

***Problems from Kant.* By James Van Cleve. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. xii+340. £37.50 hb.  
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***Possible Experience.* By Arthur Collins. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999, pp. xx+200.  
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***Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves.* By Rae Langton. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. xiv+232.  
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The question whether Kant's theoretical philosophy is correctly described by the term "idealism" has baffled his readers ever since his own times. If yes, how can he himself claim that his position is the "very opposite" of idealism?<sup>1</sup> If no, why does he famously call it "transcendental idealism"? The situation calls for great exegetical effort, and perhaps even a new label. The three authors at issue here offer both—every one of them in a very interesting manner. James Van Cleve says: Kant endorses "phenomenalism" (and hence he is an idealist). Arthur Collins says: Kant argues for "subjectivism" (and does everything to refute idealism). Rae Langton says: Kant recommends "epistemic humility" (but this does not make him an idealist).

James Van Cleve's book *Problems from Kant* covers themes from throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason*, of which Kant's transcendental idealism is the predominant, but not the only one. Van Cleve also addresses Kant's account of a priori knowledge and his arguments for the ideality of space, time, and matter, and he gives a critical account of Kant's argumentation in the 'Transcendental Deduction', the 'Analogies of Experience' and the 'Transcendental Dialectic'. Since it is not possible to discuss these parts of Van Cleve's book in detail here, I can only stress that all of them are examples of excellent exegetical work. Van Cleve combines a profound knowledge of the Kantian oeuvre with a remarkable talent for its analytical reconstruction and a style of presentation which is always concise and to the point. His efforts to clarify Kant's notoriously ambiguous terminology, as well as always to bring out the premise-and-conclusion structure of his arguments makes reading his book highly profitable for everyone interested in understanding Kant's project and evaluating its success.

My main concern here will be Van Cleve's account of Kant's transcendental idealism. He tries to defend a genuinely idealist reading of Kant's claim that we do not have knowledge of things in themselves but only of appearances, against a more realist interpretation which he

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<sup>1</sup> *Prolegomena*, Ak. IV, p. 289.

thinks is prevailing in the recent literature on the topic. The latter interpretation, known under the title of “the double-aspect view”, holds that by “appearances” and “things in themselves” Kant does not mean two distinct kinds of objects but rather two ways in which one and the same kind of object can be considered. Kant’s claim that things in themselves are unknown to us, is supposed to come down to the less dramatic assertion that we do not have knowledge of objects considered apart from their relation to our forms of sensibility. Van Cleve presents a range of arguments in order to show why the “double-aspect view” is untenable, the most striking being the following: Kant criticizes Leibniz’s principle of the identity of indiscernibles, arguing that complete qualitative identity would be sufficient for numerical identity in the case of things in themselves, but not in the case of appearances (p. 149f).<sup>2</sup> According to Van Cleve, someone who holds that appearances are the very same things as things in themselves (only considered in a different way) has to take the following situation to be possible: “objects A and B may be identical with each other if considered in themselves but diverse from one another if considered in relation to our form of sensibility. In short, A and B may be the same thing in itself, but different appearances—one thing or two, depending how considered. I find this result absurd, and I cannot believe that Kant ever meant to embrace it” (p. 149). This is a good argument, and in my opinion it is sufficient to refute a certain formulation of the “double-aspect view”. The problems with this view arise, I think, as soon as one tries to demonstrate it in the case of a particular object of perception to which one applies an empirical concept. Take Van Cleve’s “object A” to be a chair that you see in front of you. If you consider it meaningful to use a formulation like “the chair in front of me considered apart from my form of intuition (i.e. space and time)”, you are not only confronted with the absurd possibility of there being a second, qualitatively identical chair that both is and is not identical with the one you are looking at; you also have to presuppose that there is something like “considering a chair apart from its spatial properties”. Now, although it is possible to see a chair and abstract from its colour, there is surely no such a thing as considering a chair apart from its spatial properties. Chairs are essentially things you can sit on, and sitting is something which can only take place in space. Since there is no sitting on a chair in a noumenal world, there is no “chair considered as it is in itself”. However, in my opinion there is another formulation of the “double-aspect view” which is not prone to Van Cleve’s critique. In the case of a particular object of perception, which falls under an empirical concept, C, the phrase “a thing which appears to us considered as it is in itself” could mean two different things:

- (a) the C considered as it is in itself (i.e. apart from the way it appears to us)
- (b) that which appears to us as a C considered as it is in itself (i.e. apart from the way it appears to us).

