

# *Three Visions of an Ideal World: Kant Against Rival Idealisms*

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*Abstract:* This paper seeks to show that Kant's Refutation of Idealism succeeds in proving the existence of a world apart from the self, while noting that this conclusion does not disprove Berkeleyan idealism, which posits an illusory world with an external source. In making my way to this conclusion, I present two step-by-step interpretations of the Refutation of Idealism. The first relies on the necessity of a persistent ground for our representations of the world, and while a more literal reading of the text it succumbs to objections. The second interpretation brings to light a vicious circularity caused by reliance on self-caused representations, and though a less literal reading it succeeds in proving the existence of some sort of external world.

Immanuel Kant's Refutation of Idealism within the *Critique of Pure Reason* is generally seen as his attempt to distance his Transcendental Idealism from traditional forms of what he calls "empirical idealism," such as that of Berkeley or of Cartesian philosophy. To do this, he aims to prove that the very fact of our interior experience, undoubted by the most thorough of skeptics, would be impossible were it not for the existence of a world of external objects which we perceive as in space. In this paper I examine the force that Kant's argument has against its two opponents: the solipsist, who denies that we can know of the existence of an external world or even rejects its possibility, and the Berkeleyan idealist, who admits the existence of such a world but denies that what we perceive corresponds to it in any way, attributing the world of our perception to a great illusion on the part of God or another external thing. In this paper I provide two interpretations of the Refutation of Idealism. The first, though a more literal reading of the text, ultimately fails to prove its point against either opponent, while the second, I argue,

succeeds against the solipsist but remains powerless against the Berkeleyan idealist. After discussing both of these reconstructions of the argument along with their strengths and failings, I will propose that Kant limits his scope, in the introduction to the Refutation of Idealism, to a refutation of *solipsistic* idealism. In this way his argument retains full force against its opponent and achieves a significant result, even if it cannot effect the hoped-for separation between him and Berkeley.

## First Reconstruction: The Argument

One of the ways in which it is possible to reconstruct Kant's argument is as follows:

1. I am determined in time.
2. Determination in time requires something persistent in perception.
3. The two forms of perception are space and time.
4. Time cannot be perceived in itself and is only determined through a spatial analogue.
5. Therefore, time-determination must occur through the perception of persisting things in space (from 2, 3, and 4).
6. Any perception of persisting things in space that allows me to determine myself in time would be a representation.
7. All representations require another persistent thing apart from them to be determined.
8. Therefore, there is a persistent thing prior to perception that allows the determination of (i.e., grounds) my representations of the spatial world (from 1, 5, 6, and 7).
9. This prior-to-perception persistent thing is either outside me or inside me.
10. It cannot be in me.
11. Therefore, there is a persistent thing outside me which enables the determination of my representations of space and

therefore the determination of myself in time (from 8, 9, and 10).

The argument starts from the basic claim that I am determined in time. Of this fact I am immediately aware; it is what enables me to say of myself that I existed in some way in the past and exist in another in the present. Premises 2 through 5 come from the Analogies, and rest on the concept of a persisting substance. Though I will not here rehearse the entire argument for the premise's claim, one line of reasoning that supports it is found in the First Analogy. In a world in which everything is always changing, and nothing persists, each point at each moment is completely disconnected from every other point-moment (though in reality to speak of a "moment" here is a misuse of terminology). We will call a point-moment an "event." In this world of total and eternal change, instead of a continuum of connected events we would have a sequence, in which "existence is always disappearing and beginning, and never has the least magnitude" (Kant A183/B226).<sup>1</sup> It is only when we introduce something that persists through change that we can relate events to each other, forming a continuum and allowing for the determination of time. Thus, "that which persists is the substratum of the empirical representation of time itself, by which alone all time-determination is possible," (premise 2) (A183/B226).

Now, "time cannot be perceived in itself" and thus by itself it cannot provide this persisting thing (A181/B225). We must look elsewhere: "Consequently it is in the objects of perception, i.e., the appearances, that the substratum must be encountered that represents time in general and in which all change or simultaneity can be perceived through the relation of the appearances to it" (premise 4) (A181/B225). Since we perceive all appearances in space, "appearances"

here means spatial intuitions. The self cannot be the requisite persistent appearance because "[t]he consciousness of myself in the representation *I* is no intuition at all, but a merely *intellectual* representation of the self-activity of a thinking subject" (B278). In sum, we need not only a persisting thing, but a persisting thing in space in order to determine ourselves in time (premise 5).

The idealist could agree with everything said thus far. Neither the Berkeleyan nor the solipsist denies that we perceive what we perceive; rather, he or she merely posits a different source for those perceptions. We may need a persisting thing in our perceptions to make sense of ourselves and the world, but those perceptions could very well be contained within myself, as they are in dreams. To eliminate this possibility, we move to the second stage of the argument.

