
Kantian Realism

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Kant's claims that the objects of perception are appearances, "mere representations," and that we can never perceive things in themselves, seem to mark him as some sort of indirect realist. On the other hand, the theory of perception outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is much closer to direct realism. As I will try to show, there are two criteria for direct realism, one epistemological and one ontological, and Kant's theory strongly satisfies the former while partially satisfying the latter. Kant's transcendental idealism, under this view, necessarily makes him a sort of direct realist, or as he put it, "empirical" realist.¹ Two useful extremes in the philosophy of perception are the positions taken by Thomas Reid and the school of Scottish Common Sense on one hand, and by David Hume and the school of British Empiricism on the other. I will argue that Kant's theory entails that we are directly, immediately aware of real external objects that, though they are the products of mental processes and therefore subject to "epistemic conditions,"² do nonetheless occupy external space and are not simply mental entities. This theory matches the direct realism of Thomas Reid in important ways and eschews the skeptical phenomenalism of Hume, the idealism of Berkeley, and the indirect realism of Locke (the last three of which rely on the notion that

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the true objects of perception and thought are mental entities or states called “ideas” or “perceptions”). After outlining criteria in section I for a theory of direct realism, I will argue that Kant holds that we have direct perception of external objects that exist even when unperceived, and that his theory is remarkably similar to that of the most well-known direct realist in his lifetime, Thomas Reid. If these arguments succeed, then Kant should be regarded as some kind of direct realist.

I.

First, it should be made clearer what is meant by “direct realism,” and by the above distinction between epistemological and ontological realism. Epistemological realism is here taken to be the claim that the objects of perception are actually things like books and chairs, rather than images that resemble them or other mental intermediaries that indicate or imply them. Ontological realism is the claim that physical objects like books and chairs exist mind-independently. Direct realism is the conjunction of these two claims. Locke’s representational realism would deny epistemological realism (instead claiming that we only perceive ideas in the mind) but affirm ontological realism. An idealist theory might affirm epistemological realism but deny ontological realism. Thomas Reid’s direct realism would affirm both, and global skepticism would deny both. To figure out where Kant fits into all of this, we have to further distinguish two types of ontological realism – the type that says these objects and their properties exist even when they are not perceived, and the type that says these objects exist independently of *any* facts about our minds. The second type of ontological realism is what Kant means by “transcendental realism.” Transcendental realism encompasses ontological realism, but goes further by excluding mental facts altogether. Kant, I argue, would affirm both epistemological realism and ontological realism, on the stipulation that ontological realism is not taken to mean transcendental realism.

This distinction between ontological and transcendental realism would not have been necessary before Kant’s argument that our forms of intuition and understanding shape the empirical

world. To say that a thing owes its existence to the fact that it conforms to our forms of intuition, and not whether it is in fact perceived, is the novel thesis that I will try to show Kant put forth in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. If this is an accurate reading of his theory, then extending the definition of ontological realism to exclude this thesis would be in part to redefine ontological realism as “not what Kant believed.” It is more instructive to look at what the term would mean in the context of pre-Kantian philosophy, and see where he seems to fit in.

Before the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the preeminent alternatives to ontological realism were Berkeley’s immaterialism and Hume’s mitigated skepticism. Berkeley and Hume attacked the alleged independent existence of unperceived substances and the continued existence of an object even when it is not perceived – in other words, the elements of Locke’s philosophy that made Locke an indirect *realist* rather than a mere idealist. If ontological realism is taken to be merely the claim that empirical objects exist with all their properties when unperceived, then Kant may in fact be an ontological realist. Given his desire to justify science and his commitment to “empirical realism,” his theory probably does not entail that the Andromeda galaxy is not there when nobody is looking at the sky. Rather, for Kant, the Andromeda galaxy exists in virtue of its conformity to human forms of intuition and understanding. This means that although humans and their forms must exist in order for the Andromeda galaxy to exist, it does not, I argue, exist at time t in virtue of its being directly perceived by some human at t (as an empirical idealist might say). The claim that he really was an ontological realist, however, has to be evaluated by looking at the text. In any case, we can distinguish between two kinds of direct realism: strong direct realism, the conjunction of epistemological and transcendental realism; and weak direct realism, the conjunction of epistemological and ontological realism. If Kant is both an ontological and epistemological realist, then he is a weak direct realist. What remains to be shown is what kind of realist he actually is.

