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Disentangling Cartesian Global Skepticism from Cartesian Problematic External-World Idealism in Kant's Refutation

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Abstract: Kant's Refutation targets what he calls the problematic idealist. This is understood by the mainstream of Kantian scholarship as the global skeptic that Descartes briefly adumbrated in his first Meditation. The widespread view in the literature is that the fate of the Refutation is tied to its success as an argument against this Cartesian global skepticism. This consensus is what I want to question in this paper. I argue that Kant's opponent – the problematic idealist – is not the Cartesian global skeptic, but rather what I prefer to call here the Cartesian problematic external-world idealist. According to Cartesian global skepticism we cannot know whether our commonsensical beliefs are true until we rule out the skeptical hypotheses are false. In contrast, the Cartesian external-world idealist sees as problematic the assumption that the underlying nature of outer things of which we have ideas is mind-independent rather than caused by our own thinking being. My aim here is to disentangle Cartesian global skepticism from Cartesian problematic external-world idealism and show that, if measured against global skepticism, Kant's Refutation is doomed to fail; while against problematic idealism, it is at least a promising argument.

1 Introduction

In the famous footnote to the second edition of the *Critique* Kant states:

No matter how innocent idealism may be held to be as regards the essential ends of metaphysics (though in fact it is not so innocent), it always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us (from which we after all get the whole matter for our cognitions, even for our inner sense) should have to be assumed merely *on faith* (*bloss auf Glauben annehmen zu müssen*), and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof. (Bxxxix, emphasis in the original)

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The Refutation's target is what Kant calls the problematic idealism of Descartes. The key question is what problematic idealism is. According to the mainstream of Kantian scholarship, the "problematic idealist" is the global skeptic that Descartes briefly adumbrates in his first *Meditation*. Let me call this the Cartesian global skeptic.¹ He challenges us to rule out skeptical hypotheses as false in order to know that most of our beliefs are true and reliable: if I might be deluded by some Evil Demon, most of my beliefs could turn out to be false². As we cannot exclude the skeptical scenarios as epistemically impossible (we cannot possibly know whether there is an evil demon that fools us at will), the forcible conclusion is that we know nothing: all our beliefs might turn out to be false.

Is this Cartesian global skeptic the one Kant had in mind when he refers to problematic idealism? There are several reasons to suspect that this assumption is true. To begin with, Kant probably did not directly read Descartes' writings themselves; in general, he only knew Descartes secondhand, mainly from handbooks in the Leibnizian and Wolffian tradition. Second, Kant was never interested in giving an accurate account of authors and their writings or of other philosophers and their philosophy. Third, the problem raised by the Cartesian global skeptic is not the problem of access to the outside world in opposition to the inside world, but rather the problem of knowing the truth of the majority of our commonsensical beliefs. Let us take a look at what Kant says about idealism:

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. (B274, emphasis in the original)

In this passage, as in many others, Kant clearly suggests that Cartesian problematic idealism and Berkeleian dogmatic idealism are 'brothers in arms' insofar as they share the same fundamental assumption, namely, that

[t]he only immediate experience is inner experience, and from that outer things could only be *inferred*, but, as in any case in which one infers from given effects to *determinate* causes, only unreliably, since the cause of representations that we perhaps falsely ascribe to outer things can also lie in us. (B276, emphasis in the original)

¹ I prefer to call it Cartesian global skepticism rather than external-world skepticism because the Cartesian hypotheses of the first *Meditation* also compromise the knowledge of memories and other non-contemporaneous cogito-like thoughts.

² Note 3 (B278) may be read as an indication that Kant had the two famous Cartesian scenarios in mind: dream and delusion.

Both forms of material idealism start from the assumption that the only immediate experience is inner experience; the experience of outer things can only be inferred. But what is the difference between Berkeleian dogmatic idealism and Cartesian problematic idealism? While the first assumes dogmatically that the underlying nature of reality is mind-dependent (*esse est percipi*), the second sees as problematic our commonsensical assumption that the outside things of which we have ideas are mind-independent rather than caused by our own nature as thinking beings. Thus, what Kant referred to as problematic idealism is best understood as a form of the metaphysical subjectivism that Descartes adumbrated in his second *Meditation* after his proof of his own existence until his controversial proof of God's existence. Let me rename Kant's problematic idealism as Cartesian problematic external-world idealism (in opposition to the Cartesian global skepticism).

