

A Missing Step in Kant's Refutation of Idealism

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Central to any examination of Kant's Refutation of Idealism – as it appears in the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* – are questions about what sort of “idealism” it is trying to refute and what the precise steps of the supposed refutation might be. The first question is one regarding the nature of the claims made by Kant's opponent, whilst the second traces the structure of the argument. Once upon a time the concern was that the Refutation turned out to be a voracious refutation of all idealism, including Kant's own transcendental idealism. That issue has been resolved, however, by the ever more rigorous appreciation of the differences between Kant's transcendental or formal idealism and the forms of Cartesian and Berkeleian idealism for which the refutation is intended. The Refutation of Idealism, then, is no self-refutation but the soundness of the actual execution of Kant's argument in the Refutation of Idealism needs to be considered.

What I want to demonstrate here is that the argument does not withstand critical scrutiny, precisely as a “refutation of idealism”. I will argue two issues. First, I want to show that as a “refutation of idealism” – considered within and without the broader commitments of transcendental idealism – Kant's argument fails. This is because it misses a step which leaves the sceptic reasonable space to deny correlation between our representations and outer objects. The step is that of showing that external objects determine the content of our representations. This, I think, is not simply a failing in Kant's exposition of the

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Refutation of Idealism but is the culmination of an enormous tension in Kant's position between his twin commitments to transcendental idealism and empirical realism. This leads to a second important issue: the Refutation of Idealism, I will argue, relies on a notion of "outer objects" that cannot be maintained within the framework of transcendental idealism. I am thereby at odds with Kant's insistence, within the context of the Refutation at least, that the "transcendental idealist... can be an empirical realist" (A370).¹ The case of the Refutation simply does not support the unity of these two forms of explanation. Rather, the tension between them manifests itself in a debilitatingly ambiguous understanding of "outer objects". And this ambiguity is sustained only by a missing step in Kant's theory in which the determinative properties of outer – allegedly empirical – objects could be explained.² What will also become clear – in answer to the question of what sort of idealism Kant is attempting to refute – is that Kant misrepresents the requirements of the sceptic in a way that allows him to conclude his case prematurely.

The most persuasive articulation to date of the view that the Refutation is embedded in and consistent with Kant's broader program has been recently offered by Frederick Beiser. He argues towards the conclusion that "the Refutation is, in at least one basic respect, consistent with Kant's transcendental idealism.... [I]t attempts to prove nothing more than the *empirical* reality of objects in space, and not a stronger form of realism that claims the *transcendental* reality of such objects".³ Beiser's position (which I shall

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 3rd Edition, 1990) / Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² W. H. Walsh also argues along these lines. See Walsh, *Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), p. 192.

³ Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 105.

outline below) deserves serious attention. It is textually faithful and historically sensitive. Furthermore, it represents a strong alternative to Paul Guyer's powerful argument that the foundational concepts of the Refutation of Idealism can be sustained only by "surrendering every shred of transcendental idealism".⁴ I want to address Beiser's view in order to highlight what I take to be the problems of both the execution and presuppositions of Kant's argument.

The Argument of the Refutation

Before addressing the difficulty in Kant's position – as well as Beiser's interpretation – I want to outline the general argument put forward in the Refutation of Idealism. The kind of idealism that Kant's refutation seeks to undermine is what he calls "*material* idealism... the theory that declares the existence of objects in space outside us to be either merely doubtful and *indemonstrable*, or else false and *impossible*" (B274). He claims that Descartes and Berkeley are proponents of this form of idealism. It is not, however, their idealism that concerns him, not at least according to conventional definitions of idealism. His aim is a refutation of the form of *scepticism* that arises from what he takes to be their indirect realism. Indirect realism attempts to conclude that only our ideas or representations are certain, and it is a matter of insecure inference as to whether there are independent objects that correspond to those ideas or representations. Famously, Kant calls it a "scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things