 II.

The second of Kant's Postulates of Empirical Thought in General is that "that which is bound up with the material conditions of experience, that is, with sensation, is *actual*."³ This postulate could be seen as worryingly close to a denial of ontological realism. Once we examine what he means by it, however, it is clear that it is transcendental realism, rather than ontological realism, that is excluded by it.

The postulate bearing on the knowledge of things as *actual* does not, indeed, demand immediate *perception* (and, therefore, sensation of which we are conscious) of the object whose existence is to be known. What we do, however, require is the connection of the object with some actual perception, in accordance with the analogies of experience, which define all real connection in an experience in general.⁴

The fact that a thing is actual does not depend on whether it is being perceived. This is a straightforward affirmation of ontological realism and a denial of Berkeley's motto, *esse est percipi*. It is necessary that there be *some* perception that leads us to suppose that the object exists—"the connection of the object with some actual perception"—but this is only to say that we must have some empirical justification for an empirical claim. The analogies alluded to are important here, and they are as follows: first, that substance is permanent amid changes;⁵ second, that every event adheres to the law of causality;⁶ and third, that substances in space stand in "thoroughgoing reciprocity"⁷ or "mutual interaction."⁸

To say that our ascription of actuality to an unperceived object must be connected to an actual perception in accordance with these analogies, therefore, is to say that we must (in principle) be able to infer its actuality from the causal connections of interacting substances, and that this inference must at some point be based on an actual perception. In other words, we do not actually have to perceive a thing in order to know that it exists, we merely have to perceive something that implies its existence ac-

ording to basic laws, "the principles of...empirical connection."⁹

Kant gives the example of the perceived behavior of iron filings suggesting the existence of a "magnetic matter pervading all bodies, although the constitution of our organs cuts us off from all immediate perception of this medium."¹⁰ Kant affirms the actuality of unperceived forces based on their being implied by previous perceptions; Berkeley, on the other hand, denies that such things (gravity, for instance) exist, because they are imperceptible by nature.¹¹ Furthermore, Kant says that it must be admitted, "that there may be inhabitants in the moon, although no one has ever perceived them."¹² It appears definitive that for Kant, an object's existence in the empirical world does not depend on its being actually perceived – that is, that Kant is an ontological realist. If Kant was an epistemological realist as well as an ontological one (i.e., a weak direct realist); then we should expect his theory to have important aspects in common with well-known direct realist theories, which brings us to Thomas Reid.

III.

Kant's theory of perception, insofar as perception is to be defined, is essentially identical to Reid's. Kant says in the B-Deduction that perceptions are simply "representations accompanied by sensation."¹³ Kant defines "representation" as the genus of mental acts under which sensations, concepts, and intuitions are classified.¹⁴ Since in the relevant cases intuition implies sensation, it would be redundant to say that intuition and sensation are necessary for perception.¹⁵ Furthermore, intuition must be synthesized under concepts in order to yield a perceptible representation (more on this later); so it must be conception, rather than intuition, that combines with sensation to constitute perception. I therefore take representation in this context to mean the conception of a thing, and so perception of x is, for Kant, the representation or conception of x coupled with and initiated by a present sensation. Reid often refers to "that conception and belief of the external object, which we call perception."¹⁶ There seems to be a difference here, namely that Reid puts belief in the role that sensation fills for Kant. However, it can be shown that Reid's

account of perception also reduces to conception and sensation.

