

A World Without a Past: New Challenges to Kant's Refutation of Idealism

Justin Remhof

Old Dominion University

In the Refutation of Idealism (B274-B279), Kant aims to defeat the Cartesian radical skeptical hypothesis that “the existence of objects in space outside us is doubtful and indemonstrable” (B274). On the skeptical hypothesis, it is possible that empirical reality does not exist. In the *Meditations*, Descartes famously suggests that I could be a non-material mind merely being fed impressions of empirical reality by a non-material evil genius. All my experiences of what I take to be the empirical world are phenomenologically indistinguishable from being fed those experiences by the evil genius. Consequently, there is no guarantee that I have knowledge of empirical reality. Against Descartes, Kant intends to demonstrate that conscious experience presupposes direct experience of material objects in space, such that empirical reality exists and we can know it.

In this paper, I present new challenges to the conclusions Kant reaches in the Refutation. I begin by briefly reviewing Kant's views of space and time and laying out the argument of the Refutation. I then adapt and develop a thought experiment offered by Joseph Campbell (2007) concerning the possibility that there is no past in order to show that conscious experience need not presuppose direct contact with material objects. Campbell uses the thought experiment to challenge determinism about free will, but I suggest that it can be modified to challenge Kant's rejection of Cartesian skepticism. Afterward, I suggest that contact with spatial reality need not imply contact with material objects, and Kant fails to establish our direct relation to the latter. I finish by suggesting that Kant does not actually have the resources to guarantee knowledge about empirical reality.

Let us begin with Kant's views of space and time. Kant regards space as a form of pure intuition (see A27, B43). An intuition is pure when it abstracts away from material objects outside us, and an intuition is empirical when it involves a material object directly affecting us. To abstract away from material objects is to focus strictly on something about ourselves, namely, our activities. According to Kant, space is a pure form of intuition because it is the sheer activity of directing our attention outward. Outwardly directing our attention enables us to be affected by material objects, and being affected by a material object is what Kant calls

an *appearance*. Empirical reality consists in all possible appearances, or all possible ways in which we can be affected by material objects when directing our attention outward (see A26, B42; A39, B56; A492, B521).

Now consider time, which is also a form of pure intuition. While space is the means by which we encounter material objects, which Kant identifies with "outer sense," time is the means by which we attend to own mental states, which Kant identifies with "inner sense" (A22-3/B37). Time is the shifting of attention inward toward the progressiveness of our mental states. According to Kant, outer sense requires inner sense. Shifting our attention outward always involves the progression of our mental states. In the Refutation, Kant aims to establish the contrary, namely, the claim that "inner experience... is possible only on the assumption of outer experience" (B275). Inner sense, he contends, requires outer sense. Attending to our mental states is supposed to imply attending to something outside us.

To see why this controversial claim is supposed to be true, let us turn to the Refutation. The thesis of the Refutation is that "The mere, but materially determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me" (B275). The proof consists of five steps, from B275-6 with an emendation at Bxxxix. I will consider each step in turn.

The first step of Kant's proof is that "I am conscious of my existence as determined in time" (B275). Descartes holds that I cannot doubt the fact that conscious experience exists and this implies that I exist. Kant adds that Descartes must concede that my conscious experience also entails awareness that I am *presently* having some mental state. I must have the capacity to judge that some mental state is occurring *now*. This entails that my conscious experience arises in the course of time. Awareness of inner experience implies awareness of being in time.

The second step is that "All time-determination presupposes something persistent in perception" (B275). This claim is established in the First Analogy. Kant holds that determining mental states as arising in the course of time requires grounding them in something that persists. The ground is required because time extends beyond our currently progressing mental states. Most importantly, any mental progression occurring in the present has a past. What persists, and therefore what reveals the reality of the past, is *substance*. Kant writes, "That which persists, in relation to which alone all temporal relations of appearances [viz., objects] can be determined, is substance in the appearance, i.e. the real in the appearance, which as the substratum of change always remains the same" (B225 [brackets added]). Substance endures beyond the current progression of my mental states. To determine that my mental states arise in the course of time, then, I must

perceive substance. Perceiving substance enables me to conceive of a past.

The third step in Kant's proof lays the groundwork for establishing that substance is material. Kant writes:

But this persisting element cannot be an intuition in me. 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)

My mental states themselves cannot be that which enables me to understand that time persists beyond my currently progressing mental states. The reason is twofold. First, locating the progression of mental states in time is the very issue under investigation, and second, particular mental states are merely momentary—they do not persist. To determine mental states as arising in the course of time, then, they need to be grounded by something that endures which is distinct from them. And that is substance, which we now know cannot be mental. Since Descartes and Kant believe that mental states are non-material, we know that substance cannot be non-material. The most likely available option: substance is material. But we are not quite there yet—we need to bring in outer sense.

