

ELUSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS IN THEMSELVES

Rae Langton

Kant argued that we have no knowledge of things in themselves, no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of things, a thesis that is not idealism but epistemic humility. David Lewis agrees (in ‘Ramseyan Humility’), but for Ramseyan reasons rather than Kantian. I compare the doctrines of Ramseyan and Kantian humility, and argue that Lewis’s contextualist strategy for rescuing knowledge from the sceptic (proposed elsewhere) should also rescue knowledge of things in themselves. The rescue would not be complete: for knowledge of things in themselves would remain elusive.

Health Warning

Reading this may damage your epistemological health. Kant said that we have no knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps you, gentle reader, do have knowledge, right now, of things as they are in themselves. But look out. In the half-hour it takes you to read this, you may lose it. Proceed at your own risk.

I. Introduction

The idea that we have no knowledge of things in themselves is famously linked with the name of Immanuel Kant. It is not famously linked with the name of David Lewis; yet in ‘Ramseyan Humility’, Lewis has said that he agrees. The thesis that ‘we find out nothing about [things] as they are in themselves’, is ‘true . . . or at least something very like it is’ [Lewis 2001: §1].¹ Some may find this surprising. Transcendental idealism seems an unlikely candidate for Lewis’s tolerance, much less his endorsement. But there is no cause for anxiety—or at least, there is not *that* cause for anxiety. The candidate in question is not idealism after all, but a kind of epistemic humility, which says that we have no knowledge of the *intrinsic properties* of things. A thesis about the limits of knowledge is not a thesis about the mind-dependence of the known. Humility is not idealism. And humility, I have argued, is what Kant means by his claim that we have no knowledge of things in themselves [Langton 1998]. That interpretation is controversial, but I shall assume it in what follows. It is humility, not idealism, that Lewis defends.

¹ Lewis’s paper was presented as the Gareth Evans Memorial Lecture, Oxford, March 2002, read on his behalf by Stephanie Lewis. Warm thanks to Stephanie Lewis for permission to refer to the paper prior to its official publication. For helpful comments, thanks to Richard Holton, Galen Strawson, Tim Williamson, Alexander Bird, Laura Schroeter, John Bigelow, Allen Hazen, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Frank Jackson, Michael Smith, Will Davies; and those present at the Oxford occasion (where I presented some of these ideas), and colloquia at Monash University, and the RSSS, Australian National University.

Ignorance of things in themselves is, for Kant—and I borrow Lewis’s words—

ignorance of the intrinsic properties of substances. The substances that bear these intrinsic properties are the very same unhidden substances that do indeed affect us perceptually. But they affect us, and they affect other things that in turn affect us, in virtue of their causal powers, which are among their relational properties. Thereby we find out about these substances as bearers of causal powers, but we find out nothing about them as they are in themselves.

[2001: §1]

On this interpretation of Kant, things affect other things in virtue of certain *relational* properties, not intrinsic properties, and it is partly for this reason that the intrinsic properties of things, things ‘as they are in themselves’, remain forever hidden.

Suppose instead we were to think that it is in virtue of *intrinsic* properties that things affect other things. That is a widely held view in contemporary metaphysics [Jackson, *et al.* 1982; Armstrong 1983; van Cleve 1995], and it is shared by Lewis himself. Would the case for humility then be demolished? No, I argued, and Lewis agrees.² For on this way of thinking, intrinsic properties are contingently the grounds of certain powers or dispositions, and the intrinsic properties themselves remain a something-we-know-not-what. As Lewis says:

To be the ground of a disposition is to occupy a role, but it is one thing to know that a role is occupied, another thing to know what occupies it.

[Lewis 2001: §1]

Lewis connects this with a more general point about the relationship between a role and what realizes that role.

Being the ground of a certain disposition is only one case among many of role occupancy. There are a variety of occupied roles, among them nomological roles and others as well. Quite generally, to the extent that we know of the properties of things only as role-occupants, we have not yet identified those properties. No amount of knowledge about what roles are occupied will tell us which properties occupy which roles.

[Ibid.]