⁴ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 324. A more concise version of Guyer's position is offered in his "The Postulates of Empirical Thinking in General and the Refutation of Idealism", in *Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft: Klassiker Auslegen*, ed. Georg Mohr and Marcus Willaschek (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998). Jonathan Bennett argues similarly that the Refutation of Idealism needs to be separated from the project of transcendental idealism if it is going to serve as a response to scepticism. See Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 215–218.

outside us... should have to be assumed merely *on faith*” (Bxxxix). The Refutation of Idealism is Kant’s attempt to provide rational foundation – in place of faith – to the belief in the existence of outer objects. I should note here that I think Kant has clearly overstated the demand of scepticism. A less dramatic though equally pressing sceptical position is the denial that we can know that our representations *correspond* to any objects, a thesis which requires no outright denial of the existence of the external world. Unless Kant’s refutation can defeat this position it cannot, I think, be considered conclusive.

The thesis of the Refutation is “[t]he mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me” (B275). Kant’s strategy is to show that outer experience – experience of objects – is somehow a condition of inner experience. His argument sets out to demonstrate that the certainty of inner experience is impossible without perception of external objects. For Kant, then, our inner experience is not explicable purely as a flow of imagination and illusion (as the sceptic seems to have to say) since, as Kant’s revolutionary structure frames it, inner intuition (perception of temporal change) is made possible only through outer intuition. If this argument is correct then the Cartesian and Empiricist models of representation are problematised, for the assumption of “indirectness” and “inference” which leads to the very problem of scepticism is seen to be untenable: the relationship of outer to inner is not inferential. Rather, the outer provides *a condition* of the inner.

The argument involves a reconceptualisation of the nature of inner experience. In speaking of inner experience Kant refers only to the most general characteristic of

empirical self-consciousness, the awareness of the temporal sequence of one's experiences. He means to argue precisely, here and in many other parts of the first *Critique*, against self-consciousness as the arcane alleged awareness of an essential ego. The most general characteristic of self-consciousness is, as Kant himself puts it, "consciousness of my existence as determined in time" (B275), that is, as I have noted, the awareness of temporal sequence in my thoughts or experience. The argument that follows is that this awareness "presupposes something *persistent* [*etwas Beharrliches*] in perception" (B275). Without something "persistent", which is distinct from the representations (thoughts or experiences) themselves, there would be no way, it seems, of realizing the contrasting representations that I actually have. In the Preface to the second edition Kant notes in this regard: "*For all the determining grounds of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations, and as such they themselves need something persisting distinct from them, in relation to which their change, and thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined*" (Bxxxix). The very logic of the term "change" entails the assumption of a fixed point, a "persisting" something against which change is intelligible.

For Kant, the distinct persisting something provides the possibility of self-consciousness; that is, consciousness that I am in possession of changing thoughts and representations. The distinct persisting something must be other than a representation, and Kant argues that this must be an external object. The First Analogy (the Principle of Permanence of Substance) – which is prior to the Refutation of Idealism in Kant's text – signals to us that the persisting something must be a substance. As Kant plainly states: "All

appearances contain that which persists (*substance*) as the object itself, and that which can change as its mere determination, i.e., a way in which the object exists” (A182); and: “In fact the proposition that substance persists is tautological. For only this persistence is the ground for our application of the category of substance to appearance, and one should have proved that in all appearances there is something that persists, of which that which changes is nothing but the determination of its existence” (A184/B227). Actually there is nothing specifically Kantian about these claims: they are shared by the Aristotelian and Rationalist traditions in their varying efforts to explain persistence through change. But within Kant’s philosophy substance takes on a radical function in that self-consciousness is unrealizable without experience of substantial objects or “outer experience”, to use Kant’s shorthand. The actuality of inner experience entails outer experience. Without reference to it empirical consciousness is nothing more than an inert possibility. Thus in the manner of a transcendental argument Kant intends to show, as Graham Bird neatly puts it, “that to doubt or deny outer experience the sceptics must also deny inner experience; and that in accepting inner experience they must also accept outer. What they cannot coherently do is to accept inner but reject outer experience”.⁵ The idea that inner experience is the starting point for the reconstruction of certainty is used against Cartesianism. Hence the Refutation attempts to attack Cartesianism at its foundation point.

