The thing-in-itself. A reaction to current use of the term in archaeology

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Abstract
Scholars writing within symmetrical archaeology, or speculative realism, have lately claimed that archaeology should strive to grasp the thing-in-itself. This paper questions the rationale of this claim. It presents the philosophical definition of the concept of a thing-in-itself and a short presentation of its reception. The author argues that the concept of the thing-in-itself has nothing to offer archaeology, and questions why contemporary theoretical archaeologists show such an interest in this term.

Introduction

Theoretical archaeology today is said to be governed by squads who disagree on a set of fundamental issues (Ion 2018; Pétursdóttir 2018). Recently, Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2018) evoked the idea of archaeology as a 'parasitical' discipline, with reference to its tradition of borrowing theory from other theoretically productive fields, such as philosophy and sociology (see also Lucas 2015; Flohr Sørensen 2018). To follow Miller, a parasite is one 'who habitually takes advantage of the generosity of others without making any useful return' (Miller 1979, 180). According to this analogy, the host feeds the parasite, giving it life and the means to prosper. In return, the host is murdered. What an awful way of doing science!

Several authors writing within speculative realism, or symmetrical archaeology, have suggested that the thing-in-itself is something that archaeology should strive to grasp. However, instead of leading to the formulation of a firm epistemological foundation, the interest has continued to fuel speculation, e.g. about the ontological framework of archaeology. Take, for instance, Austin's (2010) weak grasp on the difference between empiricism and idealism, a telling example that mirrors Olsen's (2007) influential paper in *World archaeology*, in which it was claimed that Immanuel Kant had cut off our connection with the object world beyond perception. This had supposedly led to an asymmetry, or a 'correlationism', following Meillassoux (2008), which should now be amended by archaeology. Further on, there are Flohr Sørensen's (2016) and Pétursdóttir's (2018, 208) respective suggestions that 'things' often resemble 'traces' rather than 'evidence', an idea that undermines the human capacity to define its own world a posteriori.

In my opinion, the suggestion that archaeology should approach the thing-in-itself points to a mere dead end: e.g. which discipline would welcome an archaeological theory based on fundamental disagreements? That there is even such an interest in the concept of a pre-perceptional world, in the things-in-themselves, within theoretical archaeology today is problematic. In this paper, I present the Kantian meaning and a brief history of the concept of things-in-themselves, and I question what good it can do for archaeology. I urge this discussion because the fundamental

issues are fundamental issues, and they need to be solved if archaeology is not to succumb as a united science of the past.

What is the thing-in-itself?

Immanuel Kant (2005) was the first to implement the concept of the thing-in-itself in a philosophical system, and his definition is relevant for any contemporary science that deals with a concept of a thing-in-itself. (Page references to the *Critique of pure reason* follow the A-version primarily, and the B-version when appropriate.) The concept of a thing-in-itself remains an important, yet enigmatic, one in Kant's philosophical system. As one early critic noted, '*without* the supposition of the thing-in-itself it is impossible to find one's way into the system, and *with* this presupposition it is impossible to remain in it' (cited in Seth 1893, 293 (original italics), recent discussion in Karatani 2003, 23–53).

Kant named his theoretical theses a critique of pure reason precisely because his main argument was this: that the faculty of reason in the human species works too freely, and it does so because nature has formed it in that fashion. As Karatani (2003, 44–45) has pointed out, Kant formulated a criticism of introspection, not of empirical science. In *Critique of pure reason*, Kant (BXX) first points to this curious phenomenon of a mind too free while discussing our reason's potent urge to discover the unconditional. His point is that the will to discover and define the cause of not only every particular thing and its relation to other things, but also all things in general, is a will founded not on experience but on pure reason alone. The things we experience are therefore not purely the causes of our ideas, but are themselves immediately moulded by the human intellect through the very act of perception. This insight, namely that things change to some degree, but not in their totality, in accordance to our gaze, marks the Copernican turn in Kant's philosophy.

After the preface in the second edition of the critique, the concept of things-in-themselves reappears in the transcendental aesthetics. Kant (B45) explains that experiences from objects such as taste and colour can vary from person to person, and for this reason, such properties represent changes within the experiencing subject, not in the thing that is experienced. The rose, to use an example from the critique, enables a plurality of experiences in terms of smell and colour. The thing that enables these experiences, and which becomes known to us as a negative imprint by logical necessity, is the thing-in-itself. The rose becomes knowable through these experiences, but what enables the properties remains unknown to us. In other words, what exists beyond our senses is completely unknown and unknowable as appearances (B60). However, the thing-in-itself is a theoretically posited prerequisite for empirical cognition.