So Kant was right about our epistemological predicament, in this respect anyway. There is a real sense in which we have no knowledge of things in themselves. Lewis himself does not find the predicament particularly ‘ominous’—after all, he says, ‘who ever promised me that I was capable in principle of knowing everything?’ [2001: §4]. But, ominous or not, it *is* our predicament.

Hold on, though. If it is our predicament, then you, gentle reader, have no knowledge of things in themselves, and never did. But didn’t I say that perhaps you *do* have such knowledge? That was a possibility floated at the outset (admittedly accompanied by an obscure epistemological health warning). And it *is* a possibility, or so I shall argue. It may be that you are not irremediably ignorant of the intrinsic properties of things—even if Lewis is right in ‘Ramseyan Humility’. For while Lewis denies knowledge in ‘Ramseyan Humility’, he also *rescues* knowledge elsewhere, and his rescue, outlined in ‘Elusive Knowledge’

² I argued it in Langton [1998], drawing on Blackburn [1990] and Foster [1982].

[Lewis 1999], just might help save your knowledge of things as they are in themselves. That, anyway, is the question I want to raise. Along the way, I shall want to say a little about how Ramseyan Humility and Kantian Humility compare; and I shall want to sketch Lewis's own argument for humility, though my presentation of it will inevitably be too compressed, and will inevitably leave out much (perhaps most) that is of interest.

II. Ignorance of Things in Themselves

Lewis's argument for humility proceeds from Ramseyan, not Kantian, premises, and it goes something like this. Suppose we had a true and complete 'final theory' of the world, a theory T which (among other things) would deliver an inventory of those fundamental properties that play an active role in the workings of nature. Fundamental properties are intrinsic, and all other intrinsic properties supervene on them. Our theory, T, leaves out 'idlers', i.e., fundamental properties (if any) that are actually instantiated but play no active role; and it leaves out 'aliens', i.e., fundamental properties (if any) that are not actually instantiated. The language of T contains theoretical terms implicitly defined by T, which means T has a unique actual realization; and those terms name fundamental properties. In addition to T there is the rest of our language, call it O, our 'old' language which happens to be rich enough to express our observations (whatever else it might do). We get the Ramsey sentence of T by replacing the names in T with existentially quantified variables. The Ramsey sentence says that T has at least one actual realization. It implies the O-language sentences that are theorems of T. This means that any predictive success for T is equally a predictive success for the Ramsey sentence. If T has more than one possible realization, observation won't tell us which realization is actual, because no possible realization gives us evidence that goes beyond the Ramsey sentence. This is the crunch. If T is multiply realizable, then some fundamental properties are hidden from us. If T has more than one possible realization, then humility, or something like it, follows.

Does T have more than one possible realization? Yes. One route to this conclusion is the *permutation* argument, as Lewis calls it. One could permute two fundamental properties F_1 and F_2 , named by T, leaving everything else fixed. F_2 would then be found where F_1 had been, and *vice versa*; and the laws governing F_2 would be just the same as the laws governing F_1 had been, and *vice versa*. This permutation would give a different possible realization of T, and we would have no way to tell which of the possible realizations was actual.³ A different route to the same conclusion is the *replacement* argument, as Lewis calls it. Instead of permuting properties from T's actual realization, we replace those properties with members of those classes of properties the theory leaves out, the 'idlers' or 'aliens'. After all, while idlers are actually inactive, they could be active; and while aliens are actually uninstantiated, they could be instantiated. So, replace a property from T's actual realization with a property which had been a mere idler, or alien, before. This

³ That this permutation yields a *possibility* assumes combinatorialism; that the possibility it yields is a *different* possibility assumes what Lewis calls 'quidditism' about properties. I leave aside Lewis's arguments for combinatorialism and quidditism.

gives us a new possibility, and again, evidence cannot tell us which of these possible realizations is the actual one.

Lewis develops the argument further in many ways, extending its scope, ‘spreading Humility’, as he puts it, so that it embraces not only fundamental properties, but other properties as well;⁴ and he replies to objections from those who think that reference fixing supplies us with the kind of access we want [Lewis 2001: §§6, 7]. I shall not attend to these here, but I want to consider instead the question of how humility, Ramseyan style, compares with humility, Kantian style. Lewis says that the thesis I ascribe to Kant ‘is true’, or at least ‘something very like it’ is true. The two theses are indeed alike, but they are not, I think, quite the same. In both we have the key ideas that *there are intrinsic properties*, and that *we do not know them*. But these claims about the being and the knowledge of intrinsic properties receive different justifications.