This argument gives Kant scope for a radical refutation of the representationalist tradition which, up until then, had become stuck on the problems entailed in the following

⁵ Graham Bird, “Kant’s Transcendental Arguments”, in *Reading Kant: New Perspectives on Transcendental Arguments and Critical Philosophy*, ed. Eva Schaper and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 24.

framework: mind ↔ representation ↔ object. The actuality of the object is merely inferred from the mental presence of the representation. Kant's ingenious strategy is to show that mind itself is unintelligible without immediate outer experience. It is not on the nature of the representation that Kant focuses, as others might in their effort to repair the bridge between inner and outer experience. That is, one might try to analyze the content of a representation to demonstrate that it could not be given by the mind alone. Rather, it is the nature of experience, understood under the limited aspect of time- or change-consciousness, which is pivotal in Kant's argument for the certainty of outer objects. The burden for Kant, as he himself sees it, is to show that time determination cannot be achieved through any purely subjective resource. The relative persisting something cannot be subjectivity since, as Kant's well-known agnosticism regarding personal identity tells us, there is no subjective substance (*res cogitans*). For that reason Kant denies that the transcendental "I think" (the transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness) and the modes of intuition can provide the relative persisting something which is required for the possibility of time-consciousness. This claim carefully distinguishes Kant from the subjectivist starting point of earlier representationalism as well as, indeed, the subsequent Reinholdian version which regarded itself as transcendental idealism. Straightforwardly, the subject does not possess the resources to fulfil the criteria of being something persisting since the subject is, on the empirical level, a series of experiences.

At the conclusion of the proof Kant writes: "Now consciousness in time is necessarily combined with the consciousness of the possibility of this time-determination: Therefore

it is also necessarily combined with the existence of the things outside me, as the condition of time-determination; i.e., the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me” (B276). What Kant is trying to establish is that the ultimate claim by the Cartesian that consciousness is immediately known and thus more certain than outer objects can be seen to rest upon a false assumption, for our temporal consciousness cannot be separated from these outer objects, and in self-consciousness I must *first* be aware, at some level, of these outer objects. It is important to be clear about what Kant has achieved here. In abandoning the mind ↔ representation ↔ object explanation of experience he wants to avoid his opponents’ game, the game of transcendental realism which claims that certain knowledge is achieved if and only if we can somehow validate our representations against the things-in-themselves they supposedly represent. But this is an impossibility, not in the sense that it is beyond the power of human reason, but because it is a fallacious requirement: the notion that we could directly compare our representations with the things apart from their being represented falls into an infinite regress in that the things we directly perceived would have to be representations. Importantly, then, transcendental realism, turns out to be the theory which generates the very scepticism for which it demands, though does not expect, a solution. The strategy Kant is offering is to recast the notion of experience outside the transcendental realist structure.

Beiser on the Refutation

Beiser’s reading of the Refutation operates within a framework which insists that transcendental idealism – both in its positive account of the kind of knowledge it defends

and in its refutation of scepticism – relies on purely internal, intra-experiential criteria for the explanation of knowledge. This contrasts with transcendental realism which reaches for correspondence with something outside our experience as the only way of securing the non-illusoriness of our representations. Valid knowledge is established by transcendental idealism as that which conforms to a rule, not as that which conforms to an extra-mental entity. The difference is fundamental. Beiser writes: “Transcendental realism attempts to explain this notion [that truth consists in the correspondence of a representation with an independent reality] in terms of correspondence with a thing-in-itself; transcendental idealism accounts for it in terms of the connection or order among representations themselves. According to transcendental idealism, to say that a representation corresponds with its object means that it is a necessary part of the synthesis of representations; here the object is not a thing-in-itself but the unity or whole imposed by a norm or rule”.⁶ What Beiser encourages us to avoid is seeing Kant as engaging in ontological speculation as the basis for epistemic enquiries. Kant, instead, is offering us a sustained examination of the logic of our commitments: “Speaking transcendently or epistemically means recognizing the limits of knowledge and admitting an agnosticism about the ontology of appearances”.⁷ The advantage of this approach, Beiser claims, is that it avoids the “classic dilemma” of those who have failed to recognize Kant’s purely transcendental approach to knowledge: the dilemma of thinking *either* that Kant is giving transcendental reality to “outer objects”, as things-in-themselves, and thereby inconsistently working outside transcendental idealism, *or* that Kant holds that objects exist as appearances, a conclusion that gains no purchase on

