

DRST 004: Directed Studies Philosophy
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Minh Alexander Nguyen

A Reconstruction and Critique of the Refutation of Idealism

by Minh Alexander Nguyen

In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*¹, Kant endeavors to disprove Cartesian and Berkeleyan idealism, instead claiming that our "inner experience, undoubted by Descartes, is possible only under the presupposition of outer experience" (B 275). In this paper, I will reconstruct Kant's Refutation of Idealism, and then provide two objections to its soundness.

Kant's Transcendental argument is as follows.

Refutation of Idealism:

- (1) "I am conscious of my own existence as determined in time" (B 275).
- (2) All determination of time "presupposes something persistent in perception" (B 275).
- (3) This "something persistent", however, cannot be an "intuition in me" (B 275).
- (4) Perception of this "something persistent" is only possible through an actual external thing; this persistent thing cannot be a mental representation of an external thing (B 275).
- (5) **Conclusion:** "Consequently the determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself" (B 275).

In (1), Kant is accepting that which even Idealists such as Descartes and Berkeley accept (or so Kant claims). For instance, the mind is conscious of its mental states occurring in a temporal order. Indeed, I can order one mental state as happening *before*, *after*, or *at the same time* as another mental state.

¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer, Allen Wood. Cambridge University Press: 1998.

In (2), however, Kant asserts that before the mind makes sense of changes through its mental states, it must already have the idea of some thing that is *persistent*. This line of thought is seemingly obvious; analogously, if I want to measure the change in height of a plant, I need something that does not change (e.g., a meter stick) in order to understand the plant's growth. With space, the argument seems simple. However, with time, Kant's argument is more complex. In order to fully establish the veracity of (2), we must examine Kant's proof of the First Analogy.

First Analogy:

- (1) All appearances are *in* time; all changes in appearances, such as **succession** and **simultaneity**, can alone be represented within time. (B 224).
- (2) If all changes in appearances are represented *in* time, then time *itself* does not change. (B 225).
- (3) Time *itself* cannot be perceived, either (B 225).
- (4) Therefore, the substratum that represents time must be found *in* the objects of perception. (B 225).
- (5) The substratum of everything real ("i.e., everything that belongs to the existence of things") is called **substance** (B 225).
- (6) **Conclusion:** The persisting thing "is substance in the appearance"; substance, "as the substratum of all change," always remains the same (B 225).

Premise (1) is a consequence of Kant's previous argument that time is *a priori* of all perception; for the purposes of this paper, it should be granted true that: nothing exists outside of time, even our own existences.

Premise (2) is the claim that time itself does not change. Succession and simultaneity—examples of changes—are only “*modi* of time” (B 226). Change only happens within time; time is merely the location where change is represented. Time underlies everything.

Premise (3) implies we, in understanding time, do not directly perceive a “timeline”. Suppose I have two successive mental states. Firstly, “I think of a dog.” Secondly, “I think of a cat.” The way in which I order the thought of the cat as occurring *after* the thought of the dog is not by time-stamping both these thoughts and then analyzing that one occurs to the right of the other on a timeline. Consider this informal proof of (3): If I could perceive time by itself, then I would necessarily be able to imagine an existence without time (similarly, if I could perceive a timeline with two points on it, then I could easily imagine just the points, and no timeline). However, it is impossible for me to imagine my existence outside of time—as per premise (1)—so it is impossible to perceive time by itself.

Premise (4) answers the objection that arises from (3): If we do not perceive time itself, how do we perceive time? By extension, if we do not perceive time itself changing, how do we perceive changes in time? Kant argues that the way in which we represent time (and changes in it) is found *in* the objects of perception. There is some property (substratum) inherent to all perceived objects that enable us to make sense of simultaneity of succession.

Premise (5) merely names this inherent substratum as ‘substance’ and implies that it is persistent. How does the persistence of substance allow us to understand changes in time? Take an example of succession: wood burns, and afterwards there is ash and smoke. If we had no concept of a permanent substance of the wood, we would say the wood was destroyed and ash and smoke were created. In this scenario, we are unable to understand succession, and thus, changes in time; the wood does not change into ash and smoke, as it just disappears. However,

with the understanding that wood has an inherent and permanent substance, we can say that the wood merely *changed* in form to smoke and ash (Kant's concept of substance here evokes the Conservation of Mass, it seems). Only because the wood—and every other real object—has a substance that lasts and persists can we understand changes in time.

Thus, (1)-(5) entail (6), which secures the soundness of (2): *Substance* is that which is persistent in perception and that which is presupposed in all time-determination. Now, we can continue with the Refutation of Idealism.