Version (b) avoids, I think, the absurd consequences of version (a), which Van Cleve correctly emphasizes. It is not absurd to consider something, which appears to us as a chair,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A263/B319, and A271/B327.

apart from its spatial properties, because that which appears to us as a chair need not be a chair in itself. Nor would it be a contradiction if it turned out that that which appears to us as chair A is numerically the same thing as that which appears to us as chair B. It may be objected, that version (b) no longer expresses a real “double-aspect view”, because it seems to imply the existence of two different kinds of entities: *that which* appears to us and *that as which* something appears to us. However, version (b) does not imply idealism, since that as which something appears to us need not to be interpreted as a mental entity. I shall return to this point in the discussion of the second author at issue here.

First, however, I want to give a short account of Van Cleve's own positive interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism. Van Cleve reconstructs Kant's idealism as a form of phenomenalism: The claim that the objects of our knowledge are mere appearances means that “any statement about objects is ... logically equivalent to some statement solely about representations” (p. 123). Physical objects are “logical constructions out of perceivers and their states” (p. 11), that is to say they are not real but rather only “virtual” objects, which “exist only in a manner of speaking” (p. 58). Hence, the perception of an object, O, by a subject, S, is not to be understood as a relation between two different kinds of entity but can be characterized as S's being in a mental state of a certain kind (S's sensing or intuiting in an O-like manner) (cf. p. 9). Van Cleve defends Kant's claim that there also exist things in themselves, i.e. objects that are not mere logical constructions, for at least that of which appearances are logical constructions (i.e. perceivers and their mental states) have to be things in themselves—“otherwise we embark on an endless regress of constructions out of constructions” (p. 51).

I do not think that this is a viable interpretation of what Kant calls “transcendental idealism”, for reasons which are expounded by Arthur Collins in his book *Possible Experience*. Collins's aim is to establish an entirely non-idealistic understanding of Kant's philosophy. By “idealism” Collins understands a view according to which “the things we immediately apprehend in experience are realities that exist in our own minds”, so that “if we can know things outside our minds, they are known mediately and by inference from our unmediated experience of mental things” (p. ix). His main argument can be divided into three steps: first, Collins shows that an idealist reading of “transcendental idealism” is inconsistent with certain of Kant's own central insights; secondly, he offers an interpretation of this doctrine that avoids such inconsistencies; and thirdly, he gives an explanation of why there are so many passages in which Kant does seem to entertain an idealist position.

Collins argues that when Kant says that the objects of our knowledge are “nothing but appearances” or “mere representations”, he cannot mean that physical objects are in fact mental entities. According to Kant, representations, understood as a certain kind of mental state, are objects of our inner sense, which have temporal, but not spatial properties. In his “Refutation of Idealism” Kant claims that objects of inner sense do not have any epistemological priority over objects of outer sense. Both are perceived immediately, and we

know both of them only as they appear to us, not as they are in themselves. Moreover, as mental entities, physical objects would have to be private, but Kant assumes that they are situated in a public space and can become the objects of different persons' judgements (p. 4).<sup>3</sup> I find this argument a convincing refutation of every attempt to interpret Kant in a way that makes mental entities the only objects of our knowledge. Now, Van Cleve does not maintain that for Kant physical objects are identical with mental entities, but rather that they are "logical constructions" out of mental entities. However, Collins would say, this does not really change the situation (see pp. 4, 23). Van Cleve's phenomenalist interpretation implies that perceivers and their mental states have to be regarded as things in themselves, and that Kant cannot really deny that "in presenting us with our own mental states, inner sense presents us with *an sich* existing items" (p. 59). Since Kant repeatedly does deny this, Van Cleve concludes that the mental states which serve as the material for the construction of physical objects are not those mental states of which we are conscious by inner sense, but something like their noumenal correlates. In my opinion this would indeed be the only way out of the dilemma; but it leaves one with a strange kind of phenomenalism that makes empirically accessible objects logical constructions out of completely unknown data. Moreover, it is unclear why one should call such data "representations" or "mental states", because we seem to have no more right to characterize things in themselves as "mental" than to call them "physical". I find these consequences hard to swallow, at least if there is a better alternative.