The fourth step of the proof draws out the consequences of the first three steps and solidifies the conclusion. Kant says:

Thus the perception of this persistent **thing** is possible only through a thing outside me and not through the mere **representation** of a thing outside me. Consequently, the **determination** of my existence in time is⁴ possible only by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself. (B276)

As we have seen, what endures distinct from me which grounds my mental states cannot be my mental states themselves. Mere inner sense cannot reveal persistence. As Kant remarks, "this persisting element cannot be an intuition in me" (Bxxxix). The form of intuition that connects me to something that grounds substance must then be outer sense. Material objects ground substance, and outer sense connects me to material objects. Material objects conceived as substances, which arise in the course of my outward shifting of attention, enable me to determine my mental states as

arising in the course of time. The ability to determine my thoughts in time therefore entails that I have intuited material reality distinct from me.

This leads to Kant's conclusion:

Consciousness [of my existence] 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)

The takeaway is that immediate awareness of myself implies immediate awareness of empirical reality. Descartes's claim that I exist implies that my mental states are located in time, and locating my mental states in time requires enduring material objects. Thus, empirical reality exists.

In a note to the Refutation, Kant also suggests that his response to the skeptic is superior to Descartes's response for epistemological reasons:

[Descartes's idealism] assumed that the only immediate experience is inner experience, and from that outer things could only be inferred, but... only *unreliably*, since the cause of the representations that we perhaps *falsely* ascribe to outer things can also lie in us. Yet here it is proved that outer experience is really immediate. (B276 [emphasis added])

Descartes only indirectly infers the existence of empirical reality from inner experience, which means there is no guarantee that beliefs about the target of that inference will be reliable or represent what is actually the case. In the Refutation, Kant purports to show that no such inference is needed. Since inner sense requires outer sense, we are as directly aware of material objects as we are of our inner experience. This immediate awareness of material objects informs a justifiable and veridical relation to empirical reality.

I have reviewed Kant's argument against Cartesian skepticism in the Refutation. I now present a few challenges to his account. The first challenge turns on how Kant's view of cognition grounds his refutation of Descartes. According to Kant, Descartes accepts that "I am conscious of my existence as determined in time" (B275). The argument Kant develops against Descartes in the Refutation simply explains what must be the case for this premise to be true. Most importantly, the past must exist. Being

in a present mental state, on Kant's account, entails the existence of time before that state. But does this entailment hold?

Not necessarily. Descartes's thought experiment concerns the possibility of being fed impressions of empirical reality by some evil genius. Now suppose that the evil genius places us into some possible world at the very first moment of that world's existence. Or, suppose the evil genius creates what Campbell calls world *W* in what follows:

Consider, for instance, the possible world *W*. Suppose that *W* is a determined world such that some adult person exists at every instant. Thus, *W* has no remote past. At its first moment of existence lived Adam, an adult person with all the knowledge, powers, and abilities necessary for moral responsibility. Shortly after Adam comes Eve, and the rest is history. (2007, p. 109)

Call t_1 Adam's first moment of existence in *W*, such that t_1 signifies the present. Importantly, at t_1 there is no past. Now, it certainly seems that Adam can be in some mental state at t_1 . After all, the evil genius can endow Adam with mental faculties similar to our own, and by hypothesis the experiences induced by the evil genius are indistinguishable from real world experiences. Let us say that at t_1 Adam reflects to himself, "now." Undoubtedly, this reflection locates his mental state in the present—the "now" signifies Adam's current mental state. But because there is no past, we can accept the premise that "I am conscious of my existence as determined in time" (B275) while denying the existence of the empirical world.

Kant would likely argue that Adam's reflection is unintelligible—that Adam lacks the necessary cognitive resources to truly locate his mental state in the present. At t_1 , Kant might say, Adam cannot be conscious of his existence as determined in time, since a world without a past is not a world in time. But this response faces three difficulties. First, regardless of how our particular mode of cognition operates, it certainly seems that Adam's reflection "now" is intelligible, in the sense that Adam can understand his mental state as currently occurring. Second, if Kant's claim that Adam's reflection is unintelligible turns wholly on Kant's own view of how we cognize space and time, Kant would seem to beg the question against Descartes. And if Kant does not beg the question, a third problem emerges: the entailment relation Kant offers between being aware of our mental states in the present and being aware of the past could fall through even if we accept Kant's requirements on cognizing space and time.

Let me explain. Adam could be conscious of his existence as

determined in time because the evil genius could render it so—even at t_1 . The evil genius could endow Adam with the kind of mental life required for him to conceive “now” at t_1 as the latest in an ongoing series of mental activities that precede the present. Adam simply needs his mental states to be grounded by something that endures which is distinct from him. And substantial objects are not required. The evil genius itself could be that which persists, or perhaps the evil genius could feed Adam the impression of persistence. Importantly, the evil genius, by hypothesis, is not identical to Adam’s mental states. The evil genius is external to Adam. This therefore satisfies Kant’s requirement that my mental states themselves cannot enable me to understand the persistence of time. According to Kant, locating Adam’s internal reflections in time implies awareness of some past-determining feature of the present, and this feature could simply be provided by the evil genius.

