

THE TRUTH ABOUT THINGS IN THEMSELVES ¹

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Abstract. If what we think and talk about were constituted independently of its accessibility to us, two questions might turn out to be unanswerable. First of all: How could we know anything about it? Furthermore: How could we form a bona fide conception of it, or even of its possibility? I consider two answers to the twin questions about knowledge and concept formation, by Kant and Dummett respectively. I argue that in spite of appearances, transcendental idealism and semantic antirealism share common concerns about knowledge, content and truth. Against both Kant and Dummett, I propose an argument from contingency in favor of the constitutive independence of the subject-matter of thought and talk, and of the independence of truth from epistemic constraints.

Keywords: empirical realism, metaphysical possibility, semantic antirealism, transcendental idealism, truth, verifiability in principle, verification.

1

Suppose that what we think and talk about were constituted independently of its accessibility to us, two questions might then turn out to be if not unanswerable, at least particularly difficult to answer. First of all: how could we know anything about it? Secondly: how could we form a bona fide conception of it, or even of its possibility? The idea and indeed the hope behind the two questions is that the worry would be alleviated, perhaps even vanish altogether if only we could show that what we think and talk about somehow fits our cognitive capacities, or is linked to them in such a way that we may indeed gain a genuine knowledge of it

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¹ I wish to thank Claudiu Baciu, Marius Augustin Draghici and Christian Onof for comments and criticisms on an earlier version of this paper when it was read at the *Kant 300 Conference* in april 2024, and Oana Camelia Serban for comments and questions on a subsequent version read at the special pannel on Kant of the 5th International Scientific Conference *Philosophy Nowadays* in june 2024. My greatest debt is to Brian Loar, with whom I discussed very early versions of this paper when he was teaching at Rutgers and whose comments and advice have been as usual invaluable.

and form legitimate representations or conceptions, not just of the subject-matter of thought and talk, whatever it might turn to be, but of its so-called metaphysical possibility.

The key problem here is the conception of independently existing “things”. The word might be hopelessly vague, but it is clear that we think and talk about, say, material objects, either in the folk-theoretic sense or in the scientific sense brought about by the natural sciences, or about, say, mental events and minds, and that the question does arise as to whether it is legitimate to believe that the material and the mental are in any strong, interesting and defensible sense independent from us.

It might seem awkward at first blush to talk about the mental in this way. How could anything mental be independent from our minds? Ideas, mental representations and mental events clearly depend on us for their existence: they are inescapably *ours*². The key question, though, is whether it is thereby guaranteed that they are, qua mental, by the very nature of the case, always or necessarily *accessible to us*.

Note that the very same question may be asked about physical objects in spite of the strong difference between the mental and the physical with respect to ownership. We don’t “own” material objects as we “own” our propositional attitudes. Is it guaranteed that ordinary physical objects, standing in spatial and temporal relations to us, or that theoretically posited or inferred physical entities, e.g., subatomic particles, are independent from their accessibility to us and that the truth of the propositions about them is independent from their verifiability by us, either *hic et nunc*, or in principle, or perhaps à la Pierce in the long run of scientific inquiry?

In both cases – the mental and the physical – the key questions are whether and how some form of metaphysical independence might be guaranteed and whether the notion of truth beyond all possible verifiability is coherent. The question I wish to consider here is whether realism in that sense, i.e., in the sense of *constitutive independence* is defensible. I shall argue that it is and that the notion of truth unfettered by epistemic notions may be vindicated.

2

I wish to consider *both* questions: the question about knowledge and the question about concept formation. I hope it is clear that the two are closely connected. Here is at first blush why they are: if it turns out that we are unable to form a legitimate conception of whatever we think and talk about, the

² See Annalisa Coliva, “On What There Really Is to Our Notion of Ownership of a Thought. A Reply to John Campbell”, in *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*, Vol. 9, Number 1, 2002, pp. 41–46, for a nice discussion of this issue.

epistemological worry vanishes. Why bother about claims to the effect that we're able to gain knowledge of things we can't conceptualize at all, or – perhaps worse – that we can't conceptualize correctly? There would be no point in wondering whether we know (or ignore) objects, or properties, or state of affairs that are beyond our kern if it turns out that they are incorrectly conceptualized, or that we've formed defective conceptions or representations of them.

The idea is that a conceptualization will be legitimate insofar as our claims about the states of affairs we think and talk about are indeed in the market for truth. So, once again the problem is: is there a legitimate conception of anything we might think and talk about being possibly inaccessible to us that nevertheless allows our claims about it to be either true or false?

