

Transcendental Idealism and the Limits of Knowledge

Introduction

In several works, Immanuel Kant presents a doctrine which he calls transcendental idealism.¹ Kant asserts that we create empirical intuitions of things through our sensory capacities and intuitions about space-time.² Further, he argues that it is only possible to gain knowledge about objects through these empirical intuitions.³ In this paper, I will attempt to show that this doctrine leads to a distinction between the knowledge of the object of perception and the knowledge of the thing in itself and that the latter kind of knowledge is impossible to obtain through any human means, thereby defending Kant's account.

After explaining Kant's notion of pure intuitions, that is, the intuitions of space and time, I will briefly discuss the distinction between things in themselves and their appearances which arises from his doctrine of idealism. I will then discuss how intuitions about things are formed and utilized to gather knowledge of them, and how this leads to a difference between the two kinds of knowledge previously mentioned. After going over some objections to Kant's theory, I will proceed to discuss the limitations of human knowledge, thereby providing defense for the unknowability of things in themselves.

¹ Kant's Transcendental Idealism, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism>

² Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §10, §11.

³ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark I.

Pure Intuitions

In the *Prolegomena*, Kant distinguishes between pure or *a priori* intuitions and empirical or *a posteriori* intuitions. While a judgment may be discovered by either of these intuitions, Kant indicates that for a synthetic judgment to be apodeictic, universal, and necessary, it must be discovered by a pure intuition,⁴ since an *a posteriori* intuition is neither universal nor necessary.

Kant's notion of a pure intuition is indeed very specific. Suppose an intuition takes place without the notion of a former or an object. In such a case, the event would not be an intuition at all since there is no object of the intuition. Thus, an intuition needs an object. However, if the intuition about an object is preceded by the object, then it is not an *a priori* intuition, but an empirical intuition, for one can only intuit something about an object through an experience of the object. Thus, a pure intuition needs to precede the object of intuition.⁵

As a result, an intuition can be *a priori* and anticipate the actuality of an object if and only if it contains nothing but a form of sensibility. That is to say that a pure intuition consists only of the intuition which precedes all impressions through which one might be affected by an external object.⁶ This indicates that not only does a pure intuition precede any empirical intuitions, it also has an effect on the way one may develop the empirical intuitions of an object. Moreover, since empirical intuitions require the faculty of sensation, and objects of the sense can only be intuited in accordance with this pure intuition, as pure intuition must precede empirical intuitions, it must be the case that intuitions are only valid for objects of the senses.⁷

⁴ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §8.

⁵ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §8, §9.

⁶ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §9

⁷ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §9, §10.

In both, the *Critique* and the *Prolegomena* Kant demonstrates that it is the intuitions of space and time that are the contents of one's pure intuitions and forms of sensibility.⁸ (These arguments are beyond the necessary scope of this paper).

Things in Themselves and Objects of Perceptions

Let's introduce another distinction before proceeding further. According to Kant, to form judgments about a thing, a representation of it must be created by the sensory faculties. In such a case, the thing which, through the sensory faculties, produces a representation is known as the thing in itself, whereas the representation produced is known as the object of perception. As we can see, there is a dichotomy between the object of perception and the thing in itself, as the two must be mutually exclusive, since an appearance must be distinct from the thing which produces the appearance. Here, an object of perception or the *phenomenon* is the appearance of the thing in itself or *noumenon*.⁹

Transcendental Idealism and Knowability of Things

Having established the notions of pure and empirical intuitions, and the distinction between things in themselves and objects of perception, let's proceed to link these with Kant's idealism.

Kant asserts that the knowledge about the nature of an object can be gained only through intuitions about the objects since this is the only way a mind may discover judgments about it.¹⁰ These intuitions may be either pure intuitions or empirical intuitions.

If the intuitions used to discover judgments about an object are empirical, we cannot deduce knowledge of the nature of the object from these, since the nature must belong to the

⁸ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §10.

⁹ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark II; §32.