The argument for Ramseyan Humility hinges on the multiple realizability of role properties. It answers the question about existence—Why are there intrinsic properties?—by saying (roughly) that intrinsic properties are needed as the fundamental realizers of roles. It answers the question about knowledge—Do we have knowledge of intrinsic properties?—by saying (roughly) that since there may be more than one realizer for a given role, we don’t know which intrinsic properties are the actual realizers.

Kantian Humility answers the questions about existence and knowledge differently. It answers the question about existence—Why are there intrinsic properties?—by saying (roughly) that intrinsic properties are needed, because bearers of relational properties need some intrinsic properties or other. Kant says that ‘the understanding, when it entitles an object in a relation mere phenomenon, at the same time forms, apart from that relation, a representation of an object in itself’ [Kant 1922d: B307].⁵ He says that ‘concepts of relation presuppose things which are absolutely [i.e., independently] given, and without these are impossible’ [A284/B340]. He identifies these independent bearers of relations as substances, and says that ‘substances in general must have some intrinsic nature, which is therefore free from all external relations’ [A274/B330], here describing, and (I argue) endorsing, Leibniz. He says, in an early work, that ‘besides external presence, i.e. relational determinations of substance, there are other, intrinsic, determinations, without which the relational determinations would not be, because there would be no subject in which they inhered’ [Kant 1922c: Prop. VII]. The principle here is that a bearer of relational properties must have some sort of being that isn’t exhausted by its relational properties: so it must have some intrinsic properties or other. I won’t stop to evaluate this metaphysical principle (or ‘deep conceptual prejudice’ as Gareth Evans once called it [1980: 102]) except to note that it is not the same as the principle that roles must have realizers.

Kantian Humility answers the question about knowledge—Do we have knowledge of intrinsic properties?—by saying (roughly) that since as receptive creatures we have

⁴ In a nice ladder-kicking twist, he also argues that our ignorance is *ineffable*. Not only are we unable to answer the question, which property realizes the relevant theoretical role? We can’t even ask that question. One might suppose that is the very question we have been asking all along, but no, he says, we have not been asking it properly.

⁵ References to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* will follow the customary practice of citing the pagination of the 1781 (A) edition and/or the 1787 (B) edition.

knowledge only of what affects us, and since it is not through a thing's intrinsic properties that we are affected, we don't have knowledge of intrinsic properties. What leads to ignorance of things in themselves is partly the fact of receptivity:

The receptivity of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as it is affected in any way, is called 'sensibility' Our nature is such that our intuition can never be other than sensible, that is, it contains only the way in which we are affected by objects.

[A51/B75]

Kant says that 'properties that belong to things as they are in themselves can never be given to us through the senses' [A36/B52]. While this is partly because of receptivity, it is also partly because it is not through things as they are in themselves that we are affected—it is not through the intrinsic properties of things that we are affected, since he thinks (as he puts it in another early work) that 'substance never has the power, through its own intrinsic properties, to determine others different from itself' [Kant 1922b: 415].

So the Kantian answer to the epistemological question depends not on the multiple realizability of realizers, but on a kind of receptivity of knowledge, and a kind of irreducibility of causal power. The latter thesis makes things as they are in themselves 'idlers', in Lewis's terminology. The intrinsic properties of which we have no knowledge deserve the name 'idlers' because they are actually instantiated, but they play no active part in nature. All the more reason, then, for drawing a distinction between Kantian and Ramseyan Humility, similar though they are. Things in themselves, Kantian version, are not quite things in themselves, Ramseyan version. Idler properties *can't* be realizer properties—or at least they can't while they're actually idling! Admittedly the point of Lewis's replaceability argument was to say that idler properties *are* possible realizer properties, hence provide an alternative source of possible realizers for T, hence help the argument for T's multiple realizability. But saying idlers are possible realizers there amounts to saying, idlers don't *have* to idle; not that a property may be idler and realizer all at once. So if things in themselves are the idlers of Kantian Humility, they are not the realizers of Ramseyan Humility.