I'll consider this problem with a distinction in mind that concerns kinds of ascriptions we're prone to make, either to ourselves or to whomever we share concepts and thoughts with. There are, on the one hand, ascriptions of conceptualization or understanding, and, on the other, ascriptions of knowledge. The distinction amounts to this: ascriptions of the first kind are ascriptions to the effect that we and others truly understand claims or correctly grasp what they mean or are about; ascriptions of the second kind are ascriptions to the effect that the claims we've correctly grasped, or the meaning of which we do understand are indeed both true and known by us.

This, I hope, makes it clear why and how the concept formation question and the knowledge and truth question are closely connected *when the independence claim is at stake*. They are because it might be objected that we don't truly understand the claim to the effect that what we think and talk about is (or could be) constituted independently of its accessibility to us and, more generally, the meaning of any other claim that presupposes it, or implies it, or follows from it, or turns out to be equivalent to it. An alternative way to make the same point is to remark that it might be objected that we do not grasp the meaning of sentences or statements expressing the independence claim in some language, either a natural one such as English, or a formal one (defined without reference to any interpretation of it), or indeed the meaning of any other sentence or statement (or well-formed formulas in the case of formal languages) connected to them in any of the aforementioned ways.

In what follows, I'll be looking at two different ways of arguing in favor of a negative conclusion with respect to both understanding and knowledge. In other words, I'll be looking at two different vindications or purported vindications of downright negative answers to the two questions we started with. Unsurprisingly, the negative answers are:

1. We can't know anything about *X* if *X* is constituted independently of its accessibility to us.
2. We can't form a bona fide conception of *X*, or even of its possibility, if *X* is constituted independently of its accessibility to us.

One answer is Kant's, the other is Dummett's. It might seem at first blush that Kant's transcendental idealism and Dummett's semantic antirealism are addressing different issues and that there is a mismatch here, not just between philosophical styles but between the core ingredients of incommensurable philosophical standpoints. In particular, one might object that the unknowability of things in themselves is one thing and the impossibility of truth beyond all verification (or verifiability in principle) another. In what follows, I'll defend the view that there is more than a mere congruence between the two arguments in favor of the negative conclusions. The notion of epistemic necessity will play a key role in the argument to the effect that this is indeed the case. I shall then move on to a rejoinder to Dummett's antirealist position. Finally I will ask whether this rejoinder might help us assess the Kantian stance on the issue of the unknowability of things in themselves, and propose tentative remarks on how to proceed that take into account the rejection of excluded middle.

3

When applied to propositions and relativized to knowers, the notion of epistemic necessity may be understood in at least two different ways. One might say that a proposition is epistemically necessary for a knower just in case the knower must accept it and rule out its negation on the basis of both evidence of an empirical kind and reasoning not restricted by cognitive limitations, i.e., on the basis of ideal reasoning. Another possibility is that a proposition is epistemically necessary for a knower just in case the knower must accept it and reject its negation on the basis of ideal reasoning alone.

Prima facie, the second notion looks like the kind of notion we're interested in: epistemically necessary propositions are propositions that no knower may legitimately rule out whatever the available empirical data might turn out to be. These propositions are necessary in the sense that it would be unreasonable and perhaps even irrational not to believe them, or to refuse to believe that they are true. In other words, someone dismissing the epistemically true proposition would place himself or herself outside the scope of reason.

The problem shared by both notions is that the requirement of ideal reasoning is improbably strong. *Nobody* reasons perfectly or ideally. Provided that we're looking for an appropriate model of what to count as epistemically necessary *for us*, some degree of idealization is called for. So the question is: how do we set a limit, how do we curb the ideality, according to which criteria, and how are we to argue for these criteria?

What I propose to do here is to look at this issue in terms of properties. We'll be looking for properties that whatever we think and talk about must possess in order for it to be the object of our knowledge. The suggestion will be that it is

epistemically necessary that whatever we think and talk about possesses these properties in order for it to be properly conceptualized and known by us *qua knowers assessing warrants or justifications in shared sub-optimal epistemic conditions*.

What could these properties be? Kant's answer is that they must be intuitional properties, i.e., properties that anything must possess if it is to be the object of our intuition. On the negative side of this proposal, these properties may not be extracted, either from the general concept of the object or from the individual instances of the general concept.

