

To the Chair of the Examiners for Part C of the FHS of Computer Science and Philosophy,

**ESSAY FOR COURSE 112 (THE PHILOSOPHY OF KANT):**

**CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THINGS IN THEMSELVES?  
WHY DOES KANT THINK THERE ARE SUCH THINGS?**

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## Can we know anything about things in themselves? Why does Kant think there are such things?

Kant shaped the history and direction of Western philosophy with a revolutionary way of thinking about how we have knowledge of the world. In his own words, before him it “ha[d] been assumed that all cognition must conform to the objects”; he instead suggested that “objects must conform to our cognition.”<sup>1</sup> Although it is uncontroversial that Kant is one of the most important Western philosophers, there is no consensus about whether he was right. This is in part due to the wide range of interpretations that can be extracted from his writing.

In section 1, I begin by examining what it means to know something, and whether the concept of knowing changes when considering Kant’s philosophy. After this, I proceed by questioning what the concept ‘things in themselves’ means. Finding a definition will lead to being able to answer both (i) what we can know about things in themselves and (ii) why Kant thinks there are such things, i.e. being able to answer the two questions of this essay. Moreover, explaining what ‘things in themselves’ means is equivalent to providing an interpretation of Kant’s position of transcendental idealism. Therefore, I proceed by presenting and critically examining various interpretations of Kant’s position, with a focus on how each interpretation defines ‘things in themselves.’ In section 2, I outline the three central claims of Kant’s transcendental idealism. In sections 3 and 4, I critically examine the traditional ‘two-world’ view. Section 3 focusses on noumenalism and section 4 on phenomenalism. In section 5, I present and critique Allison’s epistemological dual-aspect interpretation, and in section 6, I argue that Langton’s metaphysical dual-aspect interpretation is superior. Section 7 concludes by showing exactly how Langton’s understanding of what things in themselves are answers the

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<sup>1</sup> B xvi

two title questions.

1.

In trying to answer whether we can know anything about things in themselves, it is beneficial to ask what it means to know about something, and specifically, what it means to know about something within Kant's philosophy. Contemporary epistemology examines knowledge by assessing things such as: what level of justification is needed for a true belief to be called knowledge, what the nature of any justifiers are, what the structure of knowledge is, and so on. However, this debate has only become prominent in the last half century, following Gettier's 1963 paper; these issues were not discussed by Kant. Kant's discussion of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is tied to his idea that we actively shape the world that we experience: the *Transcendental Aesthetic* and *Transcendental Analytic* explain how we have knowledge of and experience objects, by investigating the *a priori* conditions of our sensibility and understanding (the two relevant faculties).

It is important to note that having knowledge of objects is different from cognising objects. The two often are conflated, which is likely because Kemp Smith's translation of the *Critique* translates both '*Wissen*' and '*Erkenntnis*' as 'knowledge.' Newer translations more accurately translate only the former as 'knowledge,' and instead translate the latter as 'cognition.' Knowledge, for Kant, means "holding something to be true on the basis of ... sufficient evidence,"<sup>2</sup> whereas cognition means "a representation of an object ... often but not always used in ... a true judgement about an actual object."<sup>3</sup>

Given this, I proceed to answer whether we can know about things in themselves by examining the different ways of interpreting what things in themselves are.

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<sup>2</sup> Guyer, 2014: 433

<sup>3</sup> Guyer, 2014: 431

## 2.

Understanding whether we can know anything about things in themselves, and what the nature of such knowledge would be, requires first answering why Kant thought there are things in themselves. For Kant, the concept of 'things in themselves' forms an essential part of his transcendental idealism. While it is often thought that transcendental idealism is a view primarily about space and time,<sup>4</sup> in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant claims that "...all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance [and] the thing that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be..."<sup>5</sup> He also writes in the B preface that the *Critique* shows that "...we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself, but only ... as ... and appearance."<sup>6</sup> So transcendental idealism is about more than just the ideality of space and time: it also includes the doctrine that we can only cognise mind-dependent appearances, as opposed to cognising things in themselves.