Now, overlooking this key difference, the mainstream of Kantian scholarship has taken the Kantian problematic idealist as the global skeptic of the Cartesian first *Meditation*. That is what I want to question in this paper. Under this assumption, the consensus is that the fate of the Refutation of Idealism is tied to its success as an argument against Cartesian global skepticism. Thus, for the minority of those who still believe that the Refutation of idealism is a successful argument against global skepticism,³ it has also been proven by the same token that the underlying nature of those things outside us is mind-independent. In contrast, for the great majority of those who believe that Kant's Refutation of Idealism has failed as an argument against global skepticism, it has also failed in addressing external-world idealism.

In this paper, I argue that as an argument against Cartesian global skepticism, Kant's Refutation is doomed to fail. As I said above, only a few Kantian scholars still believe that the Refutation succeeds in refuting the Cartesian global skeptic of the first *Meditation*. The novelty of my paper is the claim that even if the Refutation fails against global skepticism, it is still a promising argument against Cartesian problematic external-world idealism. If Kant's Refutation cannot prove that most of our commonsensical beliefs are true and reliable, it provides a promising argument against idealism, by proving that the ultimate nature of reality cannot be mental.

This paper is structured as follows: The first two sections briefly reconstruct the original historical context by providing a panoramic overview of the con-

³ To my knowledge the only Kantian scholars who still believe that Kant's Refutation succeeds in refuting the external world epistemic skeptic are Westphal 2004, Dicker 2004 and 2008, and Almeida 2013. Non-standardly, Hanna 2000 and 2006 holds that although the Refutation fails to refute an external world *epistemic* skeptic, nevertheless it succeeds in refuting an external world *metaphysical* skeptic.

temporary Kant-literature. The subsequent section shows that the Refutation makes no sense against the Cartesian global skepticism of the first *Meditation*. In the final section, I present my reconstruction of the Refutation as an argument against Cartesian external-world idealism.

2 The Historical Background

Kant's Refutation of Idealism is an addendum to the second edition of the *Critique*, interpolated into the chapter on the Postulates of Empirical Thinking in General, which replaced the Fourth Paralogism of the Transcendental Dialectic in the first edition. Scholars still debate whether Kant intended to replace the Fourth Paralogism with the Refutation of Idealism.

Erdmann, as Bader reminds us,⁴ believed that when Kant declared that the existence of outside things should be taken merely on faith, he was probably referring to F. Jacobi's criticism of his philosophical system. Jacobi complained that Kant's arguments were unconvincing and that we must give "faith" a systematic role in philosophy.⁵ Kant's concern about Jacobi's criticism led him to use the second edition of the *Critique* to contend that his system was not based on faith. Yet, by characterizing as a scandal the assumption of the existence of things outside us as mere faith, Kant is targeting what he calls the problematic idealism of Cartesian provenance.

Still, when we look more closely at the historical context between the first and second editions of the first *Critique*, it also becomes clear that in his Refutation of Idealism Kant also aims to distance himself from the metaphysical external-idealism he was accused of by C. Garve (1742–1798) and J. G. Feder (1740–1821) on January 19, 1782.⁶ They argued that Kant's transcendental idealism was too similar to Berkeleian metaphysical idealism, according to which the underlying nature of both spirit and matter is mental:

(Kantian idealism is) a system of idealism that encompasses spirit and matter in the same way, and transforms the world and ourselves into representations, that has all objects arising from appearances as a result of the understanding connecting the appearances into *one* sequence of experience, and of reason necessarily, though vainly, trying to expand and unify them into *one* whole and complete world system. (1989, 193)

⁴ Erdmann 1878/1971. Bader 2012.

⁵ Jacobi 1785, quoted in Bader 2012, 6.

⁶ See Feder and Garve, 1989.