If Lewis's argument is correct, then, it doesn't quite show that Kantian Humility is true, interesting though it would be to see that kind of vindication. It does, if correct, show that something 'very like' Kantian Humility is true, namely that there are intrinsic properties of which we have no knowledge; and it shows a great deal more besides, in a paper whose surface I have barely begun to scratch.

If Lewis's argument is correct, does it show that *you* have no knowledge of things in themselves? Apparently yes: why, after all, should you have special exemption from the 'we' who can 'find out nothing' about things 'as they are in themselves' [Lewis 2001: §1]? But then again, maybe not: let us see now whether Lewis, while threatening your knowledge with one hand, with the other supplies means to save it.

III. Saving Knowledge of Things in Themselves

In 'Elusive Knowledge' [1999], Lewis offers a contextualist epistemology which, among other things, aims to save knowledge from the sceptic. He proposes an infallibilist

definition of knowledge:

S knows that P iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-P.

This at first sight looks bad. After all, S's evidence does not eliminate the possibility of a Deceitful Demon. That is the sceptic's point. But then Lewis adds a condition:

S knows that P iff S's evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-P—*Psst!*—except for those possibilities we are properly ignoring.

[1999: 125].

Which possibilities are properly ignored is a pragmatic, contextual matter, governed by a number of rules. There is, for example, a Rule of Actuality, which says that a possibility which is actual is not properly ignored. There is a Rule of Belief, which says that a possibility that is believed to obtain, or that ought to be believed to obtain, is not properly ignored. There is a Rule of Resemblance, which says that a possibility which saliently resembles a possibility that is not properly ignored, is itself not properly ignored. There is a Rule of Attention, which says (trivially) that a possibility that is not ignored is not properly ignored. We have knowledge, notwithstanding the sceptical possibility of the Demon, because when, in a Demon-free world, we ignore the sceptical possibility of the Demon, we are *properly* ignoring it. The possibility in which I am deceived by the Demon is not actual; I do not believe it to obtain, nor ought I to; and it does not resemble the actual world.⁶

The sceptical hypothesis says we lack knowledge of the real world, or at least, of a world beyond the thinking being. Humility is less devastating. Humility is not scepticism: it allows plenty of knowledge of the real world, but denies knowledge of things as they are in themselves, knowledge of intrinsic or fundamental properties. But even if humility is not as bad as scepticism, one might still wish for something better. One might hope for knowledge not only of a real world (contrary to the sceptic), but of things as they are in themselves (contrary to Kant). Can the strategy Lewis offers to save knowledge from the sceptic be used to save knowledge of things in themselves?

Maybe so. After all, the sceptical hypothesis could itself be viewed as a special case of the multiple realizability of role properties. Something or other realizes the role of provider of sensory experience. This something could be a material world; or it could be a Demon and his machinations. The multiple realizability of the provider-of-sensory-experience role is what generates the sceptical problem. Unless we can properly ignore some alternative possible realizers of this role, knowledge of the real world will disappear. Perhaps in this respect, it is the same for humility as it is for scepticism. Unless we can properly ignore some alternative possible realizers of the role properties defined by T, knowledge of intrinsic properties will disappear.⁷ For humility, as for scepticism, our evidence does

⁶ Except, apparently, in respect of the subject's *evidence*—on this difficulty in applying the Rule of Resemblance, see Lewis [1999: 430]. This rule may also provide an unnoted difficulty for strategy of my argument, given the similarity of Replaced and Permuted worlds to the actual one (for this objection, thanks to Alexander Bird and Will Davies).

⁷ I am assuming Lewis's argument depends on identifying possibilities of the kind given in the replacement and permutation arguments. If it does not—if, say, one has an antecedent conviction about the non-identity of role and realizer properties, independently of such modal facts—that too may have implications for the strategy of my argument. For this objection, thanks to Laura Schroeter and Michael Smith.

not rule out the knowledge-destroying possibilities. But if Lewis shows us how we can ‘properly ignore’ the sceptical possibility, perhaps the same strategy could show us how we can ‘properly ignore’, for example, the possibilities of permutation, or replacement by ‘idlers’, that the argument for Ramseyan Humility exploits.