Collins's interpretation runs as follows: "Transcendental idealism" is Kant's term for a conception that should rather be characterized as "subjectivism" than as a form of idealism. The claim that the only objects of our knowledge are appearances does not mean that these objects are mental entities but rather that they are mind-dependent. That is to say that "no conception of reality accessible to us yields descriptions of things in mind-independent terms" (p. 9). Collins explains the difference between a property being mental and its being mind-dependent with the help of colours. If you hold colours to be secondary qualities, then you assume that they are mind-dependent properties, i.e. properties that an object only has in relation to minds equipped with a visual apparatus similar to your own. But you do not therefore hold that colours are mental properties, i.e. properties of your mind. Colours are secondary properties of exactly those objects which also have primary qualities like extension or shape. As Collins nicely puts it: "It is surfaces that are coloured, and mental things don't have surfaces" (p. 18. Compare Kant's own remarks at B69n). When Kant says that even when we know the spatio-temporal properties of objects we only know their appearances, he should be understood as saying that all spatio-temporal properties are mind-dependent in the sense just explained: As colours are "ways that things look to us" (p. 17), spatio-temporal properties, which we can unite into empirical concepts like a chair or table, are ways things appear to us rather than mental representations or constructions out of them. This is very close

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Prolegomena*, Ak. IV, p. 298.

to what I referred to above as version (b) of the “double-aspect view”.<sup>4</sup> To say that a chair is *that as which* something appears to us does not make the chair a mental entity; and the perception of a chair is still a relation which holds between two independent entities, a perceiver and an object that appears to him. This object does not exist in our minds but is “außer uns” in the two senses which Kant wants to distinguish: it is ontologically independent, i.e. can exist without someone perceiving it, and it appears to us through outer sense, i.e. as something in space.

Collins’s greatest achievement is a chapter on Kant’s concept of representation, in which he gives an interpretation of the very passages that make a non-idealistic reading of Kant’s philosophy so hard to believe in. Collins shows in several cases that Kant’s slogans like “appearances are mere representations” or “space is in us” cannot be taken literally but are his ways of emphasizing the irreducible subjectivity of our knowledge. Further, the book contains chapters on various aspects of Kant’s philosophy that are connected with the question of idealism, e.g. the transcendental deduction, and Kant’s theory of the self. All of these are written with great philosophical perceptiveness and an admirable linguistic sensitivity in interpreting the Kantian text. In my opinion, Collins offers the soundest way out of the exegetical dilemmas connected with Kant’s transcendental idealism given so far. It should be noted, however, that his book is not concerned much with Kant’s *arguments* for the subjectivity of human experience. Since Van Cleve claims that many of Kant’s arguments for transcendental idealism in the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ and in the chapter on the ‘Antinomies’ only make sense in the framework of an idealistic interpretation, there is still much work left for someone who wants to show that the latter is wrong.

In her book *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*, Rae Langton offers an interpretation that aims to combine a non-idealistic reading of Kant’s texts, along with arguments supporting the acceptability of the resulting doctrine. She argues along the following lines: By “things in themselves” and “appearances” Kant does not mean two distinct kinds of entities but rather two kinds of properties of substances: intrinsic and extrinsic ones. Intrinsic Properties are properties a substance could have even in the absence of any other thing. (pp. 17, 119). Kant’s doctrine that we do not have knowledge of things in themselves then comes down to the claim that we do not have knowledge of the intrinsic properties of substances, a principle which Langton labels “epistemic humility”. The main (and best) argument for epistemic humility is not to be found in what Kant says about space and time as subjective forms of our intuition, but rather in his doctrine of receptivity. According to Kant, that is, things have to affect us in order to become objects of our knowledge. Since the property of affecting us is itself a relational and hence an extrinsic property, we are only acquainted with extrinsic properties of substances. From this Kant can draw the conclusion that we do *not* have knowledge of any intrinsic properties of substances,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Collins, p. 35. That he does not favour version (a) is clear from what he says on pp. 144f.

because he has good arguments for the conclusion that—contrary to Leibniz—extrinsic properties are not reducible to intrinsic ones (pp. 124-139).

I am sure that Langton's book will strike many readers as a highly original and clever interpretation of Kant's doctrine of things in themselves, which on the one hand avoids the problems of an idealistic reading of it, and on the other preserves its philosophical relevance by making it independent of dubious arguments based on the existence of synthetic a priori truths in mathematics. The book is written with great philosophical engagement, by an author enamoured of the attractiveness of a fresh view to an old problem.