There are, for Reid, three necessary elements of perception of x : the conception of x , the belief in the present existence of x , and the condition that said belief is immediate and non-inferential. It is clear for Reid that mere conception of x does not entail the belief in the existence of x . He and Kant are in complete agreement on this point: "In the *mere concept* of a thing no mark of its existence is to be found."¹⁷ Reid's "faculty" of conception

*is not employed solely about things which have existence. I can conceive a winged horse or a centaur, as easily and as distinctly as I can conceive a man whom I have seen. Nor does this distinct conception incline my judgment in the least to the belief, that a winged horse or a centaur ever existed.*¹⁸

The belief in the legitimacy of the conception (i.e., the existence of the thing conceived) cannot, therefore, come from the concept itself, but must find its origin elsewhere. Reid also says that "we perceive no object, unless some impression is made upon the organs of sense."¹⁹ Since perception is defined above as the combination of conception and belief, and since sensation of x is the only other necessary condition for perception of x , and finally since belief cannot come from conception, then belief in x 's existence must come from sensation. We see as a result that Reid's theory holds that perception is the combination of conception and sensation. This definition is identical to Kant's. Therefore, at least in terms of what is meant by the word perception, there is no daylight between Kant and Reid.

Kant argues in the *Analytic of Concepts* that concepts are necessary for all perceptual experience. This conclusion is due to several assumptions on Kant's part, chief of which is the idea that experience is a kind of judgment or knowledge, specifically of the empirical kind.²⁰ The necessary conditions for judgments in general should therefore be part of the conditions for experience as well. According to Kant, "all judgments are functions of unity among our representations."²¹ Allison explains that for Kant, the "unification of representations in a judgment, which

provides a determinate content for thought, occurs by bringing these representations under a concept."²² When we make a judgment of the form "A is B," we do not simply consider A and consider B, we synthesize the two concepts into a unified judgment. According to Kant, this synthetic unity can only be achieved by means of concepts, which function as the necessary rules according to which such synthesis proceeds.²³ Furthermore, "the same function which gives unity to the various representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations *in an intuition*."²⁴ Acts of conception are therefore necessary to unify the synthetic judgments of perception and relate them to an object. For Reid, conception is also necessary for the judgments (i.e., beliefs) that constitute perception: "there can be no belief without conception."²⁵

This congruence is a significant point of overlap. We can imagine a spectrum of perceptual theory with Reid and his two-part theory (i.e., sensation and conception) at one end and Hume and Berkeley with their sensory-input-only theory at the other. Reid believes that sensation alone presents us with no objects, and that acts of conception are required to give us an external object rather than mere blind feeling, as sensation "has no object distinct from itself."²⁶ Kant falls squarely with Reid in his account of the necessary and sufficient elements of perception. Kant, like Reid, has no need for the veil of perception, because, unlike Reid, he believes that the transcendental ideality of space and time eliminates certain problems that are posed by the assumption that things in themselves exist spatiotemporally independently of our epistemic conditions. Kant believes, in fact, that one must choose between empirical realism and transcendental realism.

Kant writes that Berkeleyan or empirical "idealism is unavoidable, if space be interpreted as a property that must belong to things in themselves."²⁷ When space is said to have "*objective reality*," we are confronted with absurdity, "in that two infinite things, which are not substances, nor...inhering in substances, must yet have existence...and moreover must continue to exist, even although all existing things be removed[.]"²⁸ Thus, Kant

argues, if we ascribe transcendental reality to space and time, the concept of matter becomes absurd, and “we cannot blame the good Berkeley for degrading bodies to mere illusion.”²⁹ This “degrading [of] bodies to mere illusion” is empirical idealism in a nutshell. Kant contrasts his own theory with Berkeley’s, and claims that, “I am not saying that bodies merely *seem* to be outside me...[and it] would be my own fault, if out of that which I ought to reckon as appearance, I made mere illusion.”³⁰ Later on, Kant says that it would be “unjust” to call his theory empirical idealism, “which, while it admits the genuine reality of space, denies the existence of the extended beings in it.”³¹ Transcendental idealism, “on the contrary, admits the reality of the objects of outer intuition...[f]or since space is a form of that intuition which we entitle outer, and since without objects in space there would be no empirical representation whatsoever, we can and must regard the extended beings in it as real.”³² Thus it is false to say that Kant thinks that outer existence is a “mere illusion,” because insofar as things are empirical objects, they really do have the spatiotemporal qualities they seem to have.