Kant vehemently rejected that reading as a misunderstanding of his own idealism. In the *Critique*, he states quite clearly:

One would do us an injustice if one tried to ascribe to us the long-discredited idealism that, while assuming the proper reality of space, *denies the existence of extended beings in it, or at least finds this existence doubtful*, and so in this respect admits no satisfactorily provable distinction between dreams and truth. As to the appearances of inner sense in time, empirical idealism finds no difficulty in regarding them as real things; indeed, it even asserts that this inner experience is the sufficient as well as the only proof of the actual existence of its object (in itself, with all this time-determination). (B519, emphasis added)

Now, I want to call the reader's attention to the fact that this passage contains at least three main textual pieces of evidence in favor of the assumption that the Göttingen Review was one of the motivations behind the Refutation. First, in this passage Kant made crystal clear that the main problem of the Feder-Garve review in his opinion was not being accused of Berkeleian phenomenism *only*, but rather of *any kind* of external-world idealism, in his own words *either by denying the existence of extended beings* (Berkeley dogmatic external-world idealism) *or finding this existence doubtful* (Cartesian problematic external-world idealism). Second, when Kant also mentions that *the idealist admits no satisfactory distinction between dreams and truth*, he clearly had the third note to the Refutation in mind. Finally, *when he adds that empirical idealism finds no difficulty in regarding inner experience as real and sufficient for time-determination*, he leaves no doubt that he had his Refutation in mind. Thus, if Kant's Refutation does not aim to refute Berkeleian idealism, the Göttingen review was certainly a further motivation for the Refutation, namely the opportunity to differentiate his own formal idealism from Berkeley's.

However, my point is the following. The Feder–Garve review is not accusing Kant of global skepticism. Here, the philosophical question that motivates Kant's Refutation of Idealism is metaphysical rather than epistemological. What is in question is not the truth of the majority of our commonsensical beliefs, but rather the very underlying nature of material things.

3 The Refutation in the Twentieth Century

Since the turn of the twentieth century, a vast amount of secondary literature on the Refutation of Idealism has emerged⁷. According to Chignell,⁸ this literature can be divided into two primary trends. The first trend dates back to Guyer's work and proposes a "causal reading" of the Refutation.⁹ According to this, the proof of outside things relies on the causal relationship between things-in-themselves and our mental states.¹⁰ Several other scholars have followed Guyer's work in this area. Indeed, Caranti showed that the causal reading can be traced back to Kant's pre-critical philosophy.¹¹ Chignell refers to the second term as "semantic reading," which identifies the primary focus of conceptual interpretation as the "semantic" content of our experiences rather than a causal relationship.¹²

A second division exists between those who claim that the Refutation proves the existence of outside phenomena, and those who argue that Kant's Refutation proves the existence of things-in-themselves.¹³ The third and most important academic divide concerns the relationship between the Refutation and transcendental idealism. In this debate, the first group of scholars claims that the Refutation requires transcendental idealism.¹⁴ The second group believes that the

7 Notable examples include Almeida 2013, Aquila 1979, Ameriks 2003, Bader 2012, Bardon 2006, Chignell 2010, Dicker 2004 and 2008, Guyer 1987 and 2006, Hanna 2000, Longuenesse 2008, Van Cleve 1999), Vogel 1993, and Westphal 2004.

8 See Chignell 2010 and 2011.

9 Guyer 1987.

10 See Chignell 2011, 507.

11 See Caranti 2007, 10.

12 Chignell 2011.

13 The first group includes scholars such as Paton 1970, Allison 2004, and Ameriks 2006. The second group includes scholars such as Prichard 1909, Guyer 1987, Chignell 2010 and 2011, Bader 2012, and Almeida 2013.

14 This position is illustrated by Paton 1936/1970, Allison 2004, and Ameriks 2006. Paton (1936, quoted from the 1970 edition Vol. II: 380) states categorically, "These permanent substances are phenomenal substances dependent, like time and space, on the constitution of the human mind." More recently, Ameriks states, "the Refutation has to do merely with empirical externality" (Ameriks 2006, 74). Caranti provides perhaps the best example of this view: "I suggest that an alternative refutation can be mounted by combining two points, both of which depend on transcendental idealism: (1) the abandonment of the transcendental realist's picture of perception (the result achieved in the proof of the immediacy of outer perception), and (2) a reflection on the meaning, within a transcendental idealistic perspective, of the very possibility of a super-imaginative power that generates our *entire* experience, even in its lawfulness (which distinguishes the 'big hallucination' from occasional and thus non-problematic hallucinations)." (Caranti 2007, 100)

Refutation and transcendental idealism are incompatible.¹⁵ A third group claims that the Refutation is indifferent to transcendental idealism.¹⁶ A fourth and final group claims that the Refutation is compatible with Kantian idealism, but denies that idealism is the solution to or even required by the Refutation.¹⁷ I defend a further thesis: the Refutation is an indirect defense of Kantian idealism: the proof that what underlies the things outside us is a transcendental object or noumenon in the negative sense that appears to us as something persistent in space.¹⁸