Premise 6 states that any perception of ours, like the perception we use to notice the necessary persisting spatial objects, are representations. This is nothing more than a definitional claim: on B376 Kant says, "The genus is representation in general (*repraesentatio*). Under it stands the representation with consciousness (*perceptio*)." Kant goes on to say that representations "require something persistent that is distinct even from them, in relation to which their change, thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined" (premise 7) (Bxxxix). This seems like a reasonable claim—take each frame of a representation individually, and there is no necessary relation to every other frame; in other words, there is no order inherent in representations alone. To take one of Kant's examples, given an image of a ship upstream and a ship downstream there is no way of knowing, solely on the basis of what is contained in the images, which comes first. There must then be a second persistent thing that grounds the perceptions and puts them in the correct relationships to each other (premise 8). This persisting thing is not to be confused with the persistent thing in

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<sup>1</sup> All following in-text citations refer to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, as cited below.

perception—Kant says that this is “distinct even from [the representations]” and so cannot be something within them. Rather, this persistent thing is “behind” the perception, so to speak. Like a table on which are arranged photographs, this persistent thing underlies representations; it is prior to them and enables them. Unlike the table, it also determines the order in which the representations appear.

Next Kant must show that the prior-to-perception persistent thing is outside me and not inside me (premise 10). This claim rests mainly on arguments only fully worked out in the Paralogisms later in the *Critique* (B406–B432). There Kant works his way to the conclusion that since we cannot have an intuition of the self as it is, and therefore also can have no cognition of it, we cannot know the self to be a substance, that is, a persisting thing. Therefore, if the required persisting thing prior to perception is not myself or something within me, then it must be outside me (premise 11). Note, however, the gap between our lack of knowledge about the substantiality of the self proved in the Paralogisms and the positive claim that the self is not a substance—this will be returned to later on. Disregarding this worry for the time being, we have proved that there is something outside me that enables the determination of my perceptions, i.e., that grounds them. And by grounding my persistent spatial perceptions, this thing allows me to determine myself in time. In the empirical realist model to which Kant ascribes, it is external things that ground my perceptions by giving them reference to something. Our perceptions of the sun, for example, are put into proper relation with each other because there is an actual sun (in some form) to which they correspond. A perception of the sun rising precedes that of the sun setting because that is the way it is in the external world. On this view, without actual external objects we would not have any basis for our representations being ordered and therefore would not perceive

anything as persistent. Consequently, we could not determine ourselves in time.

### Objections to the First Reconstruction

It is in the aforementioned gap between the arguments of the Paralogisms and the claim of premise 10 that primary problem of the argument lies. The argument in the Paralogisms only proves that we cannot know whether or not the self is a substance. It does not, however, definitively prove that it is in fact not a substance. If it is possible for the self to be a substance, then premise 10 fails, and so does the argument. Kant might attempt to plug the gap by saying that if the self is dependent on the representations, and the representations are dependent on the self, then we run into circularity. But it does not seem like this is necessarily vicious circularity—it could be the case that the unperceived self grounds the representations which are perceived. Kant himself draws a hard line between inner sense, by which we perceive the self as it appears, and apperception (see B153). Thus, it would seem the argument of the Refutation of Idealism, at least in this form, does not definitively prove anything against the solipsist.

The argument does not fare much better against an idealist like Berkeley, who posits God as the ground of perception. In Berkeley’s view God immediately gives us each one of our perceptions. Most idealists hold some variant of this position, claiming that there is something external to us that gives us our perceptions, which nevertheless do not correspond to the true nature of the external world—this is true from Descartes’ evil demon to the computer program in the 1999 film *The Matrix*. Now the conclusion of Kant’s argument—that there is an external persistent thing that grounds our representations—is perfectly compatible with this idealist picture. Kant’s view is, of course, noticeably distinct from Berkeley’s in that Kant thinks that when we perceive things, those perceptions are

actually perceptions of external things in some way; appearances are actually apparitions of something. However, they are perceptions that are filtered through our human sensibility, thus taking on the forms of space and time which do not pertain to them in themselves. Kant explains this in the Transcendental Aesthetic:

If I say: in space and time intuition represents both outer objects as well as well as the self-intuition of the mind as each affects our senses, i.e., as it *appears*, that is not to say that these objects would be a mere *illusion*. For in the appearance the objects, indeed even properties that we attribute to them, are always regarded as something really given, only insofar as this property depends only on the kind of intuition of the subject in relation of the given object to it then this object as *appearance* is to be distinguished from itself as object *in itself*. (B69)

Thus, Kant asserts that our perceptions in some way correspond to actual external things, that those things are the cause of order among our perceptions. Meanwhile, for Berkeley the representations that we perceive have no necessary correlation to things as they are in transcendental reality, God being the persistent ground of all perceptions directly. However, both positions are equally valid if the only criterion is that there is a persistent thing outside me that grounds perception—God can act as the persistent thing that produces and orders all representations in us just as well as an external world of objects can.