This positive impression will be marred, however, by a closer look at the Kantian text. Langton bases her conclusion that by "things in themselves" Kant means the intrinsic properties of substances on some passages taken from the chapter on the 'Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection'. In this chapter Kant criticizes aspects of Leibniz's philosophy, arguing that the latter disregards the distinction between objects of the understanding (noumena) and those of the senses (phenomena). The problem, however, is that Langton makes excessive use of quotations which do not convey Kant's own position, but are in fact taken from his presentation and critique of Leibniz's thought. Take the following quotation: "Substances in general must have some intrinsic nature, which is therefore free from all external relations" (A274/B330). This sentence, which Langton uses repeatedly under the description "Kant's statement" (pp. 16, 33, 64, 75, 157, 180), appears in a paragraph in which Kant describes *Leibniz's* argument for his monadology. The paragraph starts: "Leibniz's monadology has its sole basis in the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic, which he presented purely in relation to the understanding"; and it concludes: "This, therefore, completed the conception of the monads...". The passage that occurs between these two sentences can hardly be taken as Kant's own opinion.<sup>5</sup> This is even more obvious in the case of the following passage: "Concepts of relation presuppose things which are absolutely given, and without these are impossible" (A284/B340). For Langton, this is something "Kant says", and is an important piece of evidence for her own interpretation (pp. 16f, 102, 157, 180). But in the sentence in which this phrase appears, Kant claims that this principle would only be valid if we could have knowledge of objects if we represented them "by mere concepts". Since this—contrary to what Leibniz holds—is impossible, Kant concludes as follows: "Because, without an absolutely inner element, a thing can never be represented by mere concepts, *I may not therefore claim* that there is not also in things themselves which are subsumed under these concepts, and in their intuition, something external that has no basis in anything wholly inward" (A284/B340, my italics). Hence, the principle that Langton uses affirmatively is a principle of which Kant explicitly denies that it has any relevance for the objects of our knowledge. Even the motto of Langton's book, "We have no insight whatsoever into the intrinsic nature of things" (A277/B333), is quoted in a very misleading

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<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder that Langton later finds a remarkable similarity between Kant's and Leibniz's accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic properties (cf. pp. 68f.), but it is astonishing that she supports this by alluding to the very claims which she previously presented as Kant's own.

manner. In Kant, this sentence is a quotation and is treated as a claim of which sense can only be made if it is translated in his own terminology of “appearances” and “things in themselves” (and not, as Langton seems to hold, the other way round). A little earlier, Kant makes fun of talk about “the absolutely intrinsic” by calling it “nothing but a silly idea” (*eine bloße Grille*). There are more examples of this rather lax treatment of the Kantian text, of which I shall only mention that on page 41, where Langton simply begs the question of her interpretation by translating Kant’s words “*Beschaffenheit an sich selbst*” (B306) as “intrinsic nature”.

Langton’s book has some interesting and good chapters on Kant’s arguments against the reducibility of relational properties, on his account of primary and secondary qualities (as compared with that of Locke), and also on the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. But she greatly overestimates the relevance of this latter distinction for Kant’s doctrine of transcendental idealism. In my opinion the textual evidence for her interpretation comes down to a short passage which Kant added to the second edition of the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’. There he claims “that since outer sense gives us nothing but mere relations, this sense can contain in its representation only the relation of an object to the subject, and not the inner properties of the object in itself” (B67). Besides the fact that Kant introduces this argument as a further confirmation of a theory he has developed before (not as the theory itself), one may wonder how convincing it is. In an illuminating interpretation of this passage, James Van Cleve shows that Kant confuses the claim “that the only properties we intuit in outer objects are relations *to other objects*”, and the claim “that the only properties we intuit in outer objects are relations *to the subject*”.<sup>6</sup> This raises two problems: first, if outer sense conveys to us nothing but relations then we do not need Kant’s doctrine of receptivity in order to show that we do not know the intrinsic nature of objects in space. Secondly, Langton’s argument from receptivity to epistemic humility seems to invoke an unproved premise. The claim that all we know of an object are its *perceived relations* to other objects does not follow immediately from the fact that we have to stand in a *relation of perception* to an object (the relation of being affected by it) in order to gain knowledge of it.

Tobias Rosefeldt  
 Philosophisches Seminar  
 der Universität Heidelberg  
 Heidelberg  
 Germany.  
 tobias.rosefeldt@urz.uni-heidelberg.de

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<sup>6</sup> *Problems from Kant*, p. 153.