A possible objection to this direct realist reading of the “conception plus sensation” definition could be that all this tells us is that these concepts are what we perceive, and sensation merely gives us an especially lifelike version of the concept. This account would shift Kant’s position closer to Hume’s. Kant’s concepts and the schemata that underlie them, however, are not images (as this objection suggests), but rules of thought.

No image could ever be adequate to the concept of a triangle in general. It would never attain that universality of the concept which renders it valid of all triangles, whether right-angled, obtuse-angled, or acute-angled... The concept ‘dog’ signifies a rule[.]³³

Concepts are not the typical objects of perception or of thought because they partially constitute the acts of both perception and thought (though in philosophical contexts we may think about concepts). The categories “think objects in general, without regard to the special mode (the sensibility) in which they may be

given[.]"³⁴ It is not the concepts that are intuited through sensibility, but the objects that they think. The objects that the concepts are *about* are directly "given" in perception; again, Kant shares Reid's view.

IV.

This similarity between Reid and Kant comes in part from their denials of the continuum of vivacity between impressions and ideas. While this terminology is undeniably Humean, the same doctrine goes back to Locke and appears in nearly identical form in Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, along with the principle that mental ideas are copied from ideas of sense that are "imprinted" on the body.³⁵ This notion of conception being a faded or enervated form of sensation is summarily rejected by Reid and Kant, who view the two as separate faculties that yield different information and must be combined in perception. Both thinkers saw a clear break where the so-called British Empiricists saw a continuum. This distinction between sensation and conception, and the doctrine that both faculties are necessary for perception, is one of Kant's great breakthroughs in philosophy; yet the similarity of Reid's and Kant's accounts of perception outlined above shows that Reid had already made a more rudimentary version of this logical distinction (and yet necessary coupling) while Kant was still in his "pre-Critical" period.³⁶

Another spectrum we might call to mind is that between the empiricist, who in Kant's view wants to reduce knowledge and concepts to sensory experience, and the rationalist, who (again in Kant's view) wants to elevate sensory experience to the level of concepts and the intellect. Kant clearly views the history of philosophy in this way and famously describes Leibniz, the consummate rationalist, as having "*intellectualised* appearances, just as Locke, according to his system of *noogony...sensualised* all concepts of the understanding, *i.e.* interpreted them as nothing more than empirical or abstracted concepts of reflection."³⁷ On this spectrum, Reid and Kant again occupy proximate positions, though this time they are in the middle rather than at one end. Kant's "middle path" in the theory of knowledge, namely that an

innate intellectual organization (rationalism) combines with contingent sensory experience (empiricism) to produce knowledge, has already been chipped at, if not completely "cut," by Reid. Reid denies Hume's claim that any concept must have a corresponding impression which resembles it; for the sensations you get from the hardness and extension of an object are as different from those qualities themselves "as pain is to the point of a sword."³⁸

In other words, according to Reid, it is false to claim from the constant conjunction of (for example) the sensation of hardness with the primary quality of hardness that there is an equivalence or resemblance between that quality and our sensation of it. Reid points out (following Berkeley) that there is no way that a feeling can resemble a quality such as hardness, and therefore that the concept of hardness is not simply abstracted from the sensation, but rather that our minds are constituted in such a way that we understand (noninferentially) that the sensation of hardness comes about because of the primary quality.³⁹ Concepts, under Reid's system, are only given to us through sense experience, but we could not have them if we were not born fluent in the language of nature, to use his analogy.⁴⁰ The sensation functions as a sign of the quality. Just as the word "hardness" leads to the conception of the quality of hardness, the sensation we experience when we touch a hard thing naturally suggests to us the quality of hardness in the felt object.⁴¹ The concept of hardness, therefore, doesn't enter the mind until it holds the corresponding but non-resembling sensation; your mind reads this natural sign, and this causes your perception (conception and belief) of hardness as a primary quality of the object.⁴² Kant's pure concepts, on the other hand, are in the understanding prior to all experience.⁴³ Nevertheless, Reid and Kant are more similar to each other on this issue than either is to Locke or to Leibniz because Reid and Kant hold that the natural organization of the mind combined with sensory experience is what allows us to consciously possess concepts and to perceive objects through the application of those concepts.