Now, as to the first divide, I side with the causal reading of the Refutation. I argue in the final section that the argument against metaphysical idealism crucially depends on the existence of things in themselves (noumena in the negative sense) and that is what accounts for the determination/alteration of our mental states in time. In a nutshell: noumena in the negative sense affect our senses and hence take the form of appearances or mere representations inside our minds. The existence of noumena outside us taking the form of something permanent in space is a condition for determining the consciousness of our existence in time.¹⁹

As to the second divide, I side with those who claim that the existence of things outside us must be taken in the transcendental sense of things-in-themselves. To be sure, Kant's statement that required the existence of things outside me "that cannot be a mere representation of a thing outside me" (B275) may sound ambiguous to some readers. Such a claim could be read as if Kant was stating that the required existence could not be a "mere representation", which is a mental state. But with that claim he is not saying that such a thing exists in itself (noumenon in the negative sense). However, the textual evidence that what Kant means in B275, as the noumenon is simply overwhelming:

If the (material) world were an epitome of things-in-themselves, it would be impossible to prove the existence of a thing outside the world; [...] [...]

But if we take the world as a phenomenon, it proves *the existence of something that is not appearance* (Refl. AA, 18: 305, R5356; emphasis added).

We remain in the world of the senses [crossed out: however], and would be led by nothing except the principles of the [crossed out: law] understanding that we use in experience, but we make our possible progression *into an object in itself*, by regarding the possibility of experience as something real in the objects of experience." (Refl. AA, 18: 278, R5639, original emphasis)

¹⁵ This group includes scholars like Vaihinger 1883 and 1884, Prichard 1909, Smith 1923, and more recently Guyer 1987.

¹⁶ See Hanna 2000.

¹⁷ That is my position.

¹⁸ Unfortunately, I cannot say more on my reading of Kantian idealism. See my own paper 2017.

¹⁹ See my paper 2017.

We must determine something in space in order to determine our own existence in time. That thing outside of us is also represented prior to this determination as a *noumenon*.” (Refl. AA 18: 416, R5984, original emphasis)

Now since in inner sense everything is successive, hence nothing can be taken backwards, the ground of the possibility of the latter must lie in the relation of representations to something outside us, and indeed to something that is not itself in turn a mere inner representation, i. e., form of appearance, hence *which is something in itself*. The possibility of this cannot be explained. – Further, the representation of that which persists must pertain to that which contains the ground of time-determination, but not with regard to succession, for in that there is no persistence; consequently, that which is persistent must lie only in that which is simultaneous, or in the intelligible, which contains the ground of appearances.” (AA, 18: 612, R6312; emphasis mine).

Still, by far the most significant textual evidence is the Critique:

As to the appearances of inner sense in time, it finds no difficulty in them as real things, indeed, it even asserts that this inner experience and it alone gives sufficient proof of the real existence of their object (*in itself*) along with all this time-determination.” (B519; emphasis mine)

In B519 Kant made it crystal clear *that appearances of inner sense in time and inner experience itself is proof of the real existence of a thing in itself as the grounds for time-determination*. Thus, regardless of whether Kant’s Refutation is successful or not, there can be no doubt that the aim was to prove the existence of the objects of outer sense in the transcendental meaning as things-in-themselves.

Finally, as to the last divide, I side with the group that claims that the Refutation is compatible with Kantian idealism, but denies that idealism is the solution to or even required by the Refutation. Given this, I do not need to provide any independent support for my reading of Kantian idealism.²⁰

²⁰ Lacking a better name, I call my reading of Kantian idealism “non-dual-epistemic-phenomenalism”. It is “non-dual” because, from a strictly metaphysical viewpoint, my reading rules out metaphysical mind-world dualism (one-world view). However, I prefer to call it non-dual rather than two-aspect because it does not reduce the transcendental divide between noumena and phenomena to the mere opposition between two ways of considering the same reality. The noumenon functions to limit our cognitive claims (*Grenzbegriff*), but also signifies the underlying nature of reality. Even assuming that noumenon and phenomenon are numerically identical entities, I reject the associated claim that the phenomenon is the intentional object of the sensible intuition and of human cognition in general. The intentional object of our sensible intuition is what Kant calls a transcendental object in the first edition and noumenon in the negative sense. Thus, according to the reading that I am proposing, the phenomenon is nothing but the way that the noumenon in the negative sense (or the transcendental object) appears to our human sensibility or exists inside our human sensibility as a *mere representation*. Therefore, I also call it “phenomenalism” because we can only cognize things mind-dependently insofar as they appear to us *as mere representations*