As far as objects and properties are concerned, Dummett offers no answer. But as far as knowledge and truth are concerned, he does propose one, namely that the truth of the propositions we do accept and truly know must be constrained by whatever epistemic notion fits the particular area of discourse the proposition belongs to: proofs in the mathematical case, empirical evidence in the case of propositions about the external world, outward criteria in the case of mental events, memories and documents in the case of past events, and so on and so forth.

So there is for Dummett's antirealist a property the notion of truth must possess in order for it to be grasped at all, namely the property of being constrained by the relevant epistemic notion. It sometimes looks as if Dummett eschews the notion of truth altogether, substituting assertibility or verifiability for truth and assertibility conditions for truth conditions simpliciter.³ This is because of the so-called manifestability argument to the effect that *only* the grasp of the assertibility conditions of propositions may be manifested in language-related behavior and, in particular, in inferential behavior of the deductive or logical kind.⁴ This is a crucial point, not a minor exegetical matter, especially with respect to the concept formation problem, so let me dwell on it a bit.

In Dummett's case, we're considering an argument the point of which is to conclude that there is a property the concept of truth *must* possess. On the negative side of the antirealist argument, the conclusion is that there is no bona fide conception of truth according to which the truth of propositions may transcend their assertibility or verifiability. However, this isn't *another* concept formation problem, altogether different from the one we started with and remote from Kant's position on unknowability. Maybe the positive side of the argument will bring this out more clearly with the help of the notion of epistemic necessity.

Just as it is epistemically necessary that the truth of statements expressing genuine propositions be, at least in principle, known by us *qua knowers assessing*

³ See Brian Loar, "Truth Beyond All Verification", in Barry M. Taylor (ed.), *Michael Dummett – Contributions to Philosophy*, Dordrecht, Springer, 1987, p. 83 for a discussion of this construal.

⁴ See Michael Dummett, "The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic", in Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard UP, 1978, pp. 215–245, and Michael Dummett, "Realism", in *Synthese*, vol. 52, issue 1, 1982, pp. 145–165.

warrants in sub-optimal epistemic conditions (Dummett), it is epistemically necessary that the properties of what we think and talk about be intuitional, i.e., neither derived from general concepts, nor extracted from individual instances (Kant).

However, this is at best a parallel or analogue that we obtain by resorting to the notion of epistemic necessity when it is construed so that ideal reasoning and ideal access to warrants are properly restrained. We need something stronger to show that there is more than a mere coincidence. We need to give a precise content to what the curbing or restraining of the idealization of cognition and accessibility to warrants amounts to.

Let me go back to Kant on things in themselves to see if anything may be found in the Kantian position that shows there is more here than a mere analogue, something that sets precise limits to the desired restraint or curbing and gives it a determinate and specific content *both* in terms of properties and in terms of truth.

4

Kant's fundamental point is that we know nothing at all, or at least nothing of substance about things in themselves. Our human knowledge is a knowledge of appearances, i.e., of things *as they appear to us*.

Let us look at transcendental idealism as it is presented and defined in the fourth paralogism of the first *Critique*:

I understand, by the *transcendental idealism* of all appearances [*Erscheinungen*] the doctrine that they are all together to be regarded as mere representations and not as things in themselves [*nicht als Dinge an sich selbst ansehen*], and accordingly that space and time are only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or conditions of objects as things in themselves.⁵

The only positive assertion we're allowed to make about things in themselves without contradicting ourselves is that we cannot know them. That particular knowledge, i.e., the very knowledge of that impossibility is *not* a knowledge of a particular property of things in themselves. It is a knowledge of a particular feature of our own cognitive limitations with respect to so-called or putative *Dinge an sich selbst*. Either that or, if it is to be about things in themselves rather than about things as they appear to us in any reasonable sense (i.e., in spite of the fact that there is no such thing as things in themselves), it is about the fact that they can never be *representations*.

⁵ Imm. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, english translation and edition by P. Guyer and A. Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, [1781, 1787] 1999 : A369.

The point here is that it would be unfair to Kant to claim that the very thesis of transcendental idealism commits him to countenance the existence of what he wants to repudiate. We may distinguish two aspects of this repudiation. First of all, things in themselves can't *appear* to us, by definition or on pain of contradiction. Secondly, things in themselves can't be *represented* because our cognitive makeup doesn't allow it or, better, because it conflicts with what makes our human knowledge possible in the first place.

