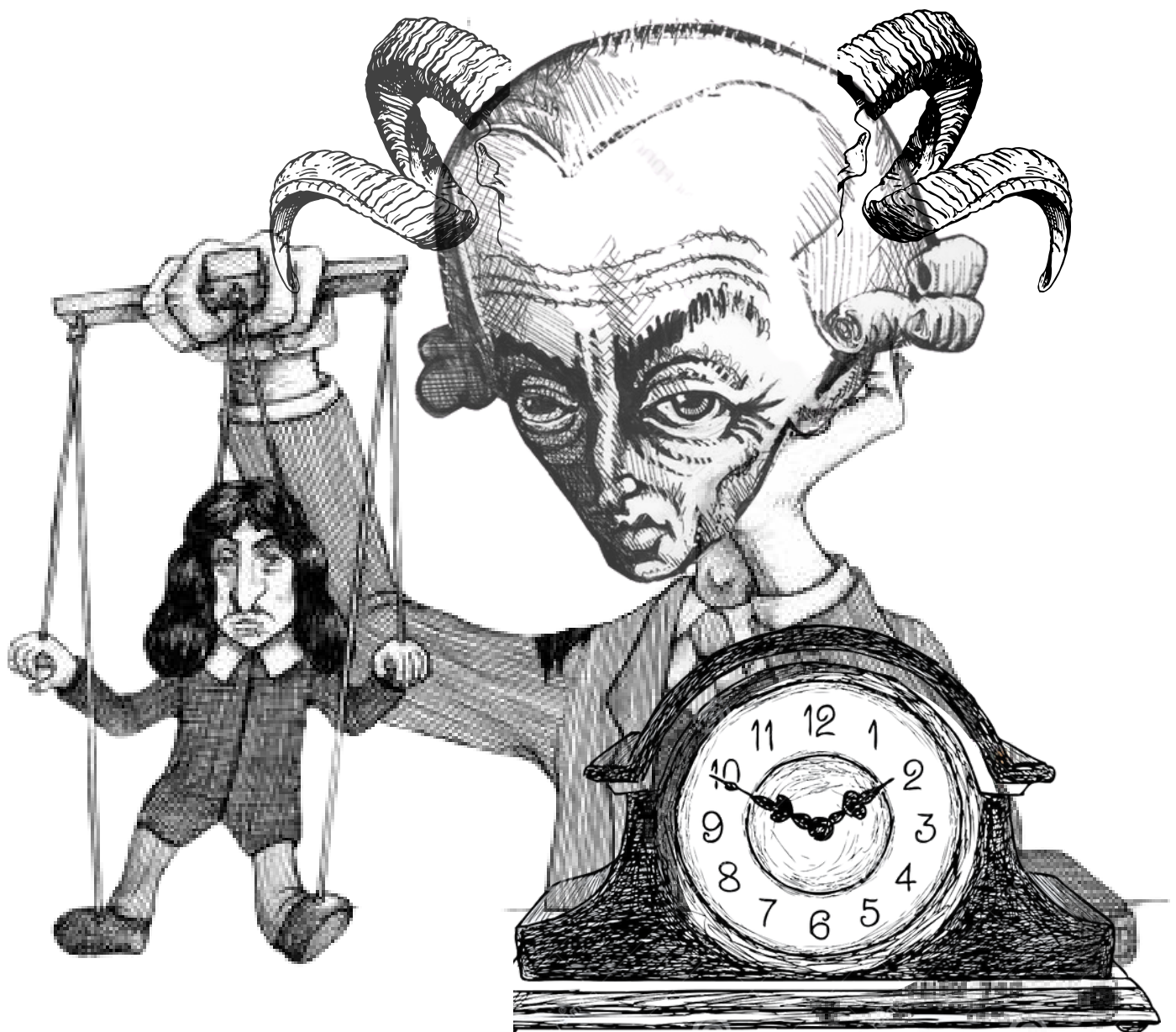


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KANT ON IDEALISM



In a section of his Critique of Pure Reason called “Refutation of Idealism,” Kant supplements arguments presented earlier in the aesthetic to further his rejection of material idealism: “the theory that declares the existence of objects in space outside us either to be merely doubtful and unprovable, or to be false and impossible” (B274). In Kant’s view, it is a “scandal of philosophy that the existence of things outside us should have been assumed merely on faith (Bxxxix).” As such, Kant’s primary objective in the refutation is to supply the believer with a rational foundation for their acceptance of reality. Given that arguments of material skepticism predate any modern theory of idealism and can be traced back to the origins of philosophy itself, Kant’s argument is ground breaking if successful. In this paper I will place the refutation in the context of enlightenment-era idealism, reconstruct and motivate the argument’s major claims, and ultimately express doubt on its potential to extinguish the doubts posed by the idealist.

