

indicates that Kant's reasons have nothing to do with those given in the *Nova Dilucidatio* argument. Spatio-temporal relations are not reducible to intrinsic properties of things in themselves because they are instead grounded in the receptive constitution of the cognizing subject. It is the transcendental ideality of space and time that establishes the conclusion for Kant, though Langton, p. 211, wants at all costs to avoid having to make this admission. The same point can be made about Langton's carefully selective citation of A44/B61–2, which she reports as criticizing Leibniz for claiming that our senses give us a merely confused knowledge of things in themselves. Why does Kant think Leibniz was wrong about this? The actual reason Kant goes on to give is not that our senses tell us only about relations, and relations are not reducible to intrinsic properties of things, as Langton would have it, but rather that our senses tell us about spatio-temporal relations, which are grounded in our subjective constitution rather than in features of things in themselves, so that were all reference to the cognizing subject removed, these relations themselves would disappear. This point is repeated in the Amphiboly at A270/B326.

Reply to Lorne Falkenstein

RAE LANGTON

Edinburgh University

In *Kantian Humility* I argue that, for Kant, ignorance of things in themselves is ignorance of the intrinsic properties of substances, and that this is epistemic humility, rather than idealism: some aspects of reality, the intrinsic aspects, are beyond our epistemic grasp.

The interpretation draws upon what Falkenstein takes to be 'a novel and not implausible understanding of Kant's distinction between things in themselves and appearances' which views it as a distinction between the intrinsic and the relational. He concedes that Kant frequently puts his distinction in just these terms, that I make 'a strong textual case for it', that it is 'plausible and intriguing' and that it may even be 'correct, at least for a certain strand of Kant's thought'. He presumably also allows that this distinction between 'things as they are in relation to other things and things as they are on their own' is at base a metaphysical distinction, which

makes no mention of how things look to us, appear to us or depend on our minds. I am pleased to find sympathy for this understanding of Kant's distinction in a review whose overall tenor is so critical.

He goes further, and allows that my interpretation provides 'an apparently elegant solution to the classic unknowability problem': for we may know that there are things in themselves, things with intrinsic properties, without knowing what those intrinsic properties are. He thinks that, if the interpretation were successful overall, it would solve this classic problem. But he doubts it is successful overall, and for that reason doubts the solution.

Why? After all, the above understanding of Kant's distinction, combined with the uncontroversial premiss that we are acquainted only with phenomena, is sufficient to yield the solution he describes as 'apparently elegant', for it implies that we have no acquaintance with the intrinsic properties of things – a thesis evidently compatible with a claim that things in themselves exist. One would therefore expect sympathy for the solution from one who has sympathy for the intrinsic-relational interpretation of Kant's distinction, which makes the solution available. This distinction is hardly a minor 'something of interest to be gleaned' from a book whose other conclusions are misguided and irrelevant to it: it is rather the foundation and motivation for those conclusions. One ought not to find the distinction plausible, and at the same time judge its potentially helpful consequences to be a blinkered failure. Falkenstein's bleak verdict must, by his own lights, be off the mark: the problem of the unknowability of things in themselves can indeed be resolved by the proposed interpretation, because it can be resolved by the distinction he finds plausible.

He thinks otherwise, because he thinks acceptance of the solution depends, first, on acceptance of an un-Kantian, and overly realist, understanding of the intrinsic-relational version of Kant's distinction; and, second, on an implausible attribution to Kant of a thesis about the irreducibility of relations. But the solution does not depend on these (though I shall have more to say about the two charges in a moment). Falkenstein is welcome to reject the attribution of irreducibility; he is welcome to find, if he can, a less realist understanding of the intrinsic-relational distinction he admires; and he is welcome to make use of the latter to solve the unknowability problem. He would then have the solution available: things in themselves exist, but we do not know what their intrinsic properties are.

Now let us think about those two main charges, about being un-Kantian, and about attributing irreducibility.

