

Kantian Humility and Ontological Categories

Sam Cowling

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

[Forthcoming in *Analysis*. Penultimate Draft. Cite published version.]

Kantian Humility holds that agents like ourselves are irremediably ignorant of the intrinsic properties of substances. In this paper, I offer two arguments against Kantian Humility. These arguments both concern categorial properties like *being an object* and *being a property*. After arguing that categorial properties are intrinsic, I show that Kantian Humility entails Categorial Humility, according to which we are irremediably ignorant of the categorial properties of entities. In virtue of this entailment, I argue that the standard argument for Kantian Humility fails and, more seriously, that Kantian Humility is unknowable if true. I conclude by surveying some responses to these arguments.

§1. Kant and Categories

Theses of Epistemic Humility assert that epistemic agents like ourselves are irremediably ignorant of certain features of the world. According to Langton (1998), Kant endorses one such thesis:

Kantian Humility: Epistemic agents like ourselves are irremediably ignorant of the intrinsic properties of substances.¹

According to Langton's reconstruction, the case for Kantian Humility proceeds from three premises:

Distinction: Things in themselves are substances that have intrinsic properties; phenomena are relational properties of substances.²

Irreducibility: The relations and relational properties of substances are not reducible to the intrinsic properties of substances.³

Receptivity: Human knowledge depends on sensibility, and sensibility is receptive: we can have knowledge of an object only in so far as it affects us.⁴

¹ For the moment, I will treat "substance" and "object" as interchangeable. Note, however, that Langton (1998: 21) characterizes Kantian Humility in terms of substances *qua* bearers of intrinsic properties. In interpreting Kant, this raises an array of issues I set aside here. See Langton (1998: 19-31). Here, my interest is in Kantian Humility as a live philosophical option. On this score, I take the following arguments to go through whether or not we focus upon "substances", or mere "objects"; however, I return to this issue in Section Two.

² Langton (1998: 20). Strictly speaking, these categories are not exclusive, since a property like *being such that my nose is smaller than my hand* is both relational and intrinsic. Although this raises concerns about the present argument, I set them aside here.

³ Langton (1998: 109).

⁴ Langton (1998: 23).

According to Irreducibility, facts about the intrinsic properties of objects do not fix the facts about their relational or causal properties. From this, it follows that there are possible worlds indiscernible with respect to the causal properties of objects yet discernible with respect to the intrinsic properties of objects. According to Receptivity, our knowledge of objects depends exclusively upon objects' causal properties, which determine the effects objects have upon us. Granted these premises, a familiar form of skeptical argument can be offered for Kantian Humility.⁵ Worlds w and w^* are alike with respect to the relational properties and their causal effects upon agents like ourselves yet differ with respect to the intrinsic properties of objects. But, since agents like ourselves have knowledge of objects only through their causal effects upon us, agents like ourselves cannot know whether w or w^* is actual. From this, Kantian Humility can be thought to follow: we are irremediably ignorant of the intrinsic nature of objects.

I take no stance on whether Kant endorsed Kantian Humility, since my interest here is only whether we are ourselves well-served to endorse it. In what follows, I present two arguments against the thesis of Kantian Humility. Both of these arguments turn on issues regarding ontological categories and categorial properties like *being an object* and *being a property*. For this reason, it will be helpful to consider more carefully the notion of an ontological category.

Ontological categories carve reality at its deepest joints. Within systematic metaphysics, there is a litany of putative ontological categories: *object*, *property*, *region*, *event*, *abstracta*, and so on. And, although there is no non-tendentious account of what makes for an ontological category, certain conclusions about their nature seem plausible. For example, it seems that the very concept of an ontological category entails that ontological categories must be exhaustive such that every entity—here, I understand “entity” as a category neutral term—belongs to at least one ontological category. In addition, there is a conclusion about the nature of *categorial properties* that will be of primary importance in what follows:

Intrinsicness: The categorial properties of entities are intrinsic.

Given the controversy over what makes a property intrinsic, any defense of Intrinsicness is liable to be controversial. For this reason, the best case for Intrinsicness proceeds by showing it to be supported by the platitudes that inform our leading theories of intrinsicality. This can be done by considering two diagnostics for the intrinsicality of a property.⁶ First, does the property in question differ between duplicates? Second, is the property in question something that can be instantiated in a world where only its bearer exists? In both cases, the categorial property of it *being an object* seems to qualify as intrinsic. First, an object and its duplicate will not differ with respect to whether they instantiate the property *being an object*, so the first diagnostic is satisfied. Second, an object could instantiate the property *being an object* in a world where only that object exists, so the second diagnostic is similarly satisfied. In light of satisfying these tests for intrinsicality, it is plausible that *being an object* is intrinsic.

⁵ Langton does not cast the argument in this fashion. I do so here for illustration.

⁶ See Lewis (1983) for the canonical presentation of these and other cognate diagnostics.