Allais summarises three central claims of Kant's transcendental idealism, which any interpretation must be able to account for.<sup>7</sup> Firstly, Kant claims that there is a distinction between what we perceive (called appearances or things as they appear to us) and things as they are in themselves. Secondly, he claims that we do not and cannot have knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Thirdly, he claims that the objects which we do perceive are in some way mind-dependent.

There exist a huge variety of interpretations of Kant's transcendental idealism. They can be characterised as debates between (i) whether Kant is committed to a type of phenomenalism, and what the nature of that phenomenalism is; (ii) whether Kant is committed

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Guyer (1987).

<sup>5</sup> A42 / B49

<sup>6</sup> Bxxvi

<sup>7</sup> Allais, 2010: 656. These three claims can be labelled Kant's distinction, humility and idealism.

to noumenalism, i.e. whether things in themselves are numerically identical to the appearances that they ground or not (often called the debate between 'one object' / 'one-world' and 'two object' / 'two-world' views); (iii) if Kant is committed to things in themselves being numerically identical to appearances, whether the difference between appearances and things in themselves is understood as an epistemological difference or a metaphysical difference. Often these debates and their resulting interpretations overlap. For the sake of simplicity, I proceed by presenting a dialectic that focusses on well-known interpretations and the problems that they face, particularly when it comes to explaining what things in themselves are. I try to find the best interpretation, using two criteria to judge: textual fidelity, i.e. which interpretation is the most faithful to Kant, and philosophical strength, i.e. which interpretation is least susceptible to criticism. I start by examining the traditional view given by Strawson.

### 3.

Strawson interprets Kant as proposing two views which can be considered independently of each other: (i) an analytical view about the limiting framework that bounds human knowledge, and (ii) the doctrine of transcendental idealism.<sup>8</sup> He writes that all of Kant's achievements are contained within the former, whereas the latter is incoherent, and so should be dismissed. His reason for dismissing transcendental idealism is tied to his interpretation of "transcendental idealism equal[ling] phenomenalism plus noumenalism;"<sup>9</sup> he attacks both noumenalism and phenomenalism for being philosophically problematic. One of the key problems he identifies is the tension between the two claims: that (i) things in themselves exist, and (ii) we cannot know about things in themselves. We can deflate this problem by showing that the characterisation of transcendental idealism as noumenalism plus phenomenalism is textually inaccurate. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Strawson, 1966

<sup>9</sup> Matthews, 1969: 205

section I start with noumenalism.

Noumenalism is a claim about noumena. In the positive sense, a noumenon is an object of a non-sensible intuition. We assume it to be “a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which ... is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand.”<sup>10</sup> Noumena understood positively can also be called ‘intelligibilia,’ meaning things that can be known by the intellect as opposed to being known by the senses. In contrast, a noumenon in the negative sense is “a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it.”<sup>11</sup> For example, if we think of a thing of which we have experience, i.e. what Kant calls an appearance, and abstract away from that thing the way in which we experience it, we are left with a notion of a thing as it is in itself. A noumenon in the negative sense is not a distinct entity from appearances.

Noumenalism is the claim that things in themselves are noumena in the positive sense. Kant denies this claim in the section on *Phenomena and Noumena*, which is meant as a summary statement of the *Transcendental Analytic*. In the B edition, Kant clarifies exactly what he means, writing that “[t]he division of objects into phaenomena and noumena, and of the world into a world of sense and a world of understanding, can therefore not be permitted at all in the positive sense.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Kant’s transcendental idealism argues that the things that we think about (i.e. the objects of our cognition) are both appearances *and* things in themselves (with the notion of noumenon in the negative sense). Considering them as things in themselves is to think of a boundary concept that plays a limiting or regulative role; they are “not special *intelligible object[s]* for our understanding.”<sup>13</sup> However, Kant is clear that a noumenon *is*

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<sup>10</sup> B307

<sup>11</sup> B307

<sup>12</sup> B311

<sup>13</sup> A256 / B311

something that actually exists. It is simply that we cannot characterise what that something is. Abstracting away from things what we know of them through the senses leaves no positive content.