### The Revised Reconstruction The Argument

If this interpretation of Kant's argument in the Refutation of Idealism fails to prove itself against either of its opponents, solipsism or idealism, we must try to find another way to interpret it. One way to do this is to take a different tack in

answering the central question of why representations alone cannot allow my time-determinations. Instead of positing two types of persistent things—the perceived persistent thing and the prior-to-perception persisting thing—we could do away with the second entirely, along with the argument following from it. We replace it with the premise that if we are to cause the change and persistence of our representations, we must already be determined in time. This new reconstruction, enumerated below, is the same as the first reconstruction through premise 5.

1. I am determined in time.
2. Determination in time requires something persistent in perception.
3. The two forms of perception are space and time.
4. Time cannot be perceived in itself and is only determined through a spatial analogue.
5. Therefore, time-determination must occur through the perception of persisting things in space. (from 2, 3, and 4)
6. These perceived spatial objects are either outside me or inside me.
7. If the perceived spatial objects were something in me, they would be representations contained entirely in me, and I would cause the change and persistence that I perceive.
8. For me to cause change and persistence in my representations presupposes the determination of myself in time.
9. Therefore, the perceived spatial objects which enable me to determine myself in time would presuppose the determination of myself in time—a vicious circle. (from 5, 7, and 8)
10. Therefore, the persistent spatially perceived object cannot be in me and must instead be outside of me. (from 6 and 9)

11. Therefore, there exist objects outside me that we perceive as persisting in space. (from 1, 5, and 10)

In the revised reconstruction of the argument, Kant sets up a dichotomy after premise 5: the objects that we perceive as outside us in space could be actually outside us, or they could be inside of us (premise 6). Now if the perceived spatial objects were inside me, they would exist as representations produced and perceived entirely within myself (premise 7) (Bxxxix). On this view we would create a representation of a persisting substance (and its alteration) for ourselves; perceiving this we would be able to determine ourselves in our self-created world of space and time. But to do this we would have to make our representations change in an ordered, connected way. This is necessary not only from an *a posteriori* perspective (since we do in fact perceive such change), but from an *a priori* one as well. Change is required for us to “perceive” time and therefore determine ourselves within it—if nothing at all ever changed, either inside us or outside us, we could not even form a concept of time. And of course, for things to change in the way that enables our time-determination, there must also be something persistent, as described above.

But if our representations are entirely contained within ourselves, then *we* are causing our representations to persist and change in this ordered manner, making them move from one state to another and situating them with reference to each other. In short, we are determining them in time (premise 8). And if the representations are depending on me to be determined in time, and I am dependent on them to determine myself in time, we have vicious circularity (premise 9). Thus, the entire line of argument on this side of the dichotomy, which stems from the supposition that the spatially perceived objects are in me, is faulty and must be rejected. This leaves us with the conclusion that

the objects we perceive in space are actually outside of us.

### The Necessity of Matter

This view, naturally, has its own weaknesses. For example, if we take premise 8 to mean that we cannot impose a framework of time on our representations, then we would be led to reject Kant’s thesis that things in themselves are outside of space and time and that we impose those forms on them as we perceive and cognize them. Rather, premise 8 must mean that I cannot provide the *matter* of change and persistence for myself; I cannot represent space and time if I have no external source of information to work with. There must be something external to us which we translate as change and persistence; in this way we are not the ones causing the persistence, but rather persistence in space is how we perceive the external world. In this manner we can reconcile the claim that we cannot cause change and persistence with the claim that space is not a property of things in themselves.

This concept is further elucidated in what Kant says about the imagination. He distinguishes the “transcendental synthesis of the imagination” from the “empirical synthesis of the imagination,” noting that the latter is only reproductive and subject to empirical laws of mental association, while the first is a central aspect of our cognition and is, in a sense, productive (B152). However, this “productive imagination” is only productive in that it is actively caused by me and not passively perceived: “insofar as the imagination is spontaneity, I also occasionally call it the productive imagination, and thereby distinguish it from the reproductive imagination” (B152). This productive imagination, or “transcendental synthesis of the imagination,” is “an effect of the understanding on the sensibility” and it exercises its spontaneity by being the faculty that “connects the manifold of intuition” (B152, B164). This is a vital role: the imagination gives an intuition to inner sense

(which by itself has no objects of intuition) by connecting it and analogizing it to the manifold given in space, thus making time-determination possible. Kant says, “inner sense, on the contrary, contains the mere form of intuition, but without combination of the manifold in it, and thus it does not yet contain any determinate intuition at all, which is possible only through the consciousness of the determination of the manifold through the transcendental action of the imagination” (B154). Not only does such a concept of imagination play a crucial role in the Analogies, on which the Refutation of Idealism largely rests, but it also means that neither the transcendental synthesis of the imagination nor the empirical is able to form images out of thin air: the former requires something to connect, and the latter something to reproduce. They both require some matter to work with, a matter which must be given in spatial intuition. And, given Kant’s theory of the imagination, the argument that we imagine an external world without any matter being given to the imagination becomes self-refuting: by taking away the matter with which the imagination works, the imagination would cease to be able to function.