V.

Comparisons with Reid aside, a central reason for my assertion that Kant is an epistemological realist is that Kant does not say that perception of x entails that we perceive any intermediating entities, insofar as x is an empirically real object. The “Refutation of Idealism” is a short but extremely important section added to the *CPR* in the second edition. Kant sought to refute the idea that we are first conscious of our own inner states and then must infer the existence of outer objects. The fault of Berkeley, Descartes, et al., is that they “assumed that the only immediate experience is inner experience, and that from it we can only *infer* outer things.”⁴⁴ If he were an indirect realist, however, he would defend this idea. He argues that we do not perceive our representations and then refer them to an object, but that we directly perceive the outer objects: “Thus perception of this permanent is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me.”⁴⁵ The representation is not some inner mediating mental entity like a Lockean/Cartesian idea, but rather it is the state of referral of sensation to the outer object, the intentional act by which we are presented immediately with such outer objects. The concept of “referral” comes from the Transcendental Aesthetic, where Kant argues for the ideality of space by saying that it must be presupposed “in order that certain sensations be referred to something outside me.”⁴⁶ Representation, then, is precisely this referral of the sensation to the outer object, and it is not the act or inner state of referring (i.e., the representation) that is the object of our perception, but rather the external object to which the sensation is referred—in other words, “outer experience is really immediate.”⁴⁷ Self-consciousness of the Cartesian sort is in fact mediated by outer perception, not the other way around (as indirect realism might have it), and the “determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me.”⁴⁸

The claims that “outer experience is really immediate”—when “outer experience” means experience of outer objects with rich spatial qualities such as being “outside me” and “outside

and alongside [other objects]" –and that objects are "actual things which I perceive outside me" are unambiguous expressions of epistemological realism. Kant's theory of perception thus fulfills our criteria for weak direct realism in that the objects of perception are "outer" in a rich, three-dimensional sense, and in that these objects are "permanent," as they persist, independently, even when not perceived. As he claims that we immediately and non-inferentially perceive actual objects in space, it is fair to call him a weak direct realist. Furthermore, we might expect that a weak direct realist would share salient features of his theory of perception with the theories of other direct realists, and the discussion of Thomas Reid, perhaps the predominant (strong) direct realist in early modern philosophy, shows this to be the case. While Kant famously asserts that we have no knowledge of things in themselves—a position that would likely get Reid's teeth grinding—this is only so far as they are non-spatiotemporal noumena, the unknowable unconditioned. Once our mental forms of perception have synthesized a sensible object, we indeed have direct access to it, though the synthesis itself is a "blind...function of the soul...of which we are scarcely ever conscious."⁴⁹ Despite the hiddenness of the means by which we represent objects, the process yields an object of which we are directly aware. "All outer perception...yields immediate proof of something real in space, or rather is the real itself. In this sense empirical realism is beyond question."⁵⁰

Sensible objects are themselves "mere representations," but they are three-dimensional and "outside me,"⁵¹ and we have direct epistemological access to them. As Allison notes, Kant's use of the term representation in this context has led to the "standard picture" that his transcendental idealism results in some form of empirical idealism or representationalism.⁵² According to Kant, perception is nothing but conception and sensation, and there is no intermingling "idea," as Locke would have us believe. In other words, we do not see a tree by means of seeing something else; we directly perceive a tree, through our conception of "a tree" accompanied by a visual "sensation" that indicates to us that this conception is of a presently existing object. For Kant, the objects

of perception are empirically real outer objects, and owe their existence not to the fact that a person is looking at them at a particular time, but rather to the fact that they conform to our forms of intuition and therefore could possibly be the object of a person's experience. In contrast to the idealist who asserts that objects exist only insofar as they are perceived, Kant's theory entails that objects exist insofar as they are objects *capable of being perceived*, or as he puts it, "objects of possible experience."⁵³ And this capability, which constitutes their status as "mere representations," refers not to any mental entities of perception, but to the way we perceive external objects, and therefore to the epistemic conditions (i.e., forms of intuition and understanding) that distinguish Kant's transcendental idealism from the "dogmatic idealism of Berkeley" and the "problematic idealism of Descartes."⁵⁴