⁶ Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

scepticism.⁸ Both horns of the dilemma are standard enough subject-object epistemologies, differing only in terms of what the object is. The discussion in the section above shows us that Kant regards himself as superseding the representationalist tradition in its idealist and empiricist forms. According to Beiser, the middle path between the materialist and idealist readings contains the following elements: (1) “we have an *experience* of objects in space”; (2) the “objects of experience are not things-in-themselves because they do not exist apart from representations of them”; (3) but nor are they mere appearances since “they conform to universal and necessary rules of the understanding and the form of outer sense, which is space”.⁹

Beiser, then, believes that Kant’s approach overcomes the need for ontological hypotheses precisely in that it restricts itself to a logic of appearances. Speculation about the nature of these objects becomes otiose. Given, though, Kant’s various discussions of objects as “empirically real”, as “things-in-themselves”, as “appearances”, and as “representations” it seems to require of us an act of intellectual self-censorship to want not to answer these ontological questions – questions of what sort of “real” objects the Refutation is attempting to prove – within the Refutation itself. (As we shall see, these questions become unavoidable.) Now it is clear that if Kant’s Refutation is successful in the way that Beiser thinks it is then it cannot be that Kant understands objects as transcendently real: our experience must be shown to be the experience of objects, as opposed to indirect representations of them. For Beiser the reality of the objects which are required for “outer experience” consists (logically) in the fact that they conform “to

⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

the universal and necessary conditions of experience in general”.¹⁰ What Beiser finds in Kant squares with the general framework of the Transcendental Analytic. However, the problem, as I want to show in the following section, is that Kant’s actual exposition of the argument of the Refutation of Idealism unravels the fabric of transcendental idealism and does not refute a specific sceptical claim.

A Missing Step

The logic of the Refutation of Idealism does not support its general aims. As soon as we try to specify the connection between outer and inner experience a serious problem appears in Kant’s argument. We find that it does not, in fact, refute a key proposition put forward by scepticism: namely, that there is no demonstrable connection between representations and reality independent of them. Kant’s difficulty, as I see it, arises in this following passage (already cited): “Now consciousness in time is necessarily combined with the consciousness of the possibility of this time-determination: Therefore it is also necessarily combined with the existence of the things outside me, as the condition of time-determination; i.e., the consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me” (B276). Kant’s use of the vague connecting term “combined with” (*verbunden mit*) is problematic.¹¹ In the B Preface he specifies that it means “bound up identically” (*identisch verbunden mit*)

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹ The passage in the original (with emphasis added) is: “Nun ist das Bewußtsein in der Zeit *mit* dem Bewußtsein der Möglichkeit dieser Zeitbestimmung nothwendig *verbunden*: also ist es auch mit der Existenz der Dinge außer mir, als Bedingung der Zeitbestimmung, nothwendig verbunden; d.i. das Bewußtsein meines eigenen Daseins ist zugleich ein unmittelbares Bewußtsein des Daseins anderer Dinge außer mir”.

(Bx1).¹² Kant thus wants it to denote some kind of direct connection between “consciousness of my own existence” and “an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me”. But the nature of this connection is not sufficiently determined by the term “combined with”, and nor is it convincingly elaborated upon in the argument of Kant’s text.