Although there is good reason to believe that *being an object* is intrinsic, Intrinsicness is more difficult to establish. Notice that it requires all categorial properties like *being a property* and *being an event* to be intrinsic as well. Are these properties plausibly viewed as intrinsic? I believe so, but it should be evident that, while our account of object-intrinsicity is in rough shape, our accounts of property-intrinsicity and event-intrinsicity are in no shape at all. We have no useful diagnostics to assess the intrinsicity of these categorial properties. Despite this, there is at least one argument in favour of Intrinsicness: Categorial properties are of a uniquely fundamental and unified sort. So, if there is good reason to believe one categorial property like *being an object* is intrinsic, there is reason to believe that all such categorial properties are intrinsic to entities of whatever category they belong. And, since *being an object* is intrinsic, this suggests that all categorial properties are intrinsic. Having defended Intrinsicness, we can now consider its consequences for Kantian Humility.

§2. Categorial Humility

The world has a categorial structure—a distribution of categorial properties. According to Distinction, this structure includes objects and properties, so some entities must instantiate the properties *being an object* and *being a property*. Notice, however, that if Kantian Humility and Intrinsicness are both true, we must be irremediably ignorant of the world’s categorial structure. Since Kantian Humility entails our ignorance of intrinsic properties and Intrinsicness entails that categorial properties are intrinsic, Kantian Humility entails that we cannot know that some object is, in fact, an object. Kantian Humility and Intrinsicness therefore entail the following thesis:

Categorial Humility: Epistemic agents like ourselves are irremediably ignorant of the categorial properties of entities.

Categorial Humility is not a thesis about our ignorance of objects. It is a thesis of our ignorance regarding *entities*. For this reason, Categorial Humility is perfectly general; it applies across all ontological categories. It denies that we can know, of any entity, what ontological category that entity belongs to. So, if Categorial Humility is true, we are ignorant of whether our world is one of objects and properties or a Tractarian world of facts or a Davidsonian world of events or even a Berkeleyan world of ideas in the mind of God. As should be clear, Categorial Humility has troubling consequences for systematic metaphysics. But, as I’ll now indicate, it poses uniquely troubling consequences for the defender of Kantian Humility.

Recall that the thesis of Kantian Humility is a thesis about our epistemic limitations regarding the properties of objects. If both it and Intrinsicness are true, Categorial Humility follows. But, if Categorial Humility is true, then we cannot know that our world is one where entities fall within the ontological categories of objects and properties. This ignorance of the categorial structure of the world creates two problems for the defender of Kantian Humility. First, if an agent knows Kantian Humility to be true, Kantian Humility must be false. Second, if Kantian Humility is true, the argument for it cannot succeed.

Let me explain the first problem, according to which knowledge of Kantian Humility entails its falsity: Suppose an agent knows that Kantian Humility is true. If she knows that Kantian Humility is true, she knows that our world is one in which there are objects whose intrinsic properties we are ignorant of. She therefore knows that there are some actual entities that

instantiate the property *being an object*. But, if Kantian Humility is true, Categorial Humility follows. And, if Categorial Humility is true, she cannot know that there are some actual entities that instantiate the property *being an object*, since that property is intrinsic and its instantiation is unknowable. As a result, an agent who knows Kantian Humility is true, both knows and does not know that our world is one in which there are objects. Upon pain of contradiction, the defender of Kantian Humility must therefore deny that any agent like ourselves can know Kantian Humility to be true.

Let me now explain the second problem: If Kantian Humility is true, Categorial Humility follows and we cannot know anything of the world's categorial structure. Recall, however, that the argument for Kantian Humility appeals to Distinction in order to fix the domain of ignorance constitutive of Kantian Humility. It is notable, then, that, since Distinction is a thesis about the world's categorial structure, it cannot be known if Kantian Humility is true. And, since Kantian Humility entails that a crucial premise in the argument for it is unknowable, either Kantian Humility is to be rejected or it must be conceded that the argument for Kantian Humility fails since one of its premises is unknowable.

These problems do not show that Kantian Humility is false. They show only that, if it is true, it is either unknowable or that the argument for it is unsatisfactory. And, while I hold these arguments to provide adequate reason to reject Kantian Humility, I will conclude by considering four responses its defenders might now offer.

A first response might take issue with the present identification of substances as objects and hold, instead, that “substance” means only “bearer of intrinsic properties” rather than expressing a genuinely categorial property like *being an object*. Indeed, I suspect this to be the approach Langton's Kant inclines towards. This response does not, however, alleviate the present worries. If substances are distinguished solely as bearers of intrinsic properties, Intrinsicness entails the uncomfortable conclusion that all entities are substances. This, in turn, guarantees that we have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of entities like properties (e.g., *being a property*). For this reason, the present problems still arise, since the case for Kantian Humility appeals to our knowledge of properties.

