Kant on Unknowable Things in Themselves: A Neglected Path through the Minefield

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This is an early draft that I will later break into two parts to be revised separately. It will become “The New Kant” and “Kant’s Non-Rationalist Metaphysics of Things in Themselves”

Kant famously seeks to establish “our unavoidable ignorance in respect of the things in themselves” (Bxxix). Interpreters struggle to understand how we are supposed to endorse both of these claims:

**Assertion:** There are things in themselves.

**Ignorance:** We cannot have knowledge of things in themselves.

We seem to have to accept the assertion to get to the ignorance claim, at which point we learn that we were never entitled to the assertion.

The tension is especially clear to see in familiar phenomenalist interpretations, on which Kant denies us knowledge of anything beyond the private ideas or sense data in our minds, asserting that we are ignorant of their external causes. The problem is that this denial of knowledge would undercut the assertion that there are such external causes. It is no surprise, then, that Kant himself later rejects this interpretation of the first Critique: those who read him as similar to Berkeley in this way “put their own folly in the place of well-determined concepts” (P 4:293). For these reasons, and for others as well, recent interpreters tend to reject phenomenalist approaches.¹ And I will follow here. But this rejection leads to a surprisingly sharp further disagreement.

¹ Allison says that phenomenalist Kant would be “an inconsistent Berkeley” (1983, 4). Langton says that this would be “the worst of all veil of appearance philosophies: Berkeley plus unknowable things in themselves” (1998, 15). Van Cleve’s reading (1999) is a prominent exception to this trend, to which I will briefly return below.