Objection 1: It is Un-Kantian

The interpretation is allegedly un-Kantian because, in making space for a realist interpretation of Kant, it is incompatible with transcendental idealism, and fails to address the problem of synthetic a priori knowledge to which transcendental idealism is the solution. Well, it is not incompatible with transcendental idealism: for Kant allows realism about bodies (constituted by relational forces) to be compatible with idealism about space itself, as Paul Guyer has shown, and as I argue in the final chapter. Moreover, not all agree with Lorne Falkenstein that transcendental idealism is the price that must be paid for the insights of the Analytic which aim to solve the problem of a priori knowledge. Many, including P. F. Strawson and Guyer, think it possible in principle to take the sweets of the Analytic without the bitters of idealism (but even their reconstructed realist Kant would, I argue, deny knowledge of things in themselves). The problem of synthetic a priori knowledge was not my target in this book; my interest lay elsewhere. Falkenstein is aghast, driven by a sense that there is one clear notion of what is Kantian, and one compulsory examination question, the question which I 'prefer' to avoid, 'steadfastly refuse' to consider, of how any qualified realism is compatible with the arguments of the Analytic. My supposed failure to address this compulsory question is chief ground for his oft-repeated charge that I am blinkered. But perhaps there is room for disagreement about what counts as Kantian, room for disagreement about what the compulsory questions are – room indeed for the hope that one need not answer all questions, in order to answer some questions.

And in view of the complaints of selective blindness, it is the more puzzling that Falkenstein presents my failure to answer his compulsory question as a bald exercise in wishful thinking, rather than noticing, or mentioning, the methodological reasons offered. As Strawson observed (calling it a fundamental but unargued premiss of the *Critique*) Kant appears to believe that ignorance of things in themselves follows merely from the receptivity of our knowledge, merely from the fact that we must be affected if we are to know.¹

Humility is supposed to follow from receptivity: not from any distinctive theses about space, or about synthetic a priori knowledge. If Strawson is right, and there are many texts to support his observation, it should be possible to pursue, independent of those deservedly famous arguments, the question of humility's relation to receptivity – a question I found myself gripped by, though I shall not prescribe it to all as compulsory. This was my methodological starting-point, and justification for pursuit of an interpretive trail that lay largely outside those well-trodden pathways. Since Falkenstein does not mention these methodological reasons, he does not criticize them either, and as far as I can see gives no grounds for rejecting them.

Objection 2: The Attribution of Irreducibility is a Mistake

The second criticism is the alleged implausibility of attributing to Kant an anti-Leibnizian thesis of irreducibility: that the relational is not reducible to the intrinsic and, in particular, that relational causal powers are not reducible to intrinsic properties.

The significance of this irreducibility thesis to the overall project is that it offers to explain *why* Kant thinks knowledge of relational phenomena does not yield knowledge of the intrinsic natures of things in themselves. Briefly: receptivity implies that we are acquainted only with relational causal powers, which are not intrinsic properties, nor reducible to intrinsic properties. Receptivity therefore does not give us access to intrinsic properties, which is why 'properties that belong to things as they are in themselves can never be given to us through the senses' (A36/B52). Recall again that if I am mistaken in attributing irreducibility to Kant, there would still be grounds for attributing to Kant the intrinsic-relational understanding of things in themselves and phenomena, as Falkenstein concedes; therefore, good grounds for attributing humility to Kant; and with it (as we saw at the beginning) good grounds for accepting the proposed solution to the unknowability problem. What would be missing would be an explanation, an answer to the above question of why Kant thinks knowledge of relational phenomena does not give us knowledge of things in themselves; but the core of the interpretation would remain intact.

Is the attribution of irreducibility a mistake? Falkenstein thinks so, for reasons that are partly textual, partly philosophical. Sometimes the complaint is a disagreement about interpretation of text; sometimes the complaint is that I have not given Kant a good enough philosophical argument. Clearly these need to be distinguished, for Kant might (sadly) accept irreducibility without having good enough philosophical reasons.

The textual evidence across a range of writings throughout Kant's life is strong, though I shall not deny (as Falkenstein denies) that there is room for interpretive disagreement. Kant states in many writings that the existence of substances alone, with their intrinsic properties, is insufficient for their causal power or capacity to enter into relations with other things. He says that causal power fails to supervene on substances and their intrinsic properties. I offer many examples, but four will do here.

