

Does kant
successfully refute
material idealism?



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In the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* called "Refutation of Idealism"[1] Kant aims to show that the two forms of idealism; 'the dogmatic idealism of Berkeley' and 'the problematic idealism of Descartes'[2] are false. By proving his hypothesis that the knowledge of my own existence actually proves the existence of objects in space outside myself.

In this evaluation of Kant's refutation of idealism, I will first address Berkeley's idealism and show how Kant disregards this almost off hand by referring to an earlier section in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Then I will go on to analyse Kant's argument against Descartes' idealism first by outlining his argument according to Dicker then critiquing this argument by looking at whether or not the substance which allows us to have experiences of succession has to necessarily be permanent. After this I will look at a criticism of the refutation from Kant's lack of explanation as why the enduring objects needed to know one's own existence is spatial. Then another the criticism from the possibility that our space of experience is imaginary. Both of these criticisms will be addressed and shown to fall short of refuting Kant's refutation.

Berkeley's idealism is the first version of idealism which Kant addresses. Berkeley's idealism can be summarised with his famous saying 'esse est percipi'[3] meaning to be is to be perceived. Berkeley's idealism argues that an object's 'being or existence consists solely in its being perceived'[4] This means that anything which is not being perceived does not exist. For Kant this idealism is a consequence of seeing 'space as a property that belongs to things in themselves.'[5] A thing in itself is something found in the external world so in the statement above Kant is saying that Berkeley sees space as a property of external objects. This is an issue for Kant as in the

Transcendental Aesthetic, an earlier section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proves that space, as well as time, is not a thing in itself nor a property of one. Berkeley's idealism is not material idealism and is therefore irrelevant to whether or not Kant refutes material idealism especially as Kant seems to disregard this idealism off hand.

Kant calls Descartes' material idealism problematic idealism because it is ' a scandal to philosophy, and to human reason in general, that we should have to accept the existence of things outside us merely on trust.'[6]Descartes' idealism accepts the existence of the external world purely on faith as his argument for there being an external world is that ' the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God.'[7]And since Descartes' ' proof of the existence of God is not very convincing.'[8]coupled with the fact that relying on God is not philosophically satisfying we can be sympathetic to Kant's position. Kant says that to prove the external world's existence he must prove ' that even our inner experience, undoubted by Descartes, is possible only on the supposition of outer experience.'[9]So inner experience such as thinking, or imagination must only be possible due to experience of the external world.

Kant's proof that ' the mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside myself.'[10]Can be said to consist of ' five steps'[11]or premises and is best set out in Dicker's article on the refutation of idealism:

' 1) I am conscious of my own existence in time, i. e., I am aware that I have experiences that occur in a specific temporal order.

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2) I can be aware of having experiences that occur in a specific temporal order only if there is some persisting element by reference to which I can determine their temporal order.

3) No conscious state of my own can serve as this persisting frame of reference.

4) Time itself cannot serve as this persisting frame of reference.

5) If (2) and (3) and (4), then I can be aware of having experiences that occur

in a specific temporal order only if I perceive persisting objects in space outside me by reference to which I can determine the temporal order of my experiences.

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6) I perceive persisting objects in space outside me by reference to which I can determine the temporal order of my experiences.'[12]

The first premise claims that we can judge mental states as our own and that we can ' recognize the order in which such states occur in consciousness.'[13]The second premise is Kant's First Analogy principle: ' In all changes of appearances substance is permanent; its quantum in nature is neither increased or decreased nor diminished.'[14]Applying this principle to time, we can see that for there to be ' temporal intervals'[15]there must be <https://assignbuster.com/does-kant-successfully-refute-material-idealism/>

some permanent substance which stays the same through changes of state. Premise three points out that the permanent substance 'cannot be an intuition' in us because 'all the determining grounds of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations.' [16] Representations are the immediate objects of our perception, for example when we see a lemon we get the representation of a lemon in us rather than a perception of what the lemon as a thing in itself is. Representations need 'something persisting distinct from them' in order to exist so representations, and therefore intuitions, cannot qualify as the permanent substance that causes temporal intervals. Premise four is not one Kant mentions himself but one which he accepts 'on the grounds that time itself cannot be perceived.' [17] Premise five says that if premises (2), (3), and (4) are true then experiencing things in a specific temporal order is only possible if persisting objects in space outside us exist. Which leads to the conclusion that when we talk in temporal terms we are talking in reference to this permanent thing in space.

One criticism of Kant's argument comes from Guyer who attacks premise two. He says: 'It remains unclear why anything more than mere *acquaintance* with representations which in fact succeed one another in otherwise uninterrupted experience...should be necessary for one to judge that there has been such a succession.' [18] Guyer is criticising Kant by saying that a persisting element is not necessary for us to be aware of temporal order. The 'temporal order of experiences mentioned in (2) is simply the order in which we have the experiences themselves.' [19] The persisting element Kant talks of does not ascribe order to representations order is given to representations by experiencing one occurring after another.