¹⁰ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark II.

object necessarily, and a posteriori intuitions cannot help discover necessary judgments.¹¹ Thus, empirical intuitions cannot give us the knowledge of the nature of an object. However, if intuitions of space and time, or the pure intuitions are used to derive intuitions to objects, knowledge of the nature of these objects may be discovered. As it is the case with pure intuitions, though, they govern only the nature of the objects of perception, since they must precede the act of perceiving.¹² Thus, pure intuitions can give us the knowledge of the nature of objects of perception, but not the knowledge of the nature of things in themselves, as they do not govern the nature of things in themselves, but only of their appearances.¹³ Furthermore, since the object of perception or *phenomenon* is distinct from the thing in itself or *noumenon*, insofar as the object of perception is only an appearance of the thing in itself, it is impossible to make judgments about the nature of the thing in itself.¹⁴ This argument can be laid out as follows:

1. Knowledge of the nature of things is only through pure or empirical intuitions
2. Judgments formed from empirical intuitions cannot give the knowledge of the nature of things since empirical intuitions are neither necessary nor universal
3. Pure intuitions can only give knowledge of the nature of the objects of perception as they govern the nature of the objects of perception, not of things in themselves
4. Objects of perception are appearances of, and distinct from things in themselves
5. One cannot have the knowledge of the nature of things in themselves, but only of their appearances

¹¹ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §8, §15.

¹² Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §9, §10, §14.

¹³ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. §14, §16.

¹⁴ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark II, III.

This argument can be extended to the following with the help of the order of inquiry principle:

1. Natures of things in themselves cannot be known
2. Knowledge of things requires knowing their natures (order of inquiry principle)
3. Knowledge of things in themselves is not possible

In other words, because intuitions cannot help gather knowledge of the nature of things in themselves (but only of the nature of their appearances), it is not possible to have knowledge of things in themselves (but only of their appearances). This shows not only that there exists a distinction between the knowledge of things in themselves and the knowledge of objects of perception, but also that human knowledge is limited to the knowledge of objects of perception. The limitation originates from the fact that the mind only really interacts with the appearance to form intuitions, and does not have the capacities to directly interact with the thing in itself to form intuitions.

The Problem of Things in Themselves

Many of Kant's early readers maintain that the conclusion of the unknowability of things in themselves introduces a problem in the entire doctrine — given Kant's reasoning, one cannot know about the reality of things in themselves, as one cannot know about the nature of things in themselves. However, if the reality of things in themselves cannot be known, it should not be possible to know about the reality of objects of perception since Kant's idealism indicates that objects of perception are representations of the things in themselves.¹⁵ That is, the appearance of a thing cannot be formed unless the thing has a certain degree of reality. They believe that this is clear evidence of inconsistencies in Kant's argument and that this argument has some absurdities.

¹⁵ Kant's Transcendental Idealism, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism>. Section 3.4.

As F.H. Jacobi famously pointed out, “without the presupposition of the [thing in itself] I cannot enter the [critical] system, and with that presupposition, I cannot remain in it.”¹⁶

Kant’s transcendental idealism, though, is very distinct from a pure idealism, as he points out in the concluding remarks of the *Prolegomena*.¹⁷ He grants that by all means there exist bodies independent of us, i.e., things in themselves. He implies that even though we have knowledge only of the appearances, and not of the things in themselves which cause those appearances, the things are no less real. Furthermore, there is significant reason to believe that even if one cannot know about the nature of things in themselves, one may know about the reality of such things, as we are aware of the facts of causation (every event has a cause) and conservation (the quantity of a substance must be conserved).¹⁸ Since this means that it must be the case that things in themselves exist (despite us having any knowledge of them), it is possible for them to affect our senses and create appearances. Thus, Kant’s doctrine of the unknowability of things in themselves is vindicated.

Conclusion

Clearly, the Kantian doctrine of Transcendental Idealism leads to a distinction between the knowledge of objects of perceptions and the knowledge of things in themselves, where the latter cannot be attained through human intuitions. The objections fail to cast any doubt upon the theory, and it can be maintained that the appearances of objects which we may know about are bound by our pure intuitions and the laws of nature in a way such that nothing can be known about the nature of that which is not an object of perception.

¹⁶ Jacobi, F. H. (1812). *Werke*. Vol. II, p. 304

¹⁷ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark II.

¹⁸ Kant, I., & Ellington, J. W. (2001). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Part 1, Remark II; §15.