

Idealism: problematic, visionary, critical

There are many passages in the *Prolegomena* where Kant distances himself from a particular variety of idealism (e.g., Notes II and III, §32, Appendix), even though he is explicitly defending a *version* of idealism himself.

In broadest outline, *realism* is the view that things in the external world are independent of human cognition; their nature and existence is unrelated to us. (This is how Kant characterises ‘transcendental realism’ in *CPR* A368–9.) In contrast, *idealism* is the view that reality is mind-dependent or mind-correlative. An *ontological reading* suggests that there *are* no mind-independent things, that there is no ‘ready-made’ world out there; or it is the view that the external world exists only as an object of the mind. But it can also be the view that the fundamental entities are ideas (as opposed to matter), and thus something that is essentially mental or non-material. This is Berkeley’s ‘dogmatic’ idealism (cf. the sheet with extracts).

An *epistemic reading* suggests that what we can know about reality is largely due to our cognitive faculties, and hence our grasp of reality is shaped not by the things themselves, but by the way in which we cognise that reality. This is Kant’s idealism, which thus by no means rejects the claim that there *is* a world out there, for it plays a role in making possible experience as we have it. But we lack epistemic access to it: we do not have insight into ‘the inner [*das Innere*, roughly, the intrinsic nature] of things’ (*CPR* A277/B333), regardless of our cognition of them.

Kant’s ‘critical’ idealism aims to steer clear both of *dogmatic idealism*, which positively denies (or, in the case of dogmatic realism, affirms) the existence of mind-independent things, and *sceptical* or *problematic idealism*, which finds reason to doubt the existence of such things. He defines *transcendental idealism* as the combination of two thoughts (see *Proleg.* §49, 4:337): (a) all objects of a possible experience are appearances, and (b) insofar as all possible objects of experience are bound by space and time *qua* the transcendental forms of intuition they are real (*wirklich*), even though they have no existence beyond our experience (cf. *CPR* A490–7/B518–25). That is, whatever we experience in space and time has objective reality (cf. *Proleg.* Appendix 4:375). (Remember the noumena discussion: things in themselves, whose existence is a condition for the possibility of experience are not *objects* in this sense, but only ‘things of thought’ (*Gedankendinge*)).

To remove any misunderstanding, Kant produces an explicit *refutation of idealism* for the second edition of *CPR* (1787; B274–9), which follows here:

“Idealism (I mean **material** idealism) is the theory that declares the existence of objects in space outside us to be either merely doubtful and **indemonstrable**, or else false and **impossible**; the former is the **problematic** idealism of Descartes, who declares only one empirical assertion (*assertio*), namely **I am**, to be indubitable; the latter is the **dogmatic** idealism of Berkeley, who declares space, together with all the things to which it is attached as an inseparable condition, to be something that is impossible in itself, and who therefore also declares things in space to be merely imaginary. 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. Problematic idealism, which does not assert anything about this, but rather professes only our incapacity for proving an existence outside us from our own by means of immediate experience, is rational and appropriate for a thorough philosophical manner of thought, allowing, namely, no decisive judgment until a sufficient proof has been found. The proof that is demanded must therefore establish that we have **experience** and not merely **imagination** of outer things, which cannot be accomplished unless one can prove that even our **inner experience**, undoubted by Descartes, is possible only under the presupposition of outer experience.

Theorem. **The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects [Gegenstände] in space outside me.**

Proof. [1] I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. [2] All time-determination presupposes something **persistent** in perception. [3] This persistent thing, however, cannot be something in me, since my own existence in time can first be determined only through this persistent thing. [Kant writes in the *Preface* (Bxxxix) that the following sentence ought to replace the previous one: ‘This persistent thing, however, cannot be an intuition in me. 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.’] [4] Thus the perception of this persistent **thing** is possible only through a thing outside me [*Ding ausser mir*] and not through the mere **representation** [*Vorstellung*] of a thing outside me. [5] Consequently, the determination of my existence in time is possible only by means of the existence of actual [*wirklich*] things that I perceive outside myself. [6] 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.”

In the first note after this proof, Kant says that the problem with idealism is the attempt to extrapolate the existence and nature of external reality from an inner (immediate) experience. His argument aims to reverse this: since an outer reality (objects in space and time) is the condition for the possibility of inner experience, and since such an inner experience is a fact or ‘actual’, there must be things out there. In essence, it seems, this is a *transcendental argument*, which concludes from a given fact *F* and some assumption about the conditions *C* for *F*’s possibility, to the reality or existence of *C*.

But note that ‘outer’ does not mean ‘mind-independent’; it means ‘in space’, and since space is ideal, Kant’s position is a version of idealism. Yet, in contrast to Berkeley’s empirical idealism, transcendental idealism is *also* a version of empirical realism: while not transcendently real, the objects that are given in appearance are empirically (or experientially) real or actual, and hence not illusory, since these objects really are in space and time, and hence ‘without the mind’.