I have argued that it is textually wrong to think that Kant's transcendental idealism posits the existence of non-sensible, non-spatiotemporal entities, which are distinct from the appearances on which we do have cognition. This is often called the 'two-world' view, as it supposes the existence of two ontologically distinct worlds, each containing independently existing objects. I next show why it is wrong to interpret Kant as a phenomenalist.

#### 4.

The interpretation that Kant's transcendental idealism is just a familiar Berkeleyan idealism or phenomenism has been discussed ever since the first published review of the *Critique*,<sup>14</sup> and its influence served as the basis for many post-Kantian German idealists. Kant disagreed with the interpretation, however, and it is widely accepted that he revised the *Critique* (into what is called the B edition) in order to distance himself from Berkeley.<sup>15</sup>

In B, Kant defines idealism as the view that all sensory cognition is illusory. He claims that his view, in contrast, does not hold that objects are illusory. For Kant, bodies are real, they exist in space, and we have immediate (i.e. non-inferential) knowledge of them.

This way of distancing himself from Berkeley is problematic. Kant misreads Berkeley: Berkeley does not deny that bodies exist, nor does he claim that everything we perceive through our senses is illusory. Berkeley *does* aim to distinguish between what we call real and imaginary things (real things being the objects that we ordinarily perceive, and imaginary things

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<sup>14</sup> Originally written by Garve and substantially revised and shortened by Feder; now known as the Göttingen or Feder-Garve review (1782).

<sup>15</sup> Scholars disagree about whether Kant presents the same doctrine of transcendental idealism in B, making the difference just a matter of presentation, or whether the theory actually is different. I write on the assumption that the theory being proposed is the same, and that the changes in B were made in order to clarify that theory.

being the objects that we perceive when dreaming, hallucinating, seeing perceptual illusions, and so on). He does this when writing in the *Dialogues*, “what difference is there between real things, and chimeras formed by the imagination...? The ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct... [b]ut the ideas perceived by sense, that is, real things, are more vivid and clear...”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in the *Principles*, he writes that “[t]he Ideas imprinted on the Senses by the Author of Nature [i.e. God] are called *real Things*: [a]nd those excited in the imagination, being less regular, vivid and constant, are more properly termed ... *Images of Things*...”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Berkeley does have a way of distinguishing real and imaginary things, by appealing to their relative vividness and coherence as caused by God.

Kant also repeatedly claims that all objects are representations; for example, he writes that “what we call outer objects are nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility”<sup>18</sup> and that “eternal objects (bodies) are merely appearances, hence [are] nothing other than species of my representations.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, his use of the word ‘*Vorstellung*,’ meaning representation, is unhelpful, as he uses the same word to translate Berkeley’s concept ‘idea.’ So, to show why transcendental idealism is not a phenomenalist theory, we must go further than Kant himself does when distancing himself from Berkeley.

A key part of Berkeley’s doctrine is that only minds and ideas exist, where an idea is something that can only be contained within a mind. This means that for Berkeley, ‘real’ things can only refer to either minds or ideas. Berkeley claims that sensible things can only exist when being perceived, so the meaning of what ‘real’ things are is assimilated into what are usually called ‘imaginary’ things. This provides a strategy, different from Kant’s own, for differentiating

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<sup>16</sup> Berkeley, 1975b

<sup>17</sup> Berkeley, 1975a: XXXIII

<sup>18</sup> A30 / B45

<sup>19</sup> A370



Kant's idealism from Berkeley's. We can show that, according to Kant, the objects that we perceive are not in the mind. This contradicts Berkeley's stance that all that exists is a mind or something that exists in a mind. Kant shows that objects are not in the mind when claiming that anything that is in the mind is accessible to inner sense, meaning it is in time but not in space, and what is outside the mind is accessible to outer sense, meaning that it is in time and is also in space. Differentiating between inner and outer sense like this requires the assumption that we directly (i.e., non-mediately) have cognition of physical objects. Kant thinks that cognition of outer objects is no more inferential than the cognition of inner objects, i.e. our own mental states. Both types of object are known equally immediately. While it could be argued that Kant does still claim that outer objects are in us, as he writes that "space itself is in us,"<sup>20</sup> here he only means to say that thinking in spatial forms is a purely human way of thinking.