In the end, empirical objects, as spatiotemporal and categorized phenomena, are "given" directly to us through intuition. It appears that the appeal of viewing Kantian phenomena through an idealist notion of "representations," though seductive, is superficial and inconsistent with how Kant describes the process of perception. The outer objects themselves, not the representations or conceptions of them, are given to us in experience. It is clear from the above that Kant and Reid share fundamental views on epistemology and perception. If the structural similarities between Reid and Kant really exist and have the significance I've attached to them; if this account of the direct "givenness" and permanence of empirical objects is accepted as an accurate reading of the text; and if my definitions of and distinctions between different kinds of realism are correct, then it must be accepted that Kant was a weak direct realist.

Notes

- ¹ *CPR*, A28/B44
- ² This term is taken from Allison 1983.
- ³ *CPR*, A218/B266
- ⁴ *CPR*, A225/B272
- ⁵ *CPR*, B224
- ⁶ *CPR*, B232
- ⁷ *CPR*, B256
- ⁸ *CPR*, A211
- ⁹ *CPR*, A225/B273
- ¹⁰ *CPR*, A226/B273
- ¹¹ The denial of gravity is found in the first of the *Three Dialogues*. Berkeley, 29
- ¹² *CPR*, A493/B521
- ¹³ *CPR*, B147
- ¹⁴ *CPR*, A320/B376
- ¹⁵ Pure intuition might qualify as a case of intuition without sensation, but that exception is not relevant here, where the issue is empirical perception.
- ¹⁶ *EIP*, 212
- ¹⁷ *CPR*, A225/B272
- ¹⁸ *EIP*, 267
- ¹⁹ *EIP*, 36. See also: *IHM*, 44
- ²⁰ *CPR*, B147: "empirical knowledge...is what we entitle experience." B166: "But empirical knowledge is experience."
- ²¹ *CPR*, A69/B93
- ²² Allison, 116
- ²³ *CPR*, A105-6
- ²⁴ *CPR*, A79/B105
- ²⁵ *EIP*, 172
- ²⁶ *EIP*, 133
- ²⁷ *CPR*, B274
- ²⁸ *CPR*, B70-1
- ²⁹ *CPR*, B71
- ³⁰ *CPR*, B69
- ³¹ *CPR*, A491/B519

³² *CPR*, A491-2/B520

³³ *CPR*, A141/B180

³⁴ *CPR*, A254/B310

³⁵ The relevant passage is found in Sec. 33 of Berkeley's *Principles*. Berkeley, 37

³⁶ I have so far only quoted from Reid's *EIP*, which was published in 1785, after the first edition of Kant's *CPR* (which was published in 1781), but the point about sensory impressions and the concepts we gain from them being different entities entirely (and thus not simply more or less forceful versions of each other) is argued strongly and repeatedly in Reid's 1764 *IHM* (especially in Ch. 5, "Of Touch") and is central to the critique of empiricist idea doctrine in that work.

³⁷ *CPR*, A271/B327

³⁸ *IHM*, 60

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *IHM*, 59, 85

⁴¹ *IHM*, 57-8

⁴² *IHM*, 64-5

⁴³ *CPR*, A65-6/B90

⁴⁴ *CPR*, B276

⁴⁵ *CPR*, B275

⁴⁶ *CPR*, A23/B38

⁴⁷ *CPR*, B276

⁴⁸ *CPR*, B275-6

⁴⁹ *CPR*, A78/B1-3

⁵⁰ *CPR*, A375

⁵¹ *CPR*, A23/B38

⁵² Allison, 26-27

⁵³ *CPR*, B148

⁵⁴ *CPR*, A226/B274

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