4 The Failed Refutation of Cartesian Global Skepticism

The global skeptical strategy is based on the so-called skeptical hypotheses according to which everything could look exactly the same in our experiences even if those scenarios described by those hypotheses were true. The most famous skeptical hypothesis is Descartes' Evil-Demon scenario, in which our experiences are produced by such a genius. A standard global skeptical argument says something along the following lines:

- 1) If the scenario described by Evil Demon hypothesis is true, I can never know whether most of my beliefs are true.
- 2) I can never know that this hypothesis is true.
- 3) Therefore, I can never know whether most of my commonsensical beliefs are true.

The question is how Kant's Refutation is supposed to refute this global skepticism. Let us first take a look at what Kant states. The conclusion of the proof takes the form of a theorem:

The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me. (B275; original emphasis)

The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me. Kant states the following in support of his theorem:

- i. I am conscious of my existence as determined in time. (B275)
- ii. All time-determination presupposes something persistent in perception. (B275)
- iii. But this persisting element cannot be an intuition in me. For all the determining grounds of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations and as such they themselves need something persisting distinct from them, in relation to which their change, and thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined. (Bxxxix)
- iv. Thus, the perception of this persistent thing is possible through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me. Consequently, the determination of my existence in time is possible only

inside our minds. However, those things are nothing but mind-independently existing noumena. Finally, I also call it "epistemic phenomenalist" because I reject both Berkeleian ontological phenomenalism (according to which reality is a logical construction of mind-dependent representations) and non-reductionist two-worlds-plus-phenomenalist views.

by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself. (B275f.)

- v. 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. (B276)

Because these steps are clearly not the premises or conclusion of the argument, contrary to usual procedures, I will only discuss each step after first discerning its logical form under the standard assumption that the argument targets an epistemological skeptic challenging us to prove that we know the existence of outside things or that most of our beliefs are true.

My aim here is to prove that as an anti-skeptical epistemological argument, Kant's Refutation is doomed to fail. Firstly, the argument must begin with epistemic premises to achieve an epistemic conclusion. Thus, the first premise of the argument in (I) must be read as stating that I have *propositional self-knowledge* of my existence as determined in time. Kant never stated the first premise in this way, but this reading seems to me fair enough to assess his putative anti-skeptical epistemological argument in the Refutation²¹. In the same anti-skeptical vein, the second premise (II) must state that I have propositional self-knowledge of the time-determination of my mental states. Following the same pattern, the conclusion is also prefixed with the same epistemic operator: *I know* that there exist permanent things outside me as a necessary condition for my introspective self-knowledge of the time-determination of my mental states.

The alleged Kantian epistemological skeptical argument takes the following form:

- 1) If I know that my mental states are determined in time, and I know that if my mental states are determined in time, then there are permanent things outside me, therefore I know that there are permanent things outside me, that is, I know that the Cartesian skeptical scenarios are not actual: I know that I am not dreaming and that I am not being deluded to falsely believe that there are permanent things outside me.

²¹ Caranti formulates this as follows: "In the first step of the argument ('I am conscious of my own existence as determined in time'), Kant defines the kind of self-knowledge that the Cartesian is supposed to accept as certain." (Caranti 2007, 123)

- 2) Now, I do know that my mental states are determined in time.
- 3) Therefore, I know that there are permanent things outside me and hence that the Cartesian skeptical scenarios are not actual, that is, I know that I am not dreaming and that I am not being deluded to falsely believe that there are permanent things outside me.

To begin with, it is not clear why one's knowledge of one's existence in time is a presupposition of Cartesian global skepticism. What we know from the Cartesian second *Meditation* is that the cogito is the only certainty that survives the hyperbolic Evil Demon scenario: The Evil Demon could fool me about everything that I believe, except that I exist as long as I think. Nonetheless, Descartes never said, because it would be completely unwise from him to do so, that the cogito is a condition or a presupposition of the Evil Demon scenario. I believe that the root of the mistake lies in the misunderstanding the epistemic modal character of scenarios in general. Again, a scenario is a maximally specific way things could be: a sort of epistemically possible world, in a loose and intuitive sense. All that Descartes needs to suggest that all our commonsensical beliefs might be wrong is to figure out his Evil Demon scenario: until we are unable to rule out that scenario as epistemically possible, we can never know whether our beliefs are true even if they contingently happen to be true, or even if the Evil Demon has never tried to deceive me. And we could never prove that the Evil Demon scenario is not epistemically possible by showing that the awareness of our existence in time entails the existence of outside things. Kant's argument that the awareness of our existence in time entails the existence of outside things would be engulfed by the Cartesian Evil Demon scenario.