Berkeley makes a claim about the type of things that exist, which is an ontological point. Kant, however, is making an epistemological point: he is trying to demonstrate the limits of human knowledge. When talking about appearances, all he means to say is that they are appearances for humans; they are objects shaped by the way that we experience them. Arguing that objects are only representations is not a denial of the existence of any mind-independent objects but is instead an assertion that the only cognition of objects which we have is a cognition shaped by the nature of human experience. Kant's view is thus only idealist in a formal way: objects have the forms that they have, due to our minds. The matter of objects is not generated by the mind, but is instead outer sensory content that becomes perceptually structured by space and time and conceptually structured by the categories.

This notion of Kant's view being epistemological can be combined with the conclusion

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<sup>20</sup> A374

from the section above, which rejected the noumenalist interpretation, to show that there is significant textual evidence to think that appearances and things in themselves are the very same things. Appearances are things in themselves when cognised by humans; things in themselves are the very same objects, but as considered from a 'God's-eye' point of view. This interpretation is also supported by Kant's frequent use of the phrase 'things as they are in themselves.' This use of wording suggests that Kant is not trying to contrast two different things, but is instead trying to point out two ways of considering the exact same things.

This interpretation of Kant, which frames the difference between appearances and things in themselves as epistemological, is known as the 'dual-aspect' view. Having argued that it is wrong to interpret Kant as proposing the existence of two-independent worlds by rejecting the noumenalist and phenomenalist interpretations,<sup>21</sup> I now move on to examine the dual-aspect view.

## 5.

The dual-aspect interpretation became prominent in the 1960 and 1970s, and is famously championed by Allison,<sup>22</sup> although he was pre-empted by Bird and Matthews. As explained above, it proposes an anti-metaphysical reading of transcendental idealism: thing in themselves are understood as an aspect of reality which grounds the spatio-temporal appearances that we perceive.

Allison reaches this view using what he claims are the two key ideas in Kant's writing, that (i) we possess a discursive intellect which has two faculties, and that (ii) the faculty called

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<sup>21</sup> To be precise, I have only discussed the type of phenomenalism that Strawson and the Göttingen review discuss, namely identity phenomenalism. This is the view that objects in space are *identical* to our representations of them. Identity phenomenalism finds few contemporary supporter, though Guyer (1987) is an example. Other phenomenalist interpretations of Kant exist, which propose a weaker phenomenalism.

<sup>22</sup> Allison, 1983/2004

sensibility has epistemic conditions that it uses to cognise objects.<sup>23</sup> Using these two ideas, he reaches a different understanding than Strawson of what things in themselves are.

A discursive intellect is one that passively receives intuitions (through sensibility) and then actively, spontaneously, subsumes those intuited objects using general concepts (through the understanding). This discursive intellect is contrasted with an intuitive intellect, which would be able to bring objects into existence by merely representing them.

The faculty of sensibility has epistemic conditions. An epistemic condition must be applied to an object in order for a discursive intellect to cognise the object. Space and time are the epistemic conditions of spatiotemporal discursive cognition of objects; the categories are the epistemic conditions of discursive cognition of objects in general. By distinguishing between these types of epistemic conditions, Allison shows that we can think about objects of discursive intellect *in general*, as opposed to thinking about objects of our own specific discursive intellect. Objects of discursive intellect in general do not have our specific, intuitional (i.e. spatiotemporal) epistemic conditions applied to them; they only have the more general epistemic conditions of all discursive cognition (the categories) applied to them. This means that things in themselves can be considered by using the categories, but not by using space and time. Hence, we do not cognise things in themselves, but we are still able to have thoughts about them.