Kant’s argument, in fact, seems to have missed a step. Kant, I think, has merely shown that the idea of time-consciousness requires some objects “outside me”. That, however, is some way away from our having an immediate experiential grasp of them. What Kant is doing thereby is conflating the conditions of inner experience – namely, that there are objects outside us – with inner experience itself which is nothing more than consciousness of my existence in time. There is an interesting view of experience contained here. The certainty of the existence of external objects does not derive from their being experienced as actual (with all their properties and determinations): rather they are certain insofar as they provide the conditions of inner experience. I think therefore that Kant is drawing the wrong conclusion from his argument. This is because of a missing step. He shows that we require external objects, but he does not show that there need be any correspondence between these objects and our representations of them.¹³ His argument does not demonstrate the objective reality of the content of our

¹² The original passage (emphasis added) reads as follows: “Dieses Bewußtsein meines Daseins in der Zeit ist also *mit* dem Bewußtsein eines Verhältnisses zu etwas außer mir *identisch verbunden*”.

¹³ Another way of setting up an alternative framework, one which denies such a problem in Kant, is to reintroduce the phenomenalist reading of Kant. See, for example, Erling Skorpen, “Kant’s Refutation of Idealism”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 6 (1968): p. 26. However, the phenomenalist reading of Kant has the clear disadvantage, in the Refutation of Idealism at least, of depriving Kant’s argument of a sufficient version of the concept of independent objects, as required by his argument against scepticism.

representations, merely the consciousness of their order. And this leaves the sceptic with room to manoeuvre.

We can see that this problem of the “missing step” is an obstacle to what Beiser proposes. Certainly Kant’s is not a position that holds that objects are “mere appearances”, yet only part of the meaning of “experience of objects in space” is secured. In this case, the supposed securing of the notion of “objects in space” seems to be an unjustified conclusion drawn from two premises: (a) “I have experience”, and (b) “experience requires something persisting”. In no sense is a determinate object in space provided by this argument. Kant simply does not furnish us with the further premise which connects content with object.¹⁴

An argument against the thesis of the missing step might be that the supposed lacuna is the result of looking for the wrong thing in Kant. Worse still, the thesis imagines itself pertinent only because it reintroduces the discredited demand of the transcendental realist, that is, the demand for the validation of experience against an unreachable object. Instead of restricting the analysis to the logic of our epistemic commitments I am going in search of the ontology of outer objects, it could be said. A response here is that it is true that the thesis of the missing step emerges only because I am not restricting myself to the terms of Kant’s transcendental/formal idealism. A purely formal analysis of our commitments is

¹⁴ It might be argued that unless the objects determined the content of our representations they would not act as the distinct “persistent something” against which representations could be contrasted. And thus, if we accept that Kant is consistent in that part of his argument – regarding the necessity of a distinct “persistent something” – then the claim about content determination follows. This, however – were it available to Kant – would not set off the sceptic. We can posit a given which acts as a physical substrate, without at the same time being constrained to see representations as corresponding to that substrate. A sceptic would be entitled to ask for the objectivity which is clearly absent here, as all that has been shown is that our representations are subjective projections.

not a theoretical impossibility by any means, but the problem is that Kant's argument cannot be adequately evaluated within these terms. To "bracket out" ontology, as it were, is disingenuous since, when it comes to Kant's philosophy, we need to know exactly what sort of things the objects of experience are for him, as everything in his Refutation depends on (a) the capacity of these objects to relate determinatively to self-consciousness, and (b) Kant's ability to refute scepticism thereby.

The idea that there is a missing step is at odds with Henry Allison's reading of the Refutation. In what he identifies as "D. Step 4" of the argument Allison finds conclusive refutation of the sceptic. Explaining Step 4 as that in which Kant demonstrates the incoherence of the claim that "we might merely believe or imagine ourselves to have an outer sense"¹⁵ he concludes that the "sceptic... cannot consistently doubt the reality of this perception [of something permanent in space]; more precisely, he cannot, without contradicting his assumption about self-knowledge, doubt that he actually intuits, not merely imagines or believes that he intuits, enduring objects in space".¹⁶ Allison's analysis then moves on to what he sees as the final step of the Refutation, that which deals with time-consciousness, but does not consider whether there might in fact be a cleft between the notion of objects outside me – the arguments for which largely satisfy Allison – and experience. But I think that it becomes evident that this cleft in Kant's Refutation fatally determines what sense we can make of the notion of outer objects upon which the argument seems so heavily to depend.