In (3), Kant rather straightforwardly claims that “the persisting thing” cannot come *immediately* from within myself—I cannot simply intuit it from my “inner sense” because my “own existence in time can first be determined only through this persistent thing” (B 275).

In (4), Kant furthers his claim, not only asserting that I cannot *immediately* perceive “the persisting thing” in my mind, but also asserting that I cannot *intermediately* perceive it, i.e., as a mental representation of a real thing outside me. In his revised preface, Kant proceeds to explain why perception of the “persisting thing” cannot be through representation of an external object:

“For all grounds of determination of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations, and as such 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 (B XXXIX)”.

Upon closer inspection, we see that this argument is a proof by elimination: given that (3) is true, if Kant succeeds in disproving that “the persisting thing” can be a representation, then the only option is that “the persisting thing” is external; the only option is that “the persisting thing” is substance, which is uniquely material. Perhaps we can rewrite this argument formally:

The Persisting Thing is Not a Representation:

- (1) Claim: “The persisting thing” is only a mental representation of the persisting thing that exists externally.
- (2) If “the persisting thing” itself is only a representation of the real persisting thing, that representation is still understood *in* time. (1) in the First Analogy asserts this.
- (3) If that representation is understood *in* time, then that representation *still* needs to be grounded in a substratum with *something else* that is persisting.
- (4) If that *something else* is a representation, then repeat (2) - (3).

Thus, the initial claim that “the persisting thing” is a representation yields an invalid proof by creating an infinite loop, for representations themselves “require something persistent that is distinct even from them, in relation to which their change...can be determined”. The only way to sever this loop, asserts Kant, is for the persisting thing to be external. The persisting thing must be substance—which is real and material.

If the persisting thing is substance, and if substance “is the substratum of everything **real**”, then the existence of substance presupposes the existence of real, material objects—“actual things that I perceive outside myself” (B 225). Thus, (1) – (4) entail (5), and Kant’s Refutation of Idealism is complete.

Having reconstructed Kant’s Refutation of Idealism, let us now examine its validity and soundness. If (1) - (4) are true, then the proof is valid. However, its soundness is another question. Perhaps (1) may be false; how can I be certain that I am conscious of my mental states occurring in temporal order? That is, how sure am I that *before* my present thought of a cat, I *was* thinking of a dog? In his haste to refute Descartes’ “problematic idealism” (B 274), Kant seemingly forgets to take into account the possibility of Descartes’ deceiving demon. Granted, my *present* mental states are immune from hyperbolic doubt via the Cogito and the Clear and

Distinct Rule. However, I am uncertain of the reliability of my *past* mental states. For instance, the evil demon could have implanted in my mind that I was thinking of a dog before my present thought of a cat; in reality, I was thinking of a moose before the present thought of the cat. Thirty days from now, how can I be sure that I thought of the dog *before* the cat? The demon could have switched the order, implanted both thoughts of the cat and dog in me, or otherwise deceived me of my past mental states—I can only be sure of my present thoughts. Without first ruling out the deceiving demon (which can *only* be done by proving the existence of God, as Descartes does; Kant explicitly believes God cannot be logically proven), I have no ability to temporally order my past mental states. Because all memory is unreliable, I therefore cannot carry out any time-determination that involves the concept of succession. Thus, **(1)** is false, and the Refutation of Idealism is unsound.

Furthermore, **(2)** may be false if the First Analogy is unsound. The First Analogy relies heavily on the concept of substance as the persistent thing by which we can determine changes in time. Yet this argument implies that I need to understand persisting substance before I can perform time-determination; I need to first understand that burning wood does not destroy it and only changes its form, in order to understand changes in time—namely, succession. However, humankind has been able to perform time-determination far before it learned that burning wood does not destroy it; we understood succession even before we discovered the law of Conservation of Mass. Primitive humans, therefore, did not need the idea of a persistent and unchanging property of matter to make determinations in time; thus **(2)** is false. Kant has only one possible response: substance is not matter or mass. However, this response renders the First Analogy vague and impotent. If time-determination presupposes a persistent thing in perception, and that persistent thing is *not* matter or mass, then what is it? Are we to take Kant's word that

there is something *else* out there that is unchanging, something unspecified that grounds our understanding of time?

Nevertheless, Kant's argument is an ingenious, albeit somewhat flawed, effort to prove what most of us arguably *want* to believe anyway. His end is to establish that we are not brains in vats, and that our lives and interactions with nature are real and material; perhaps this life-affirming property of Kant's argument is why his Refutation of Idealism is so seductive.