The good news for my reader, then, is that your knowledge of things in themselves may be safe—at least so far as the argument for Ramseyan Humility is concerned. Note that your knowledge of things in themselves may not be safe, so far as the Kantian argument is concerned, for that argument did not exploit the idea of possibilities that fail to be ruled out by our evidence. (Here we have yet a further difference between Kantian and Ramseyan Humility.) But your knowledge may be safe from the threat posed by the Ramseyan argument. The ungracious reader may complain that I have not exactly produced and administered the remedy. But supplying the recipe for it is something. And it is rather nice to think that the philosopher who gives us the problem, in ‘Ramseyan Humility’, might also be the one who gives us a solution, in ‘Elusive Knowledge’.

IV. Oops, There Goes Knowledge Again

If my hypothesis is right, Lewis’s strategy for saving knowledge from scepticism will also work to save knowledge from humility. We can properly ignore all kinds of possibilities, and when we properly ignore them, knowledge is safe: knowledge of a familiar material world is safe from the sceptic, and, perhaps, knowledge of things in themselves is safe from the Ramseyan argument.

Or rather, it would have been safe—if only you hadn’t read this far. When we mention the Demon, we are not ignoring him, so we are not properly ignoring him. So, by the Rule of Attention, our knowledge of the familiar material world goes away. Epistemology, says Lewis, is a subject that destroys its own subject matter, at least temporarily. Now forget the Demon, but think of the Ramseyan argument. It mentions the possibility of permutation of fundamental properties, or replacement by idlers or aliens: and when we consider the argument, we are *ipso facto* not ignoring those possibilities, so we are not properly ignoring them. So, by the Rule of Attention, our knowledge of things in themselves goes away—even if we *could* have properly ignored them, and thereby saved knowledge of things in themselves. Perhaps you had knowledge of things in themselves at the outset. Lucky you, if so. That was a possibility for you, but not for me, since it is the author’s fate to have been attending to the Ramseyan argument from the beginning. But your luck has run out, now that we—David Lewis and I—have made you attend to possibilities that have destroyed your knowledge of things in themselves.

What is the remedy? Carelessness and inattention, as Hume advised. Forget the permutation argument, forget idlers and aliens, do not think about Ramseyan Humility at all. Then, just maybe, your knowledge of things in themselves will return.

University of Edinburgh

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, David 1983. *What is a Law of Nature?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 Blackburn, Simon 1990. Filling in Space, *Analysis* 50: 62–5.

- Evans, Gareth 1980. Things Without the Mind, in *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, ed. Zak van Straaten, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 76–116.
- Foster, John 1982. *The Case for Idealism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jackson, Frank, Robert Pargetter, and Elizabeth Prior 1982. Three Theses about Dispositions, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19: 251–7.
- Kant, Immanuel 1922a (1755–1804). *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter.
- Kant, Immanuel 1922b (1755). *Principiorum Primorum Cognitionis Metaphysicae Nova Dilucidatio*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.
- Kant, Immanuel 1922c (1756) *Monadologia physica*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1922d (1781/1787). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 4. (The customary practice of citing the pagination of the 1781 (A) edition and/or the 1787 (B) edition is followed.)
- Kant, Immanuel 1929 (1781/1787). *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan.
- Kant, Immanuel 1986. *Kant's Latin Writings: Translations, Commentaries and Notes*, ed. L. W. Beck et al., New York: P. Lang.
- Langton, Rae 1998. *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lewis, David forthcoming. Ramseyan Humility, in *The Canberra Plan*, ed. David Braddon-Mitchell and Robert Nola. Preprinted in Lewis 2001. Ramseyan Humility, *University of Melbourne Philosophy Department Preprint* 1/01.
- Lewis, David 1999 (1996). Elusive Knowledge, in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 418–45.
- van Cleve, James 1995. Putnam, Kant, and Secondary Qualities, *Philosophical Papers* 24: 83–109.