This, I think, brings about an important point because it shows that, under either construal (the one in terms of appearance and the one in terms of cognitive makeup) Kant isn't, helplessly as it were, endorsing the view that things in themselves are just a way things might be among many others, with the particular proviso or qualification that it is one of which we may not have the faintest inkling. If that were the case, what we, as a matter of fact, do know of objects in the actual world, i.e., their intuitional properties, could after all be inaccessible to us in another possible world. But this is tantamount to claiming that we could very well have no access to these intuitional properties. So either they are intuitional properties for *other beings* with a different cognitive makeup—beings for whom knowledge has different and indeed divergent possibility conditions—or the very conception of intuition and intuitional properties put forward so far is incomplete.

But it isn't. It is very clear for Kant that the only intuition we have as humans is sensory intuition. We only have intuition of objects which are given to us, either through the perception of the senses (sight, typically), or in the imagination⁶

Kant explicitly denies that we have any other kind of intuition, e.g., intellectual or non sensory, through which we could secure a knowledge of objects in a different way, e.g., as objects given to us in a purely intellectual, or discursive, or conceptual manner, deprived of any information or data given to us by the senses. He denies this by way of a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that any positive knowledge might be thus acquired by us. Kant claims:

[I]f, however, I suppose that there be things that are merely objects of the understanding and that, nevertheless, can be given to an intuition, although not to sensible intuition (*as coram intuitu intellectuali*), then such things would be called noumena (*intelligibilia*).⁷

[F]rom this supposition arises the concept of a noumenon, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of something in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition.⁸

(Note, incidentally, that there cannot be, in Kant's view, a conceptual or intellectual intuition of abstracta, e.g., of what we would call "abstract objects" –

⁶ *Ibidem*, B 75.

⁷ *Ibidem*, A 249.

⁸ *Ibidem*, A 249.

typically, so-called mathematical objects such as numbers. From this point of view, both platonism, the contemporary doctrine that there are such objects, and nominalistic rejoinders to the effect that one may dispense with them, would be both misguided as philosophical positions disputing the vexed question of the existence of mathematical entities thus construed.)

So, as far as intuitional properties are concerned, we may at least provisionally say this:

1. Nothing positive may be legitimately claimed about things in themselves if they are construed as *a way that what we think and talk about could be* independently of its accessibility to us by means of a sensory intuition.
2. Nothing positive may be legitimately claimed about things in themselves if they are construed as the objects of a *non* sensory intuition *that would be ours*.

5

Let me now go back to the key point of Dummett's manifestability argument. The key point is that it must be guaranteed by the very nature of the case that the central notion of a theory of meaning must be the notion of conditions such that we must be able to recognize that they are satisfied or fulfilled whenever they are. These, the argument goes, may only be assertibility conditions, or truth conditions insofar as they are constrained by assertability.

Dummett often expresses this in terms of mastery or grasp of meaning. To understand a proposition is to master its verification conditions. There is no way for us to manifest our knowledge that a proposition could be both true and unverifiable. There are no legitimate or deductive means at our disposal by which we could exhibit our knowledge of the verification conditions of *that*.

Once again, the challenge is to produce something in the theory of meaning, i.e., an account of how one is able to understand that a proposition might be both true and unverifiable⁹.

One way to meet the challenge is to point out that evidential relations between us and the truth of propositions might break down, as they, as a matter of fact, sometimes do. In other words, our ability to recognize or acknowledge that a proposition is true is *contingently* connected to that truth. And if that connection or relation is contingent, then we may think the further modal thought that the propositions we do ascertain as true might after be so *unbeknownst to us*.

Dummett's objection to this line of thought is that the distinction between the existence of evidence and our possession of it is illegitimate.

⁹ See Brian Loar, in Michael Dummett, "Reply to Brian Loar", in Barry M. Taylor (ed.), *Michael Dummett – Contributions to Philosophy*, Dordrecht, Springer, 1987, pp. 269–280, p. 84.

There is, I think, a rejoinder to the objection that it is illegitimate to draw a distinction between the existence of evidence for the truth of our thoughts and statements (insofar as they do express genuine propositions) and our possession of it.

The Dummettian objection we must dismiss is that the distinction *amounts to the assumption* that the evidence does indeed exist, or might exist although we ignore or might ignore it, so that there is a *petitio principii* involved in what turns out to be an unsupported appeal to contingency.

Does the argument from contingency rest on such a mistake?