¹⁵ Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven, Conn./London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 301.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

It is at this point that Heidegger's neglected criticism of the Refutation of Idealism has, it seems to me, something important to say. Kant, Heidegger notes, begins with the "empirically given changes 'in me'."¹⁷ Time, as change, is subjectively experienced. As Kant says in the B Preface: "I am conscious through inner *experience of my existence in time* (and consequently also of its determinability in time)" (BxI). This experience, as Heidegger points out, carries the burden of the proof. As he puts it: "[Time] provides the foundation for leaping into (*beweisenden Absprung*) the 'outside of me' in the course of the proof".¹⁸ What are the implications of this probative leap? If Kant's argument proceeds by sound reasoning then it shows, Heidegger claims, that "beings that are changing [ourselves] and beings that are permanent [persistent outer objects] are necessarily present together".¹⁹ However, this, Heidegger believes, does not overcome the duality which arises from the epistemological division of our prereflective experience, the essential structure of which for him is our being-in-the-world, as opposed to the problematic connection of the subject and object. As he puts the problem of what he sees as Kant's dualism: "But ordering two objectively present things on the same level does not as yet mean that subject and object are objectively present together. And even if this were proved, what is ontologically decisive would remain covered over: the fundamental constitution of the 'subject' as being-in-the-world".²⁰ In essence, it is Kant's very starting point which allegedly undermines his critique of dualistic epistemology. Any analysis which begins with the question of how subject and object relate is already committed to a

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). References are to the pagination of the German edition of *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 16th ed., 1986), as indicated in the margins of the English translation: p. 204.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

dislocated subject. For that reason Heidegger concludes that, “[t]he ‘scandal of philosophy’ does not consist in the fact that this proof is still lacking up to now, but *in the fact that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*”.²¹ What Heidegger is alluding to here, I believe, is the missing step of Kant’s proof. His essential complaint is that we are given two components – inner experience and outer objects – but no account of a synthetic relation between the two.

What Are Outer Objects?

The thesis of the Refutation, as we have seen, is that “[t]he mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me” (B275). But what could “objects in space outside me” mean given that Kant’s argument can, as I am proposing, grant them only material yet indeterminate properties (the missing step)? This is a complex problem which arises from two sources: the problem with the specific argument of the Refutation and the account of objects produced by transcendental idealism itself. It is on this issue that I want to question how the other component of Beiser’s interpretation, regarding the notion that objects “conform to universal and necessary rules of the understanding and the form of outer sense, which is space”, can be defended as a convincing refutation of the sceptic.

H. A. Prichard’s criticism is a good place from which to begin to address this question of what sense Kant can give to the concept of “objects in space outside me” as an element of his refutation of idealism. He writes that “there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that Kant is deceived by the ambiguity of the phrase ‘a thing external to me’ into thinking that

²¹ Ibid., p. 205.

he has given a proof of the existence of bodies in space with the view that they are only phenomena, although in reality the proof presupposes that they are things-in-themselves”.²² Prichard is picking up on the idea that Kant’s argument generates a plausible sense of, let us call it, the “non-I”, but that it is simply not the specific sense that the Refutation requires: determinate objects in space (as empirical realism would hold). Kant, it must be noted, recognizes the ambiguity in the notion of external objects. He remarks in the Fourth Paralogism (A) that “the expression *outside us* carries with it an unavoidable ambiguity” (A373). This is the ambiguity that the expression may designate what “*as a thing in itself*, exists distinct from us, and sometimes merely something that belongs to outer *appearance*” (A373). The question is, whether Kant has forgotten his own distinction and produced a conflated concept of an object. That is to say, has he presented a metaphysical or transcendental realist assumption (based on the existence of transcendent supersensible objects or things-in-themselves) serving as an empirically realist argument for the existence of the world of given objects? Before answering that question we should look at what Kant himself has to say about the distinction between objects understood phenomenally and noumenally or as things-in-themselves. Indeed it is very likely that the complexities arising from the notion of “outer objects” in the Refutation of Idealism stimulated Kant to think further about his general account of objects. In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant inserted several pertinent pages into the section On the Ground of the Distinction of all Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena (a section which falls only several pages on from the Refutation of Idealism). Kant notes there that phenomenal objects are those objects which conform to our modes of intuition and forms of *a priori* judgments. As such they