Keeping in mind this necessity of matter for the imagination, we can explain those cases in which it seems that the imagination creates an illusory outer experience for us. Lifelike dreams and imaginings, on which much of idealism’s appeal rests, are accounted for as reproductions of previous intuitions—our memories provide the matter for the imagination. Moreover, these representations are made possible by the fact that we are already determined in time. They depend on my time-determination as premise 8 prescribes, but I have already been able to determine myself in time on the basis of spatially perceived persistent images caused by an external world independent of me. Only after already having these intuitions stored in the memory, and after being previously determined in time,

can my empirical synthesis of the imagination create illusions.

### **Berkeley’s Objection Returns**

Thus, it seems that this reconstruction of Kant’s argument fares better than the first. By pointing out the impossibility of determining oneself in time on the basis of representations alone, it is successful at least against the solipsist—a significant accomplishment. Yet the objection of Berkeley’s God still looms large. Once again, Berkeley could accept that we perceive objects outside us in space and that they are caused by an external source while still maintaining his claim that it is God who creates the perceptions of the objects, that it is solely God who is this external source. Since these representations are not dependent on our determination in time for their persistence and change, they fulfill premise 8 and render idealism perfectly compatible with Kant’s Refutation. It would seem that the only way to refute Berkeleyan idealism while maintaining trans-cendental idealism would be for Kant to prove that there must be some correspondence of our representations to the things represented—a proof that does not seem to appear in the text and likely would violate the assertion that we can know nothing about things in themselves.

Another option for Kant, and the one that I argue he takes, is for him to shift the burden of proof and say that there is simply no reason to believe that our perceptions do not correspond in some way to reality. In his introduction of the Refutation of Idealism, found on B274–B275, Kant notes that the motivation behind Berkeleyan idealism was that transcendental realism, the supposition that space is a property of things in themselves, is logically inconsistent. Since Kant has removed that motivation with his new transcendental idealism, there is no philosophically rigorous reason to believe Berkeley. Kant says:

Dogmatic idealism is unavoidable if one regards space as a property that is to pertain to the 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. (B274–275)

Instead, Kant takes as his main opponent the “problematic idealist” who “professes only our incapacity for proving an existence outside us from our own by means of immediate experience,” and he intends with his argument to give such a person a reason for believing in external things (B275). In this light, Kant’s Refutation of Idealism never took Berkeley as its main opponent to begin with. Though this approach deprives Kant of a full refutation of Berkeleyan idealism, i.e., a proof that Berkeley cannot be right, it leaves Kant’s argument, in its limited scope, intact.

## Conclusion

In this paper I first laid out what seems to be the most literal reading of Kant’s Refutation of Idealism, consequently showing that it failed to prove its point in any definitive manner against both the solipsist, who claims that there exists nothing external to me, and the Berkeleyan idealist, who suggests that our perceptions do have their source outside me, but that they do not correspond with reality. I then put forward a modified reconstruction of the argument, founded on the premise that persistence and change in my representations, if those representations are entirely contained within me, is dependent on my prior determination in time. This argument was able to refute the solipsist, while remaining ineffective against the

Berkeleyan idealist. Finally, I suggested that Kant, in the preamble to the Refutation of Idealism, in fact limits his scope to a refutation of solipsism, asserting that there is simply no good reason to agree with Berkeley. The compatibility of Berkeleyan idealism and transcendental idealism remains troubling, however. Since we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves, it seems entirely possible that behind the veil of our perceptions is a puppeteer God foisting representations—albeit persistent ones—on our sensibility. In fact, it seems Kant and Berkeley would agree on this statement from the Transcendental Aesthetic, that “[o]ur expositions accordingly teach the reality (i.e., objective validity) of space in regard to everything that can come before us externally as an object, but at the same time the ideality of space in regard to things when they are considered in themselves through reason” (A27–A28/B44). In this light, Berkeley’s true fault would be that he makes unjustified claims about things in themselves, apart from the world of possible experience. So, if Kant’s larger aim in the Refutation of Idealism was to separate himself from Berkeleyan idealism, that hope has been disappointed. However, against the solipsist or lonely Cartesian meditator who issues a skeptical denial of the possibility of knowledge that there is an external world, Kant’s argument, at least in its second reconstruction, retains full force.

## Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, 2009.