Kant on Problematic Idealism:

Kant’s refutation is focussed on a specific type material idealism, the “problematic kind.” Largely attributable to Descartes, problematic idealism holds that “we are unable to prove by direct experience an existence apart from our own” (B275). In a nutshell, Cartesian skepticism expresses doubts about the veracity and trustworthiness of our experience of the external world. While our senses might appear to represent a coherent picture of some material reality external to our mind, we are not able to verify the accuracy of these mental representations, or even confirm that their objects exist with any degree of certainty. Descartes motivates this material skepticism through his illustrious evil deceiver argument; in short, we can never rule out the possibility that some omnipotent, malevolent being could be manipulating our perceptions, leading us to believe in a false reality. What differentiates problematic idealism from the “dogmatic” kind of Berkeley is the preservation of certainty of our internal, subjective experience. That is, while we could be totally confused as to the nature of our mental states, we

can never doubt that we are indeed having them. Thus Descartes arrives at his well-known maxim, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) which underscores the idea that our own existence as thinking beings is the sole certainty we possess.

As we will see, Kant's strategy to refute problematic idealism is to effectively flip it on its head by proving that the existence of a material world is actually a prerequisite for Descartes' inner experience. More specifically, Kant argues that a mere awareness of some inner experience necessitates the existence of external objects. As such, the skeptic's notion that our inner experience can be generated by some independent imaginative or illusory faculties of the mind is actually metaphysically impossible. Instead, and as we will see, Descartes inner experience is inextricably linked to a temporal phenomena that we cannot ourselves generate. If sound, Kant's ambitious argument effectively strips problematic idealism of its necessary tool of inference used to ground material skepticism. Outer experience is not something inferred from inner experience, but the former is actually a condition of the latter.

Terminology:

Kant is a notoriously technical writer, and his refutation of idealism contains an exceeding amount of nuanced terms that I wish to clarify in advance of my reconstruction of his argument. As the above exposition of problematic idealism might hint, much attention must be given to Kant's conception of inner and outer experience.

At various points in *The Critique* Kant defines experience as an empirical cognition: it is founded on the cognitive process by which we form sensation-based judgements about empirically real objects. It arises from an activity of the mind that organizes a multiplicity of sensations into empirical concepts that can be joined into judgments. Our experiential cognition is composite

and operates through two central faculties: sensibility and understanding, the former functioning as the faculty of perception and the latter of judgment. Through the faculty of sensibility we are able to form immediate, unmediated representations of objects known as sensory intuitions which are structured by the forms of space and time. Understanding, on the other hand, utilizes concepts and forms judgments about the objects encountered in experience in agreement with the forms known as the categories (e.g, plurality, cause, necessity, etc.). In a word, experience is a type of empirical knowledge that comes from the mind's ability to organize sensory information into judgments about objective reality.

The vast majority of Kant's discussion on experience in the Critique pertains to "outer experience" which refers to the cognition of external objects. However, albeit in a manner far from comprehensive, Kant also provides an account of inner experience that appears to roughly follow the same cognitive structure; through inner sense we can perceive our mental states in a similar manner to how we observe outer objects through outer sense. Through these observations we develop a sense of self-awareness that enables us to make judgments about these mental states (e.g., about their relations to each other, their properties). As we will see, in the refutation Kant provides some much needed clarification to this notion of inner experience. For now, however, it is best to conceptualize the relationship between inner and outer experience primarily in terms of how they complement each other in the realm of sensory experience.

Kant's Refutation of Idealism:

In proper transcendental fashion, the thesis of Kant's refutation of idealism is: "The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me" (B275). The premises that motivate this assertion are as follows:

(P1) I am conscious of my own existence as determined in time.

(P2) All determination of time presupposes something permanent in perception.