²² H. A. Prichard, *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p. 322.

are the objects that we actually know through experience. Any phenomenal object may be considered noumenally, that is “*a thing insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it” (B307); in other words as a thing-in-itself. Noumenality postulates the limits of the faculty of knowledge, human experience and the rationality which must be based in it. There is an understandable temptation to see the object deprived, as it were, of the contribution of human sensibility as the object under a different mode. Strictly speaking, however, it is controversial to speak about noumenal objects or things – though Kant himself does so – since objecthood as we know it in its paradigm case, so to speak, is constituted in the conditions of human sensibility and judgment. Nevertheless, we shall see whether such a conception of a radically other object is required by Kant in order to give weight to his notion of “objects outside me”.

Kant identifies what is empirically external – what I shall refer to as *phenomenologically* external – with “things *that are to be encountered in space*” (A373). Phenomenological externality is the apparent requirement of the official argument of the Refutation. Here an empirically external object appears as external to an empirical consciousness. In contrast, the noumenal externality of the thing-in-itself would be external in no coherent sense and it is plainly wrong, I think, to say that Kant would deliberately posit noumenal externality as the sense required by the thesis of the Refutation. There are, in fact, powerful arguments against the idea that Kant is intentionally operating with some notion of noumenally external objects. First, they are not “in space outside me”: space is a condition of phenomena only. The argument of the Transcendental Aesthetic was, after

all, to show that space and time are conditions of human sensibility. Noumenality, by direct contrast, designates specifically the idea of what is behind or beyond human sensibility. Second, because they have no causality they cannot be determinative, never mind “empirically” determinative. So-called *noumenally* external objects would be *epistemologically* irrelevant without the capacity for some kind of causality. Without causality or determinateness it is difficult to see what role they could possibly play in the epistemological structure of knowledge for the simple reason that they could not determine our representations in any way. Third, as a corollary of the first and second, we can by definition never know noumenally external objects, and the kind of inferential weight we placed upon them would be no more than assumptive.²³ For these reasons the Refutation of Idealism would be deeply at odds with the basic principles of Kant’s philosophy if it tried to include any idea of noumenally external objects (as understood above). The question is, however, whether in Kant’s theory of objects any other concept of an object can be legitimately described as a distinct persisting something?

When we consider phenomenal objects, as the natural alternative, we see certain problems that might throw us back onto the need for some mistaken sense of independent objects. This is because within the terms of transcendental idealism *phenomenologically* external objects can have a circular and highly controversial causality only. That is, phenomenologically external objects determine empirical consciousness. But the constitution of these objects is explained by the spontaneous constitutive activities of the

²³ As Guyer notes: “Kant appears strongly committed to the view of his times that we are never directly acquainted with anything but our own representations (A104), yet also maintains the principle that our knowledge of the independent existence of external objects [noumenally external objects] in general cannot be understood as a causal inference from the form of our own representations, even though in practice he sometimes lapses from this principle”. Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, p. 324.

faculty of knowledge. As two of Kant's most programmatic claims put it: "in *a priori* cognition nothing can be ascribed to the objects except what the thinking subject takes out of itself" (Bxxiii); "although all our cognition commences *with* experience, yet it does not on that account all arise *from* experience. For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty (merely prompted by sensible impressions) provides out of itself" (B1). And if this form of idealism is the case, then the external objects that are affirmed in the Refutation itself are ideal. It is in relation to this very possibility that Hegel commented: "[Kant's] philosophy is subjective idealism, inasmuch as the Ego (the knowing subject) furnishes both the form and the material of knowing – the former as *thinking* and the latter as *sensing* subject".²⁴ It is clear that within the structure of transcendental philosophy the notion of "outside" is a shadow version of what empirical realism means by it: all objects are representations and are thus logically the effects of the subject's cognitive capacities. Empirical objects, as such, may be spoken of as phenomenologically spatial, but since, as the Transcendental Aesthetic argues, space is *in us*, or "ideal", we cannot then reach a clearer understanding of how objects are "outer" in the sense that would be required to fulfil the criteria of independence necessary for time-determination. John McDowell, also concerned by the problem of independence in Kant, asks "how can the empirical world be genuinely independent of us, if we are partly responsible for its fundamental structure? It does not help to be told that it is only