A second response available to the defender of Kantian Humility is to maintain that knowledge of categorial properties constitutes a principled exception to Kantian Humility. While there are several routes one might take in an effort to reconcile Kantian Humility and knowledge of categorial properties in a non-*ad hoc* fashion, the most plausible turns on the difference between categorial possibilities and intrinsic possibilities. As I presented the argument for Kantian Humility above, it turns on the indiscriminable nature of two worlds that differ with respect to the intrinsic properties of objects. This assumes the very plausible thesis that worlds can indeed differ in terms of the intrinsic properties of objects. In contrast, one might reasonably hold that worlds cannot differ with respect to categorial structure. That is, one might hold that the world has its categorial structure, perhaps one of objects and properties, of necessity. For this reason, the defender of Kantian Humility might hold that categorial properties are a principled exemption from the scope of Kantian Humility. Since there are no worlds that differ only categorially, there are no indiscriminable worlds that allow for an argument for categorial ignorance.

In assessing this response, it is important to note that the possibilities relevant to establishing Epistemic Humility or skepticism need not be metaphysical. To establish theses of Epistemic Humility only epistemic possibilities are required. And, while it might be plausible to hold that the world's categorial structure holds of *metaphysical* necessity, it is implausible to believe it holds across all *epistemically* possible worlds. Consider, for example, the myriad accounts of categorial structure offered in past and present metaphysical theories. According to these theories, the world is built of facts or events rather than objects and properties. And, since these theories represent genuine epistemic possibilities, there is an adequate store of epistemically possible worlds to allow for an argument for Categorial Humility. As such, the present strategy does not succeed in establishing categorial properties as principled exceptions to Kantian Humility's stricture against knowledge of intrinsic properties.

A third response holds that the case for Kantian Humility does not presuppose knowledge of categorial structure, since it can be reformulated in category-neutral terminology. Throughout the preceding discussion, I've employed "entity" as a category-neutral term. In a similar vein, one might introduce an additional purportedly category-neutral term, "feature", that picks out ways that entities can be without specifically requiring features to be properties. They might, for example, be the adverbial modifiers of events. Finally, one might introduce the notion of an "intimate feature", which is to be understood by way of analogy: the intimate features of an entity are to that entity as intrinsic properties are to objects. Granted this purportedly category-neutral terminology, one might recast the case for Kantian Humility in terms of intimate features and hold that the appeal to categorial knowledge in formulating Distinction is dispensable.

The question of what, if anything, allows a term to be category-neutral is a difficult one. It would, for example, be disconcerting to learn that we cannot successfully employ "entity" in the way I have proposed. Even so, we can rather straightforwardly understand "entity" as encompassing anything that falls within any order of our unrestricted quantifiers. (I assume here that unrestricted quantification is legitimate). In contrast, no similarly natural understanding of "feature" or "intimate feature" can be offered. Although these terms purport to be category-neutral, their meaning is liable to be unclear or they are simply our concepts of property and intrinsic property in disguise. For this reason, the strategy of recasting the relevant theses in category-neutral terms does not seem promising.

A fourth and final response turns on our understanding of what it is to know Kantian Humility. According to this response, all that is required for one to know Kantian Humility is to know that *in whatever worlds* there are objects and properties, agents like ourselves are ignorant that such entities are objects and properties. If this were all that was required to know Kantian Humility, it would not entail knowledge of the actual world's categorial structure, since it merely expresses an ignorance that would obtain in counterfactual scenarios. Such a view could therefore be compatible with Categorial Humility, since it does not require us to know of *this world* that it is composed of objects and properties.

This final response entails that, while an agent might know Kantian Humility, this knowledge is potentially irrelevant. The first point to note is that, while this response might resolve the worry that knowledge of Kantian Humility entails the falsity of Kantian Humility, it does nothing to alleviate worries about the failure of the argument for Kantian Humility. That argument relies on Distinction and knowledge of Distinction is assuredly knowledge of the

actual world's categorial structure. The second point to note is that this response seems to distort the apparent significance of Kantian Humility, which is put forward as a thesis about ourselves and our epistemic predicament. Kantian Humility asserts that we are ignorant of the properties of those objects whose relational properties affect us. To hold that it is merely a conjecture about the epistemology of other worlds wherein certain categorial structures obtain is to rob it of the importance which Kant and others ascribe to it. For this reason, denying that knowledge of Kantian Humility is knowledge of the actual world is unsatisfying.

§3. Conclusion

Kantian Humility holds that we are ignorant of the intrinsic properties of objects. I've argued that, since categorial properties are intrinsic, Kantian Humility entails Categorial Humility, according to which we are ignorant of the categorial properties of entities. In light of this commitment, two consequences follow for defenders of Kantian Humility. First, knowledge of Kantian Humility entails its falsehood, since in virtue of knowing Kantian Humility one must have knowledge of the world's categorial structure. Second, if Kantian Humility is true, the argument for its truth fails, since we are irremediably ignorant of one of its premises. These problems do not suffice to show Kantian Humility is false, but they do show that Kantian Humility is, in important respects, unattractive as well as unknowable.

§4. Works Cited

Langton, Rae. 1998. *Kantian Humility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, David. 1983. "Extrinsic Properties." *Philosophical Studies* 44: 197-200.