Kant's concept of appearance, or *Erscheinung*, formed a striking argument against idealism, which suggested that external objects are nothing but empty skin, while the inner objects are brought forth purely by our consciousness. This, the argument goes, limits the human capacity to truly engage and learn anything from the external world. Kant turned this around, and pointed out that all objects, external and internal, are parts of perceptions. There is no such thing as an external world, but the perceptions are twofold in their nature. On one side, there is the abyss of things-in-themselves, which have a necessary existence but cannot be experienced, only thought intellectually. On the other side, there are the conditions of perceptions, which are time and space, and these conditions belong to the subject. To suggest, as idealism did, that senses produce blurred, or in any other way inaccurate, pictures of external objects in the world distorted the very concept of sense perception, according to Kant (B60–61).

The thing-in-itself remains hidden, and not even a reflection on past experience will be able to bring forth the thing-in-itself as something else. When we reflect, Kant argued (B63), our questions that concern the relation between a property, or a representation, and its objects take the form of transcendental questions. However, the fact that the questions we ask change form does

not force a change in the ontology of the world as such. Consequently, the things we choose to focus on in reflections do not change their ontological status, but are modified in order to fit our line of thought at that moment. We are merely exploring the relations between things that were already there (B66–67). Again, the thing-in-itself remains hidden.

There should be nothing awry attached to the linguistics here. Kant did on multiple occasions refer to the thing-in-itself by use of other words as well, namely as the transcendental thing $= X$, something whatsoever $= X$, or just the X (B34, A108–10). He is very clear that the thing-in-itself, the X, is a non-empirical phenomenon beyond the reach of cognition. The empirical phenomena that we experience are appearances, and the objects captured in appearances reflect the negative of the unknown X, which is the negative of one thing, and all things at the same time, simply because we have no positive knowledge of it. Cognition, on the other hand, is not intuitive but discursive, because cognition cannot take place in time and space without the use of concepts and terms to make the appearances intelligible (B93). All knowledge is, by Kant's definition, discursive. For instance, in the critique, he points out that the order and conformity we define as natural in the world are partly stuff that we put into nature ourselves. Conversely, we would never have discovered these rules in nature unless we had already put them in there in the first place (A125). Therefore cognition cannot happen without the aid of our imagination (A123).

What the thing-in-itself became

I could go on, beyond the transcendental aesthetics in *Critique of pure reason*, but it is not necessary, as the basic idea of the thing-in-itself was formulated there. In Hegel's (1991) encyclopedia, we find the very same definition of the thing-in-itself, with three levels of a priori. In §124, Hegel presents the thing in experience as the totality of distinctions, or properties, e.g. smell, firmness, etc. As in the critique, these properties are to be understood as diverse, but also as individual inward reflections of the thing of which they are properties. Following the same logic, the thing beyond the properties is identical to itself just as the thing-in-itself. Truly, Hegel (1991, 200) opposed Kant's definition of appearance as inherently subjective. At this point, Hegel's argument went like this: because we know that the world of immediate objects is only appearance, this essential insight (about the world) must also be given in the very same experience. Thus the fact that the world of immediate objects is only appearances is not an insight hidden beyond appearances, but must be inherent to it. However, Hegel did not oppose, in the sense of 'falsify', the idea of the thing-in-itself as an object of potential diverse knowledge through this critique. On the contrary, he merely pointed out that cognition of the thing-in-itself, as what it is in accordance with Kant's system, must have its origin in the same world of appearances.

In Heidegger's late writing (1967), focus is not on the path of things, or stuff, from experience to cognition, as it was in *Critique of pure reason*. Rather, Heidegger claims that the question of the identity of empirical things is itself conditioned by another question, namely the question of being (Heidegger 1967, 24). His conclusion is that the question 'what is a thing?' is a historical question, and that the answer will vary depending on historically conditioned intellectual presuppositions. This conclusion, however, does not contradict the first critique and its statement on the thing-in-itself. As Kant argued, the cognition of the world as natural only reflects our interpretation of the world, which itself is conditioned by discourse.

Taylor (1975), in his book on Hegel, iterates the very same definition of the thing-in-itself as Kant. The idea that knowledge of the things as they are independent of the subject can be based solely on the nature of the subject, not on the synthesis of appearances as phenomena, is presented in Taylor as a 'wild and baseless presumption' (ibid., 30). Further on, a true Kantian understanding of the thing-in-itself occurs in the work of Žižek (1989; 2009), who accurately reproduces the concept of a thing-in-itself as something that is 'not simply a transcendental entity beyond our grasp, but something that is discernible only via the irreducibly antinomic character of our

experience of reality' (Žižek 2009, 20). As Žižek (ibid., 33) concludes, the world of the things-in-themselves, or the Lacanian world he refers to as 'the pre-synthetic Real', is a world that can never be encountered, only presupposed.

What is it good for?

If archaeology is to borrow the concept of the thing-in-itself from philosophy, archaeologists should strive to understand the meaning of it. As we have seen, the thing-in-itself already has a specific meaning that philosophers who actively use the concept agree upon. These scholars argue that the thing-in-itself is beyond the reach of any empirical science by definition. Thus one can question why theoretical archaeology has found such an interest in the term. Is it simply because it has the word 'thing' in it?

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