If . . . nothing more is added to this existence [of the substance as posited in itself], there would be no relation among beings . . . A substance never has the power through its own intrinsic properties to determine others different from itself. (*New Exposition* 1755, *Ak.* 1:412, 415)

For substances to be in relation, something needs to be added over and above what the substances are in themselves; the power to causally affect other substances is not something a substance has through its own intrinsic properties. Falkenstein's objections to my use of such passages from the *New Exposition* are philosophical, not textual, so I assume he is happy to allow they are textual evidence for an early attribution of irreducibility.

11. Phenomena are strictly species of things, not ideas, and do not express the intrinsic and absolute quality of objects . . . 17. Given a plurality of substances, a principle of possible interaction between them is not given by their existence alone. Something more is required from which their mutual relations are to be understood. (*Inaugural Dissertation*, *Ak.* 2: 397, 407)

Phenomena do not 'express' the intrinsic properties of things (contrary to Leibniz); relations among substances are not given simply by the existence of the substances. Later, criticizing Leibniz in the *Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection*, Kant says, 'When everything is merely intrinsic . . . the state of one substance cannot stand

in any active connection whatsoever with the state of another' (A274/B330). Causal power, and causal connection between substances, must be something over and above the merely intrinsic. Again, later still,

One substance cannot have, in virtue of its subsistence, an inherent accident that is the cause of something in another substance ... the possibility of ... interaction cannot be understood from the mere existence of the substances. (*What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made?* 1791, *Ak.* 20:283)

Falkenstein is happy to say my attempt to find irreducibility in all such passages 'flounders', because he thinks it flounders for B67.

Everything in our knowledge which belongs to intuition ... contains nothing but mere relations, of locations in an intuition (extension), of change of location (motion) and of laws according to which this change is determined (moving forces). What presents itself in this or that location, or, beyond this change of location, what activities occur within the things themselves, is not given through these relations. *Now through mere relations one cannot be acquainted with a thing as it is in itself.* We may therefore conclude that since external sense gives us nothing but representations of mere relations, this sense can contain in its representation only the relation of an object upon the subject, and not the intrinsic properties that belong to the object as it is in itself. (B67, italics added)

Now the chief point of my discussion of this passage was, first and foremost, to reject a competing Leibnizian interpretation of the passage. I said that the passage clearly expresses Kant's distinction between the intrinsic as the thing in itself, and the relational as the phenomenal; and that it affirms humility, exactly as Falkenstein himself allows, saying (putting it in his words) that 'we cannot know the intrinsic properties of things through knowing relations'. Falkenstein's reading, thus far, of the passage's main point, conforms exactly to my own, and it is dismal misrepresentation to say, as he does, that I 'ignore' it.

However, I do also suggest that the passage implies something more than these comparatively evident theses, namely the anti-Leibnizian thesis of irreducibility itself. I do not, at all, present the passage as an enthymematic argument for the conclusion of irreducibility, but only suggest that a commitment to irreducibility is

implicit in it. Acknowledging that this is far less obvious, I devoted substantial argument to it, showing how it flows from an understanding of Kant's broader rejection of Leibniz.

Briefly, again: according to Kant, Leibniz 'took the appearances for things in themselves', 'the appearance was, for him, the presentation of the thing in itself' (A264/B320, A270/B326). Leibniz took the (relational) phenomena to supervene on the intrinsic properties of monads. This reduction of phenomena to monads is at once a metaphysical thesis about the reduction of relations to intrinsic properties; and an epistemological thesis about sensory acquaintance, via phenomena, of the intrinsic properties of monads. In Leibniz's view, sensibility gives us 'a confused representation of things, that contains solely what belongs to the things in themselves' (A43/B60). The epistemological and metaphysical theses go hand in hand, for Leibniz: it is because phenomena are nothing over and above monads that sensory acquaintance with phenomena is sensory acquaintance (albeit confused) with monads. Leibniz thus thought that through mere relations one can be acquainted with a thing as it is in itself. Against this Leibnizian backdrop (a central theme of the book), Kant's belief that through mere relations one cannot be acquainted with a thing in itself is a rejection of Leibniz's reduction of phenomena to monads, and an implicit commitment to irreducibility.