Trying to put myself in the shoes of the mainstream of Kantian scholarship, I can figure out the following reasoning: "as Descartes has argued that our commonsensical beliefs are doubtful, he must now assume that they are subjective states of our own mind. So, what the Kantian has to do is to prove against Descartes that the subjectivity entails objectivity". Nothing could be more wrong! If we cannot know whether our beliefs are true, the forcible conclusion is that we must suspend our judgment about the truth of those beliefs. To be sure, as doxastic states of mind beliefs are subjective in the trivial sense of belonging to the minds of subjects. Still, suspension of judgment about the truth of our commonsensical beliefs does not make me imprisoned in my own mind as if I could not have access the external-world, but only my own internal-world! The opposition between subjective and objective, between internal and external experience, plays no role in Cartesian global skepticism. Thus, if Kant's aim is to refute Cartesian global skepticism, he could never have started from the premise that I know my own existence.

The second step is also unacceptable in a putative argument against the Cartesian global skeptic, namely the assumption that awareness of my own existence entails the self-knowledge that my mental states are time-determined. I can imagine the Kantian struggling to show that factual premise (2) is of Cartesian provenance and hence indubitable. According to Caranti, for example:

Descartes claims that ‘I am I exist’, is necessarily true *each time* I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. The reference to its being true ‘each time’ seems to indicate that the validity of the cogito does not go beyond each *instant* in which the cogito is performed. More importantly, regardless of whether Descartes interpreted the cogito in this way, arguably he should have. For the extension beyond the validity of the cogito seems to imply reliance on memory. Since this faculty could very easily be deceptively triggered by the Evil Genius, it seems that Descartes should not have extended the validity claim of the cogito beyond the instant. If this is so, couldn’t the skeptic simply ignore the Refutation by denying that I am conscious of my own existence through the experience of a succession of representations *over time*? (2017, 315)

Indeed, that is exactly what Descartes states:

So, after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true *whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind*. (CSM II, 16f. The second emphasis in italics added. The translation is mine.)²²

My point is not historical, but conceptual. If the Evil Demon can fool me about everything that I believe, even whether $2+3=5$, how could I be so sure about the knowledge of time-determination of my own mental states? What we know for sure is that the Cartesian hyperbolic doubt cannot engulf the cogito and cogito-like contemporaneous thoughts. Yet, the time-determination of mental states is a quite different issue regardless of whether it seems to depend on memory or not. I leave the question to the Cartesian scholars.

But let us assume for the sake of argument that factual premise 2) is undeniable. Ironically, at this point, the Kantian argument against Cartesian global skepticism must grapple with an ancient form of skepticism, namely, Pyrrhonian *equipollence*. On the one hand, the Kantian claims that we know the existence of permanent things outside us and hence that the skeptical scenarios are not epistemically possible because we know that our mental states are determined in time. On the other hand, the Cartesian global skeptic insists we cannot know

²² The Latin text makes the temporal uncertainty regarding one’s own existence even more clear: “Haud dubie igitur ego etiam sum, se me fallit: et fallat quantum potest, nunquam tamen ef ciet, ut nihil sim *quamdiu* me aliquid esse cogitabo. Adeo ut, omnibus satis superque pensitatis, denique statuendum sit hoc pronuntiatum, *Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum*” (AT, VII, 5, emphasis added).

whether our mental states are determined in time because we can never know whether the skeptical scenarios are epistemically possible: I can never know whether I am dreaming or whether I am being deluded to falsely believe that there are permanent things outside us.

5 The Refutation of Cartesian External-World Idealism

As I said in the Introduction, even if the Refutation fails as an argument against the Cartesian global skepticism that Descartes briefly adumbrates in his first *Meditation*, it can still address the Cartesian external-world idealism that Descartes adumbrates in his second *Meditation* until his controversial proof of God's existence. If Kant's Refutation cannot rule out the Cartesian skeptical hypotheses as false, or whether most of our beliefs are true, it provides a promising argument against problematic external-world idealism.