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, Ind./London: Hackett, 1991), §42z3.

transcendentally speaking that the fundamental structure of the empirical world is of our making”.²⁵

As I said, there is a temptation to move from phenomenological externality to supersensibility or noumenality in order to achieve or locate a forceful sense of independence. To enlist McDowell again: “the radical mind-independence of the supersensible comes to seem exemplary of what any genuine mind-independence would be, and then when Kant purports to attribute mind independence to the ordinary empirical world, as it figures in his thinking, that looks merely disingenuous”.²⁶ The essence of this problem, then, is that if we make use of phenomenological spatiality we have difficulty in establishing a notion of independent objects which can (a) provide the condition for time-consciousness and (b) be the correlate of our representations of objective reality.

And this brings us back to the other part of Beiser’s defence of the Refutation. He holds that Kant avoids transcendental realism by showing that the objects of experience are not “things-in-themselves”, and that they “conform to universal and necessary rules of the understanding and the form of outer sense, which is space”. But this cannot do. First, as just remarked, in so far as objects conform to our cognitive faculties they are deprived of the sense of independence that Kant seeks in his refutation of the “idealist” (and which the sceptic demands). Second, it shifts the refutation of idealism onto a consideration of the validity of the entire program of transcendental idealism: that is, we must evaluate the coherence of, for instance, the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Transcendental

²⁵ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2nd ed. 1996), p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Deduction in order to show what it means for objects not to be things-in-themselves, being entities which conform to our structures of cognition. This is not an illogical requirement, but it does tend to suggest that Kant is far from restricting himself to the “game that idealism plays” (B276). Kant’s proof relies on a version of inner-outer peculiar to himself. It is peculiar to Kant in that the certainty of exteriority has already been guaranteed by the Transcendental Aesthetic, as he seems to say in the introduction to the Refutation: “Dogmatic idealism is unavoidable if one regards space as a property that is to pertain to things in themselves; for then it, along with everything for which it serves as a condition, is a non-entity. The ground for this idealism, however, has been undercut by us in the Transcendental Aesthetic” (B274). For this reason, Kant’s Refutation does not start at the zero point which is required in order to gain critical leverage on the sceptic. The reason why it might appear that Kant has defeated the sceptic is that he seems to trade inadvertently on an ambiguous concept of objects. He must intend the sense of a distinct persisting something for the requirement of independence (a something which cannot be attributed to the modes of cognition of the subject), and he must intend the sense of representation for content. But what he fails to do is provide a unifying argument that can explain how the same objects are both independent (persisting and distinct) and at the same time determinative of content.

Conclusion

The problems of the Refutation of Idealism stem from Kant's failure to produce a theory of objects adequate to the role that they are given in the argument against scepticism. He establishes in the first instance that there is inner experience, but cannot show the objective reality of this experience. This is because what is required, but not here delivered, is a demonstration of the connection between representations and outer objects. Another step in the argument is needed. A further issue at stake is that the Refutation works within an ambiguous conception of objects in that it seeks a notion of independence (a persisting something) that can be delivered only by an account of objects which lies outside the terms of transcendental idealism. We are constantly pushed in the direction of a particular sense of "outer objects" which transcendental idealism itself is an attempt to avoid.²⁷

²⁷ I should like to thank those who contributed to discussions of earlier versions of this paper, which I presented at the Facoltà di Filosofia e Scienze Sociali of the University of Siena, the University of Berne's Institut für Philosophie, the Philosophische Seminar of the University of Heidelberg, and the Philosophy Colloquium at Trinity College, Dublin.