(P3) This permanent thing can not be something within me and thus be a thing outside of me.

(C) My existence necessitates the existence of things outside of me.

Beyond the mere articulation of these major argumentative steps, Kant provides very little in the way of explanation or justification. In what follows, I will to the best of my abilities motivate Kant's argument by drawing from his three ensuing comments regarding the proof as well as other context provided elsewhere in his project.

(P1) In Kant's first premise he argues that "I am conscious of **my own existence** as determined in time" (B276).

As presented, this notion of self-consciousness is not without a fair share of ambiguity that will require explanation. From a high level, the fundamental insight is that we are able to observe our mental states from a removed perspective, and in doing so, are conscious of their time-determined nature. That is, we are aware that our mental states (e.g, thoughts, feelings, memories, etc.) are temporally determined in virtue of the sequential ordering we perceive them as having. This, for the most part, is uncontroversial; we are certainly able to reflect on when past thoughts of ours occurred with respect to others. With that being said, and with further clarification from Kant's subsequent comments, (P1) has some interesting implications for Kant's conception of inner experience worth highlighting.

"The presentation I am, which expresses the consciousness that can accompany all thinking, is what directly includes the existence of a subject, but it is not yet a cognition of that subject, and

*hence is also no **empirical cognition** (i.e., experience of it). For such experience involves, besides the **thought of something existent**, also intuition, and here specifically **inner intuition**, in regard to which (viz **time**) the subject must be determined” (B277).*

The above passage confirms our hunch from the previous section regarding the architectural similarity between inner and outer experience. Indeed, Kant posits that our self-consciousness constitutes empirical knowledge in virtue of its acquisition through sensory experience; we intuit empirically real states of mind (i.e., objects) through our inner sense (i.e., time).

An additional takeaway from Kant’s account concerns his conception of self. It follows from our running definition of Kant’s self-consciousness that, in line with the Cartesian conception, “I am” merely a catalog of mental states; “all bases determining my existence that can be encountered within me are presentations” (B277). This characterization highlights what I deem to be the most problematic aspect of Kant’s conception of inner experience: what constitutes a mental object? That is, Kant provides very little in the way of an explanation of what types of presentations constitute content material for the inner sense and how they arise. Presumably our empirical memories, or past representations of external objects constitute a large portion of our mental repertoire. However, are these not already associated with the outer sense? In a word, Kant’s description of inner experience is desperately in need of an account of mental objects.

(P2) The second step in Kant’s argument involves an inquiry into what allows for this time-determined nature of our inner experience (i.e., our empirical self-consciousness). Kant’s major claim is that “all determination of time presupposes something **permanent in perception**” (B276). Conceptually speaking, something that is “determined by time” is something that we recognize as having the capacity to undergo change. This notion of changeability is characteristic of both our internal and external representations; our mental states vary from one

to the next (e.g, a craving for a dessert evolves into a specific craving for lava cake) and so do appearances of the outer sense (e.g, a plane flies through the sky). In the context of time, this change is understood and articulated through temporal relationships: Succession, as we have been discussing, refers to representations occurring one after another while simultaneity refers to representations coexisting at the same time (e.g, a feeling of uncontrollable euphoria occurs simultaneously with my reading of Kant's canon of pure reason).

The second leg of Kant's claim, the necessity of permanence in perception for time determination, leans on Kant's "principle of permanence" described elsewhere in the Critique. Developed in The First Analogy, Kant's argument for the principle of permanence holds that in order for us to perceive change across representations of something, there must be a permanent element that remains stable amidst the change within that something. Furthermore, this permanent element must also be distinct from the representations themselves and perceivable; a successive ordering of representations implies a change amongst these iterations which can only be captured with an external, enduring reference point. By definition, all change is relative and accordingly can only be made intelligible with something that persists through it. In our time-determined experience, we must perceive that which bears change but, for the sake of time continuity, does not ever change itself (e.g, disappear out of existence). Time itself might be a good candidate for this permanent something (hereby "the permanent"). After all, time is a "*permanent* form of inner intuition" that accordingly structures every one of our representations. However, Kant explains, "time cannot be perceived" in virtue of it being a precondition for perception itself.