The first step in this direction is to show that Cartesian problematic external-world idealism does not entail Cartesian global skepticism and vice versa. If I am a Cartesian problematic external-world idealist I suspect that the underlying nature of things outside me is mind-independent (by assuming that they might be caused by myself as a thinking being). Such metaphysical idealism does not render most of my commonsensical beliefs false. For example, whether or not the ultimate nature of things is mind-dependent (or material, or virtual and made of bites, or whatever), it is still true that I am writing this paper on this computer; it is still true that I have two hands; it is still true that I have a body, etc. To be sure, I might be philosophically wrong about the nature of outside things. But that second-order metaphysical mistake leaves the truth of our first-order external-world beliefs untouched. Conversely, even if the ultimate nature of things outside us is mind-independent, that is no guarantee that my commonsensical beliefs are true if I do not know whether skeptical scenarios are not epistemically impossible.

And the other way around: even if I can never know whether the Cartesian skeptical scenarios are true, that Cartesian global skepticism does not commit me to any kind of metaphysical idealism. Cartesian global skepticism leaves the metaphysical question about the ultimate nature of reality untouched.

Now let us return to the Kantian proof and assess what it looks like when understood as an argument against Cartesian problematic external-world idealism. As we saw, the standard anti-skeptical reading faces the problem of assuming that the skeptic must assume that he has knowledge that his mental states are time-determined because such self-knowledge is ensured if skeptical scenar-

ios are not epistemically impossible. Still, things change dramatically when we consider that the Kantian opponent is the Cartesian problematic external-world idealist. Indeed, as the starting point of the Cartesian problematic external-world idealism is the cogito, self-knowledge as time-determination seems to be presupposed. According to Caranti, for example:

Even if we grant the possibility of such a thing as an instantaneous cogito, the entity that this instantaneous activity yields would be much less than what Descartes requires. The ‘I’s’ whose existence would be proved through a certain number of occurrences of this activity would be completely unrelated. In other words, they could not be reidentified as moments of the same subjectivity. (Caranti 2007, 136)

Again, I leave the question to the Cartesian scholars. What I want to emphasize is that my point is not historical, but conceptual. If someone has serious doubts that the outer things of which one has ideas exist mind-dependently or are a product of our imagination, one must concede that one knows at least the time-order of one’s own ideas of outer things. In this regard, we also overcome the second obstacle: the explanation of why (I) entails (II). For the Cartesian problematic external-world idealist, the knowledge of one’s own existence is the knowledge of one’s mental states determined in time.

But now we face the third obstacle to traditional epistemological anti-skeptical readings: in what sense does Kant state in (II) that the perception of alterations entails something permanent in perception? Several scholars appeal here to the thesis of transparency of time-relations of the Kantian First Analogy. However plausible that metaphysical claim might sound, it is controversial (to say the least) in an argument that addresses Cartesian global skepticism. Again, the obstacle is eliminated when we consider the proof as an argument that addresses the Cartesian problematic external-world idealist: from the fact that I know that my mental states are determined in time, I must account for this determination as alterations in time.

Now we come to the crux of the disagreement between Kant and the Cartesian external-world idealist. Whereas for the idealist this persistence must be accounted for in terms of the persistence of a thinking being, for Kant this persistent thing must be some mind-independent thing-in-itself (noumenon in the negative sense) that causes the alteration of mental states. In his own words:

(IV) Thus, the perception of this persistent thing is possible only through a thing outside me and not through the mere representation of a thing outside me. (Bxxxix)

Kant states that permanent things required for the time-determination of my mental alterations cannot be a “mere representation in me”:

For all the determining grounds of my existence that can be encountered in me are representations, and as such they themselves need something persisting distinct from them, in relation to which their change, and thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined. (Bxxxix)

The argument here is a classical regress. This permanence cannot be a mere representation in me because, as such, it is also in time and hence it also requires something permanent for its own time-determination. In this way, a regress is launched. The only way to avoid this regress is to assume that what is causing the alterations is something external to my representations, namely mind-independent noumena in the negative sense:

We must determine something in space in order to determine our own existence in time. That thing outside of us is also represented prior to this determination as *noumenon*.” (Refl. 5984, AA 18: 416, original emphasis)

What forces the Cartesian external-world idealist to assume that our mental states are mere representations in us is the assumption that we know outside things only as a plausible cause of our mental states. However, based on the regress argument, Kant proved that our epistemic access to outside things in space is direct rather than indirect or inferential. Thus, there is no further obstacle to thinking that our sensory states are by their own metaphysical nature representations, that is, sensible intuitions of outside things. Given this, the argument takes the following form:

- A I know that I exist in time.
- B I could not know that I am a thinking being in time unless I could perceive alterations in myself as changing mental states.
- C The awareness of this alteration presupposes something permanent in perception.

