overall quantity of forces (Chapter 3).

Hence, if we dig as deep as we can in the phenomenal realm, we do not get to a plurality of things that bear relational properties to each other. All the candidates for relata turn out to be properties as well, namely properties of phenomenal substance. Consequently, there is only one ultimate subject of the predication of properties in the phenomenal realm, namely matter as a whole (or the field of forces, if one takes Kant to be a precursor of a field theory of matter). The problem now is this one: Relational properties presuppose a plurality of related

³ John A. Wheeler, *Geometrodynamics*, New York: Academic Press 1962.

⁴ See, for instance, Michael Esfeld, “Physicalism and Ontological Holism”, *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999), pp. 319–337.

individuals. If properties are considered as properties of phenomenal substance, they cannot be relational properties; for there is nothing besides phenomenal substance relative to which phenomenal substance could have certain properties (leaving aside the questions of God and of immaterial souls). Whatever one may consider [403] as parts of phenomenal substance, these are not ultimate subjects of the predication of properties, but determinations of phenomenal substance and thus properties as well. Consequently, if we pursue Langton's interpretation of what substance is in the phenomenal realm according to Kant, the argument from relational properties to unknowable intrinsic properties risks becoming a non-starter. Instead, we then get to a view of Kant's philosophy of physics that is close to the field metaphysic which Bennett ascribes to Spinoza.⁵

Langton's book is an excellent example of the argumentative quality and clarity that can be achieved if analytic philosophy is applied to the interpretation of historical texts. This book is not only a significant contribution to the interpretation of Kant's work, but it also develops a systematic argument that is relevant to today's philosophy. However, given the mentioned problems with that argument, as with many other good books on Kant, one may get the impression that one can continue to mine Kant for various interesting ideas none of which is in the end overall convincing – both with respect to exegesis and with respect to systematic philosophy.

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⁵ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1984, in particular chapter 4.