(P3) Expanding on his second premise, Kant contends that the permanent "cannot exist within me, as my existence is determined in time by this unchanging element." Therefore perception of

this permanent something is possible only through a thing outside me and not through mere presentation of a thing outside me (B 275).”

Upon further inspection this final premise involves the combination of insights from the preceding two in order to ultimately make the case that the permanent is something outside of oneself. As a reminder, in (P1) Kant has shown our inner experience is merely a collection of representations made perceptively intelligible through their determination in time. In (P2) Kant has shown that our perception of change amongst representations requires a distinct, enduring element within this perception. In what appears to be an important footnote, Kant puts these insights together to further support (P3):

*“For all bases determining **my existence** that can be encountered within me **are presentations**; and, being presentations. they themselves **require something permanent distinct from them**, by reference to which their variation, and hence my existence in the time in which they vary, can be determined (B277).”*

In a word, our inner experience (i.e, our conception of self) as a myriad of representations cannot produce the permanent that is a prerequisite for these representations. As such, the permanent cannot be a representation and therefore cannot be found within us. That leaves one option: the permanent is a real object that exists outside of us.

(C) “Hence determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things that I perceive outside me (B276).”

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the most dubious premises provided in Kant's account appear to be (P1) and (P3). Regarding the latter, it should appear odd to the reader that Kant never provides a concrete account of what the permanent is (or anything close for that matter). While I do not intend to problematize his claims here, there can be no good reason to have omitted this critical detail. After all, if the permanent is something distinct and perceivable, how can it be so unintelligible?

For the remainder of this essay, however, I will focus my attention on some problems that might arise out of (P1), Kant's definition of self-consciousness. To reiterate, Kant's approach in the refutation is to adapt a Cartesian conception of inner experience and demonstrate its conditioning on outer experience. As such, the entirety of the refutation rests on the assumption that Kant's reconceptualization of self-consciousness accurately mirrors the dogmatic idealist's concept of inner experience.

In line with the above, the fundamental question is whether a Cartesian skeptic must accept the temporal structure Kant places on inner experience. To answer this, we might want to examine the cogito for indications of time: "I think, therefore I am." Does the certainty of inner experience afforded by the cogito (in Descartes' view) persist permanently from this realization or solely in each temporally distinct instance in which it is cognized? I argue for something along the lines of the latter. After all, returning to Descartes' evil deceiver argument, couldn't our memory of the cogito's reassurance merely be a deception if we were to rely on it for sustained certainty? While perhaps an overread, the articulation of the cogito solely in the present tense further lends itself to this interpretation at least to some degree. Accordingly, given that the addition of a

temporal structure to inner experience does not serve in any way to bolster the strength of the cogito, it appears relatively easy for the Cartesian skeptic to reject it.

Aside from considerations regarding how (P1) might be interpreted by Kant's opponents, (P1) as interpreted might in fact be problematic to Kant's very own ideas established elsewhere in *The Critique*. For example, it seems to be in blatant contradiction to Kant's description of inner sense described in the introduction of the Paralogisms: "I, as thinking, am an object of inner sense and am called soul" (B400). This is a far cry from what is described as the objects of inner sense in the refutation: namely, a series of non-reidentifiable representations. Furthermore, in this picture there is no object that could share in the same enduring nature that the soul as an object would have.

One final problematic consideration pertaining to (P1) that I wish to highlight concerns the existence of altered states of mind. That is, can Kant's notion of the self adequately account for dream states or drug altered states? While this might appear frivolous at first, there is good reason to believe that we can experience mental states that are not structured in time, and upon reflection cannot be temporally related to each other. Dream states, for example, seem to lack a fundamental level of continuity; objects of dreams pass in and out of existence, change in radical ways, and do not persist from dream to dream. In fact, it is quite possible in the midst of a dream to wake up and return to the same dream. Psychedelics, especially those of the tryptamine class (e.g DMT) are reportedly known to remove a subject's sense of self and time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kant's refutation of idealism offers a superbly unique argument against material skepticism. In a realm of philosophy so exhaustively explored yet so very narrow, Kant must be

commended for the identification of a novel approach that, at the bare minimum, demands a response from the dogmatic realist. While the historical lack of interest in the refutation relative to Kant's other works is not a terrific indicator of its success, the refutation provides an intriguing account of self-consciousness that might prove useful in other contexts.