Sensitive though he is to the dangers of selective blindness, Falkenstein does not discuss the implications of this Leibnizian backdrop. And since he therefore raises no textual objection to it (though he offers an alternative interpretation of B67), I see no textual reason for thinking the attribution of irreducibility to Kant here is a mistake, especially when it is substantiated elsewhere. And since Kant might (sadly) accept irreducibility without having good enough philosophical reasons, a textual case is sufficient, *tout court*, for attributing irreducibility.

It is worth looking at the philosophical objections too, for I think Kant not only accepted irreducibility, but probably had good reasons for doing so. Falkenstein's first philosophical objection is that the argument for irreducibility is poor, in particular that the argument in the *New Exposition* is complicated and philosophically unpersuasive. In his view, the detail of my analysis in that chapter testifies not to the argument's inherent interest and promise, but to its philosophical barrenness. My use of different notions of

intrinsicness on Kant's behalf is effectively said to be *ad hoc* and trivial. Well, it is not *ad hoc* to invoke notions for which there is independent motivation, and whose application turns a bad argument into a good one: for the argument is, on the final reading, philosophically persuasive. As for the triviality worry – yes, I share it, and indeed raise a version of it myself (p. 121, n. 34), suggesting it may be related to an apparently inevitable circularity about intrinsicness once lamented, but accepted, by David Lewis (though he and I have since attempted to remedy it).² It is hardly an idiosyncratic, and unnoticed, feature of the interpretation. I conclude there is no good philosophical reason for rejecting the *New Exposition* argument for irreducibility.

A second philosophical objection is that irreducibility does not provide support for epistemic humility. Falkenstein thinks a reduction of relational properties to intrinsic properties would not gain us acquaintance with intrinsic properties, given acquaintance with relational properties; and so a denial of that reduction would be irrelevant to acquaintance with intrinsic properties. On the Leibnizian way of thinking, though, he is simply wrong. Acquaintance with phenomena is confused acquaintance with monads, because phenomena are nothing over and above monads. To be sure, we might not realize that we are acquainted with monads and their intrinsic properties, might not realize that we have knowledge, by acquaintance, of things as they are in themselves, but we do, nevertheless – just as someone viewing a crowd from a great distance may not realize he has sensory acquaintance with individual people, but he does, nevertheless.³ And sensory acquaintance supplies at least a *necessary* condition for sensory knowledge – a necessary condition that is absent, if irreducibility holds. Moreover, we can suggest in Leibniz's favour that for one who knows the reduction holds, there may be more than mere acquaintance: for, contrary to Falkenstein, supervenience implies more than the minimal idea that 'there must be something in itself underlying what appears'; it implies there is no difference in the phenomena without a difference in the things in themselves.⁴ This potential source of knowledge of things in themselves also disappears, if irreducibility holds.

It should be evident that it is the Leibnizian reduction of phenomena to things in themselves, and Kant's response to it, which provides one of the most important means of rendering intelligible the philosophical relationship between irreducibility and epistemic

humility. And since Falkenstein omits mention of that Leibnizian reduction and Kant's response, he likewise omits explicit criticism of my interpretation of it, though the above philosophical objection is obliquely relevant. And since that objection fails, he supplies no reason, philosophical or textual, for doubting that irreducibility may provide a justified path to epistemic humility.

Let me, in conclusion, say that I am grateful for the detailed care and attention that Falkenstein has devoted to my work, grateful too for some helpful philosophical arguments, and for some alternative interpretations of texts. I am sorry he finds relatively little to admire, but then I did not expect to convince everybody. I did hope to offer an answer to a question I found gripping; I hoped the story of that answer might be of interest even to some who were not persuaded. And, of course, I hoped to convince some – a hope which Falkenstein has so far given me no good reason to abandon.

Notes

- ¹ P. F. Strawson, *Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 250.
- ² It was lamented, and accepted, by Lewis in 'Extrinsic properties', *Philosophical Studies*, 44 (1983), 197–200; Lewis and I attempt to remedy it in 'Defining Intrinsic', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58 (1998).
- ³ Kant's illustration, drawing on Leibniz, in 'On a discovery' 1790, *Ak.* 8:208. Kant is here arguing against the Leibnizian Eberhard.
- ⁴ I agree with him that supervenience is best not formulated in terms of change, popular though such a formulation is. I define it more formally in chapter 4.