An example that helps explain this is by thinking about how non-human animals cognise the world. Dogs perceive the world similarly to how we do, but as they are colour-blind, this aspect of their experience is different to ours. Dolphins and bats perceive the world even more differently, as they use echolocation. As far as we are aware, all animals perceive the world as

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<sup>23</sup> The following discussion draws from Allison, 2004: 11-17.

perceptually conditioned by space and time, however, it is conceivable that some beings could have non-spatio-temporal cognition. Considering 'things in themselves' is to consider things by using the categories, but *not* using space and time at all. It is the aspect of objects when considered from *no* point-of-view.

Allison's dual-aspect interpretation has two notable strengths. Firstly, it gives a way of considering appearances to be mind-dependent, without needing to commit to phenomenalism. Objects do not rely on us for their *existence*, but they do rely on us for a specific trait of their existence, namely, their spatio-temporality. The objects are mind-dependent, without them existing within minds.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, it explains how we have knowledge of things in themselves, while still characterising such things as being 'unknowable.' This is done by firstly distinguishing between cognition and knowledge, and then by showing how Kant's analysis of specific and general discursive intellects means that things in themselves can be known about conceptually, but still remain 'unknowable' in the sense that they cannot be cognised.

I now examine four objections to Allison's interpretation. All of them take issue with the epistemological nature of Allison's dual-aspect view. The first objection is that there is a difference between the claims (a): things in themselves are non-spatiotemporal, and (b): we do not know whether things in themselves are spatiotemporal. The most that Allison's view can support is the weaker claim (b), whereas it seems that Kant wants to argue that claim (a) holds.

The second objection is from Van Cleve, who asks "[h]ow is it possible for the properties of a thing to vary according to how it is considered? As I sit typing these words, I have shoes on my feet. But consider me apart from my shoes: so considered, am I barefoot? I am inclined to

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<sup>24</sup> Some would argue that this is still a type of weak or qualified phenomenalism; for more, see Stang (2016).

say no; consider me how you will, I am not now barefoot.”<sup>25</sup> Van Cleve is arguing that, when given an object considered in terms of spatiotemporal cognition, abstracting to the perspective of a more general discursive intellect does not make the object non-spatiotemporal. Rather, it is just that we are *judging* the object to be non-spatial. Guyer uses the example of a job-applicant: when considering a person for a job, the prospective employer ignores their gender and race. In ignoring gender or race, one just chooses to not consider them as having a particular gender or race, rather than actively judging that they are gender-less or race-less. Abstracting a certain property away from a thing is just to ignore that property, not to imply that something exists which does not have that property. Kant, however, argues that things in themselves do exist and genuinely are non-spatiotemporal.

The third objection is that by treating the distinction between appearances and things in themselves as a mere epistemological difference, Kant’s view becomes trivial. If ‘things in themselves’ merely refers to the independent aspect or way of considering objects, this aspect is only different to the aspect of appearances by virtue of us judging it to be different. Things in themselves become non-spatiotemporal because we define them as being non-spatiotemporal. Some might argue that this is not a problem, however fails it to account for Kant thinking his view to be revolutionary, akin to the Copernican revolution.

The fourth objection is that Kant clearly thinks we are lacking something by not having cognition of things in themselves. Moreover, the limited thoughts we *do* have of them is used in Kant’s discussion of moral philosophy, which relies on the notion of transcendental freedom. Frequently, Kant writes that things in themselves are more fundamental than appearances; they are described as the grounds of appearances. These ideas of epistemic loss and ontological

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<sup>25</sup> Van Cleve, 1999: 8

priority imply that the realm of things in themselves must be more than one way of seeing the word or a limiting concept;<sup>26</sup> things in themselves must *really* exist, and be more than an epistemological aspect.

These four objections show that we need an interpretation of transcendental idealism that (a) is non-trivial and (b) conceives of things in themselves as being *not* spatial and *not* temporal, rather than just as things conceived as being without their spatiality and temporality.