It doesn't. The argument just sketched insists that the contingency of the relation between truth and verifiability *implies* that our thoughts and statements could be true even though we are not in a position to verify that they are. It does not describe a hypothetical state of affairs in which a proposition happens to be true and a purely contingent chain of events, compatible with some naturalistic account of how truth conferring evidential relations and states of affairs are related, deprives us at some point in time of the relevant means of determining that the proposition is true. If it did that, we would indeed be in a case of *petitio principii*.

A further objection to the rejoinder is that we need *more* than natural independence to vindicate the sort of realism Dummett wants to reject or, at the very least, to challenge. We need to secure metaphysical or transcendental independence.

The question I now want to consider is the following: is there anything in Kant that could tell against the possibility of such a metaphysical independence?

6

We could look at this problem as it were from the other end, and ask whether the need for more than an empirically based kind of independence tells us anything interesting about the Kantian way of understanding what may be legitimately said about things in themselves.

Insofar as the independence we've been concerned with is entailed by contingency, and insofar as contingency is part of the way in which we conceive our relation to objects in the external or natural world, it seems that it doesn't. It doesn't because the contingency we've appealed to is a natural or empirical fact (or derives from one) whereas what is needed to offer a proper rejoinder to Kant on things in themselves – and indeed to have a fair understanding of his position about their unknowability – is a *stronger* transcendental independence.

A Kantian considering the rejoinder to the antirealist manifestability argument might object that whether or not the argument from contingency is guilty of a *petitio principii*, the throughout empirical natural of the contingency we've appealed to *misses the mark entirely*.

If that turns out to be the case, then we can't even ask whether the idea that there might be a gap between true and being known to be true tells us anything interesting when knowledge and truth are secured not by means of the possession of a warrant that legitimates the assertion of our statements¹⁰ but by means of "an intuition that contains nothing but the form of the sensibility, antedating in my subjectivity all the actual impressions through which I am affected by the objects"¹¹. In other words, we can't even make sense of the two questions we started with in adequately or properly Kantian terms.

We can't make sense of the question in Kantian terms – and I'll conclude with this – unless the stronger transcendental independence we would need is already secured by the natural and empirical one. It is secured in the sense that what is naturally possible (i.e., in our case, the gap between true and recognized by us as true) is also metaphysically or possible. But everything that is naturally possible is thereby logically or metaphysically possible.

Does *that* provide any help in answering the two questions we started with *in their Kantian rewording*:

1. How could we know anything about things in themselves?
2. How could we form a bona fide conception of things in themselves, or even of their possibility?

Obviously, it doesn't if what is needed is a direct grasp of a downright metaphysical independence claim, i.e., one that doesn't rest on the natural or empirical one. So the crucial question now is whether a direct grasp of the metaphysical possibility of things in themselves is possible, given that this is what would be needed to secure a positive answer to the Kantian rewording of the two questions we started with.

It seems at this point that Dummett's antirealist claim is even more negative with respect to truth beyond all possible verification than Kant's claim is with respect to the unknowability of things in themselves. At least, Kant allows for the possibility of a *conception* of them – a conception devoid of any epistemic content but not altogether devoid of meaning.

Dummett's antirealist denies that there may ever be a legitimate conception of truth beyond all possible verification in a very strong sense: we just don't grasp the full meaning of that possibility. This is particularly clear in the case of classical logic. When accepting excluded middle across the board, we merely entertain the illusion that we know that either p or its negation – p must be true whether or not we're able to find out which one is the case, thus crediting ourselves not only with

¹⁰ Michael Dummett, "Reply to Brian Loar", in Barry M. Taylor (ed.), *Michael Dummett – Contributions to Philosophy*, Dordrecht, Springer, 1987, pp. 269–280, p. 276.

¹¹ Imm. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, english translation by L. W. Beck, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Publishing Company, [1783] 1950, § 9.

a knowledge we don't and indeed cannot have, but with the illusion that we understand the claim, i.e., that we grasp the meaning of the classical constants for negation and disjunction.

Unless I'm mistaken about what Kant has to say on the very possibility of knowledge and on things that may not be either intuited or represented, a Kantian shouldn't be willing to go that far. Anyone wishing to check whether a rejoinder to Dummett's antirealism sheds any light on Kant's argument for transcendental idealism should investigate the antirealist argument against the intelligibility of classical logic, i.e., the argument to the effect that classical introduction and elimination rules for the constants are downright illegitimate. This task goes far beyond the scope of this paper.