Despite this criticism Guyer still believes Kant's refutation of idealism is a strong argument. In Kant's *Handschriftlicher Nachlass* he reflected on this argument and altered premise (2). Kant adds that the recognition of succession ' can be grounded " only on something which endures, with which that which is successive is simultaneous"[20]What this means is that successive representations, such as the representation of the sun rising shining out sunlight every day, can only be experienced to be successive is they are judged on ' some enduring object.'[21]Dicker, using Kant's adaptation, defends the refutation of idealism by using the example of past experiences. ' We have a series of subjective experiences or conscious states that stretches back in time over the hours, days, months, and years.' These memories can be ordered in our consciousness not through a ' feeling or sense of " pastness"[22]nor ' little clocks'[23]that would enable us to date memories. They are ordered by you correlating the remembered experiences ' with successive states of an enduring reality that exists independently of the experiences' being remembered. With Kant's change the refutation of idealism does prove that an enduring substance is needed for our representations of succession. as it does seem to prove that there is an external reality which our inner experiences depend upon meaning Kant does successfully refute material idealism.

Solving the issue of the enduring object needed for our experience of succession not needing to be an enduring object does not mean Kant's theorem is completely successful. Another issue of his argument is that Kant does not offer any reason why the ' the enduring objects required to know oneself must be spatial.'[24]For Kant to successfully refute material idealism

he needs to show that there is a knowable physical external reality, so he needs to show that the enduring substance that supposedly allows for our representations of succession must be spatial. Kant does give an answer to this criticism later on. He differentiates between space and time. 'Space and time as wholes are permanent[25]but 'space alone is determined as permanent.'[26]This means that space can be divided into numerically distinct, coexisting parts.'[27]Which means for us to have consciousness of permanent, distinct and, 're-identifiable'[28]things, such as oneself, the representations must come from space and not time. Time exists as separate parts which exist successively meaning that no temporal location can be re-identified whereas spatial locations can. So, a permanent, distinct and, re-identifiable representation must come from a spatial location. With this Kant successfully shows that the enduring object need to know oneself must be spatial and therefore Kant's theorem that the 'consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space'[29]is proven correct as we can see that knowledge of oneself must be based on spatial locations rather than temporal ones.

Another criticism of Kant's refutation of material idealism asks the question: what if space of our experience is merely imaginary? This would mean that our consciousness of one self's existence would only happen 'through the subject's representing, as in dream states, hallucinations, and after images.'[30]Meaning the whole of Kant's refutation would fail as it would be impossible to argue for any spatial dependent representations. Imagination in the Kantian sense means This criticism can be quickly shot down by the Kantian by pointing out that 'if there were no continuity of the spatial

framework from one representation to another, there could be no consciousness of enduring, continuous existence in time.’[31]Because space and spatial objects can be re-identified through time they ‘ exhibit their independence of momentary representations, including mere imaginings.’[32]This makes the Cartesian hypothesis ‘ that I can know my thinking self and merely imagine spatial things’ an impossible hypothesis as spatial things cannot come from our imagination.

In conclusion I believe Kant does successfully refute material idealism. He successfully refutes Berkeley’s idealism through the transcendental aesthetic. It is harder for Kant to refute Descartes idealism, but I still believe he succeeds in doing so. The argument formulated by Dicker is strong after we had the later reflection Kant has. The criticisms from the enduring objects allowing for our experience of succession does not have to be spatial and from the question of whether or not our spatial experience came from imagination rather than something spatial in reality both fail to refute Kant’s refutation as they can be shown to be wrong in other parts of the *Critique of Pure Reason* . Because of these reasons I believe Kant does successfully refute material idealism.

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[1]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[2]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[3]Berkeley, 1998 [1734], pp. 13

[4]Cardinal, Jones & Hayward, 2015, pp. 37

[5]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[6]Kant, 2007 [1781], Bxxxix

[7]Descartes, 1996 [1637], pp. 49

[8]Cardinal, Jones & Hayward, 2015, pp. 167

[9]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[10]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[11]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2340

[12]Dicker, 2008, pp. 82

[13]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2342

[14]Kant, 2007 [1781], B225

[15]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2342

[16]Kant, 2007 [1781], Bxxxix

[17]Dicker, 2008, pp. 82

[18]Guyer, 1987, pp. 285-286

[19]Dicker, 2008, pp. 82

[20]Kant, 1902, vol. h18, 6313; quoted in Guyer, 1987, 305

[21]Guyer, 1987, pp. 306

[22]Dicker, 2008, pp. 83

[23]Dicker, 2008, pp. 83

[24]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2352

[25]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2375

[26]Kant, 2007 [1781], B291

[27]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2375

[28]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2375

[29]Kant, 2007 [1781], B275

[30]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2382

[31]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2385

[32]Buroker, 2006, Kindle Location 2387