## 6.

One of the major reasons for supporting Allison's dual-aspect view is the thought that Kant wants to propose an alternative to a metaphysics, and so interpreting transcendental idealism itself as being a metaphysical position (rather than an epistemological position) would be missing the point. However, this starting point is wrong: Kant does not want to avoid metaphysics; he only wants to *limit* metaphysics. This is clearly seen by his discussions of God and freedom, which are parts of traditional (i.e., transcendent) metaphysics. These discussions, however, are bounded by the limitations of our cognition. It is thus wrong to think that transcendental idealism is merely an epistemological doctrine. As Kant himself acknowledges, "[a]ll the despisers of metaphysics [still] had their own metaphysics ... [f]or everyone still thinks something about [their own] soul."<sup>27</sup>

Because of this, many recent interpretations have been sophisticated views that try to retain a metaphysical distinction between appearances and things in themselves, while rejecting the traditional 'two-world' interpretation that comes from thinking of Kant as a noumenalist. Langton's interpretation is one of the most prominent of these.<sup>28</sup> She criticises Allison's reading using the fourth objection above: Kant's view implies that there is something

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<sup>26</sup> Melnick (1973) gives an interpretation which makes things in themselves a mere limiting concept.

<sup>27</sup> LM 29: 769

<sup>28</sup> Langton, 1998.

about the world of which we must be ignorant. She then goes on to discuss how to relieve the tension between the two claims, that (i) things in themselves exist and (ii) we cannot know anything about things in themselves. As explained above, a more accurate rendering of claim (ii) is that we cannot *cognise* anything about things in themselves.

Langton's view is to interpret things in themselves as substances that have causally inert intrinsic properties. Appearances thus become the extrinsic properties of those same substances.<sup>29</sup> By framing the distinction like this, the above two claims can be re-interpreted as saying that (i) substances with intrinsic properties exist and (ii) we cannot cognise the intrinsic properties of substances. This removes the tension between the two claims. It also means that we can make the stronger judgement which Kant wants to make, that things in themselves *are* non-spatiotemporal, rather than the weaker judgment which Allison's view is limited to, that we cannot know whether things in themselves are spatiotemporal. This is because Kant's claim that 'things in themselves are non-spatiotemporal' can be reinterpreted as meaning 'being spatiotemporal is not an intrinsic property of substances.'

Langton's interpretation of transcendental idealism is an elegant solution to some of the most troubling problems in Kantian philosophy. Arguments that criticise her view have been made, the most notable criticism coming from Van Cleve, who writes of Langton's view (as well as other contemporary interpretations) that "one can begin to wonder whether Kant's transcendental idealism has anything much to do with idealism at all,"<sup>30</sup> given that there is supposedly nothing mind-dependent about extrinsic properties. Views that solve this and other problems have been formulated.<sup>31</sup> However, due to space constraints I do not discuss these in

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<sup>29</sup> Langton's use of the word 'substance' here is different from how Kant uses it in the *First Analogy*; she distinguishes between substance and phenomenal substance. For more, see Langton, 1998: 48-67.

<sup>30</sup> Van Cleve, 1999: 4

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Allais (2004, 2015) offers a 'one-world' view which overcomes some of the problems with Langton's view.

detail.

7.

I have argued that Langton's interpretation of transcendental idealism is one of the strongest. It is a moderate metaphysical view: it proposes a genuine metaphysical difference between appearances and things in themselves, but it is not as extreme as traditional two-world views. What now remains is to show how her interpretation answers the two title questions, namely (1) whether we can know anything about things in themselves, and (2) why Kant thinks there are such things.

The first is answered by acknowledging the difference between knowledge and cognition. Traditionally, things in themselves have been described as 'unknowable,' as, in contrast to appearances, they cannot be cognised. However, this does not mean we do not have knowledge of them. We do know about and have thoughts about things in themselves, but only in general terms. For Langton, this is knowledge of the intrinsic properties of objects, that are best considered as 'substances.' So, the answer to (1) is simply, yes, we can know about things in themselves. The second question alludes to the problem of knowing something which is defined to be unknowable. However, in light of the answer to (1), this problem is dissolved. The answer to (2) is simply that Kant thinks things in themselves exist because of the way he analyses our knowledge of the world.



### Primary sources

Works of Kant are referred to using the numbering in the Akademie edition, and the following abbreviations:

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|-----|--------------------------------|
| A/B | <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> |
| LM  | <i>Lectures on Metaphysics</i> |

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