It then appears that Kant does not rule out the possibility that empirical reality does not exist. Cognizing the past need not imply intuiting material objects that endure, but rather only intuiting something that persists distinct from myself. Kant remarks, “consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me” (B275). But notice that “objects in space outside me” could mean *either* materially or spatially distinct from me. Descartes, of course, runs these two together. On his account, the essence of material reality is extension, and extension is that which fills a three-dimensional spatial-field (Descartes, 1996, 7:63). It is no wonder, then, that Kant believes outer sense will supply awareness of material objects—the connection between space and material reality falls squarely in the Cartesian tradition.

But this connection need not hold in the evil genius skeptical scenario. The evil genius could merely feed me impressions that ground my intuition of something that persists spatially distinct from myself. There is no good reason to make the stronger claim that the ground is, in fact, material objects. Such a claim would unnecessarily limit the conditions under which I can be affected spatially to that which is material—a move which would be either unwarranted or question begging. Hence, it seems that the Refutation does not provide the anti-skeptical ontological conclusion that Kant desires.

Now turn to epistemological issues. Kant’s response to the skeptical scenario attempts to establish that we are immediately aware of empirical reality—a response that Kant takes to be superior to Descartes’s own response. According to Kant, Descartes fails to guarantee reliable and veridical awareness of the world. For Kant my outward directing of attention works to justify my belief that I am immediately connected with

objects outside me. Merely having the concept of an object outside me does not establish the existence of that object: “In the mere concept of a thing no characteristic of its existence can be encountered at all” (A225, B272). There are only two ways existential beliefs can be justified if not by virtue of merely having certain concepts: either directly by intuition or indirectly by inference from intuition. In the Refutation, Kant attempts to show that one need not infer awareness of the external world because location in time presupposes spatial intuition, which puts us into direct contact with empirical reality.

But we easily can see how the challenges to Kant laid out above play out here. I have suggested that Kant only establishes that spatial intuition makes possible non-inferentially justified judgments about whatever persists external to me, and does not prove the further claim that these judgments will be veridical. And if Kant cannot establish the material nature of that which persists external to me, as I have argued, then the claim that we have immediate awareness of empirical reality outside ourselves will be neither justified nor veridical.

Let me summarize and conclude. In this paper, I presented Kant’s argument in the Refutation and leveled three criticisms against his view. First, it appears possible that in the evil genius scenario I can intelligibly reflect upon my own existence at the very moment I come into existence. If so, then outer sense does not seem to be a necessary condition for inner sense. Inner experience can be set in time without implying the existence of the past. Second, while mere mental states cannot establish awareness of something persisting independent of me, it appears possible that the evil genius could feed me impressions that establish that awareness, such that outer attending need not be grounded by material objects. Third, I suggested that while Kant establishes direct awareness of something persisting outside me, this does not imply that I am able to make reliable and veridical judgments about empirical reality. Overall, Kant’s Refutation neither guarantees the existence of material objects in space, nor our immediately awareness of such objects. Cartesian skepticism, it appears for now, wins the day.

Notes

- ¹ All references are to Kant (1998).
- ² For these tasks, I am greatly indebted to conversations with Arthur Melnick. See also Melnick (2004).
- ³ Perhaps the most influential treatment of Kant's Refutation is Guyer (1987, pp. 279-332). Guyer believes Kant's efforts against Cartesian skepticism ultimately succeed, whereas I challenge the soundness of Kant's argument. For other readings that claim Kant's Refutation succeeds, see Heidemann (1998); Hanna (2000); McDonough (2000); Allison (2004); Caranti (2007); Robinson (2010); Nitzan (2012). For readings that Kant does not succeed, though for reasons other than what I offer here, see Ameriks (1982, pp. 294-304); Dicker (2008, pp. 80-83). Dicker, influenced by Guyer, ends up reconstructing Kant's argument in order to render it successful. See Dicker (2008, pp. 83-108; 2011; 2012).
- ⁴ I believe my account holds against Kant's challenge to the *imagination* in the B276-277 footnote to note 1. Kant claims the Refutation establishes that we do not merely imagine outer experience, but instead we necessarily have actual outer experience. The justification appears to turn on the fact that outer imagination is momentary and merely a product of thought alone, neither of which imply persistence. I have argued that something persistent that is not merely thought alone can enable Adam to conceive of his mental states in time. For an argument that Kant fails to undermine the challenge brought against his account by the presence of imagination, see Caranti (2007, pp. 147-150).
- ⁵ Buroker contends that the otherness of what affects me "guarantees" its material nature (2006, p. 191). But, as I have argued, I believe this claim is unwarranted. Guyer (1987, pp. 310-316) agrees that the claim is unwarranted and recognizes the worry about running materiality and spatiality together. However, he overlooks the fact that the evil genius could have merely fed us the latter, and done so in such a way that the past is actually an illusion.

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