Now here is Kant against the idealist:

- D This persistence could not be a mere representation in me, because as such it also changes and so a regress is launched.
- E Therefore, we must assume, first, that the changing mental states are of something persistent and mind-independent; second, that it is causally responsible for my perceived change in time.
- F What underlies my perception of alterations of my mental representations over time is a reality made up of unknown mind-independent things-in-themselves.
- G Therefore, the underlying nature of reality is made up of unknown mind-independent things-in-themselves.

However, someone might complain that, if the target of the Refutation were the proof of the existence of things in themselves, it would be like mounting an argument to show the existence of something your entire system says is not knowable. However, in the Second Edition Kant makes a key distinction between noumena in the negative and in the positive sense, as follows:

If by noumenon we understand a thing *insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, because we abstract from the manner of our intuition of it, then this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense. But if we understand by that *an object of a non-sensible intuition*, then we must assume a special kind of intuition, namely intellectual intuition, which, however, is not our own, and the possibility of which we cannot understand, and this would be a noumenon in the positive sense.

Now the doctrine of sensibility is at the same time the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense [...]” (B307, Kant’s original emphases).

About noumena in the positive sense we really know nothing. However, about noumena in the negative sense we know, first, that they must exist, second that they affect our sensibility, and third that they appear to our minds as appearances in space and time. What we do not know of them are their intrinsic properties. That is why Kant claims that the doctrine of sensibility is at the same time the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense. That is exactly what Kant states in Reflection 6312:

Now since in inner sense everything is successive, hence nothing can be taken backwards, the ground of the possibility of the latter must lie in the relation of representations to something outside us, and *indeed to something that is not itself in turn mere inner representation, i. e., form of appearance*, hence *which is something in itself. The possibility of this cannot be explained.* – Further, the representation of that which persists must pertain to that which contains the ground of time-determination, but not with regard to succession, for in that there is no persistence; consequently, that which is persistent must lie only in that which is simultaneous, *or in the intelligible, which contains the ground of appearances.*” (Refl. 6312, AA, 18: 612; emphasis mine).

Thus, Kant is allowed to claim that noumena in the relevant negative sense (which appear to us as persisting things in space) are the ultimate cause of the alterations of our mental states in time.

Now, according to Longuenesse 2006, Kant has never rescued his promise to prove the existence of something ontologically distinct from our own mental states as he announces:

We remain in the world of the senses [*crossed out*: however], and would be led by nothing except the principles of the [*crossed out*: law] understanding that we use in experience, but we *make our possible progression into an object in itself*, by regarding the possibility of experience as something real in the objects of experience. (Refl. 5642, AA, 18: 280 f.; original emphases)

In contrast, what Kant has proven (if anything) is only that there is a necessary connection between the *awareness* of my own existence in time and the *awareness* of something persistent in space rather than the connection between the *awareness* of my own existence in time and the existence of something ontological independent from me:

What he actually does is to progress from the consciousness of a specific determination of my existence (his empirical determination in time) to a necessary condition of that consciousness which is itself another consciousness (consciousness of a permanent, of which Kant maintains that it must be the consciousness of something in space). [...] The question remains whether the objects of which I am necessarily conscious as objects ontologically distinct from myself and my mental states are actually distinct from me and from my mental states (Longuenesse 2006, 69; my translation, original emphasis.)²³

In the same vein, Allison complains that Kant never accomplished his goal of proving the existence of something ontologically independent of our own representation as the ground for determinations of the alterations of our mental states in time. In Kant's own words:

For all the determining grounds of my existence, that which can be encountered in me are *representations*, and as such they themselves *need something persisting distinct from them*, in relation to which their change, and thus my existence in the time in which they change, can be determined. (Bxxxix; emphases added)

According to Allison:

The previous steps have established that the cognition of one's inner state rests upon the *representation* of something persisting in space. But if Kant is to refute the skeptic, he cannot rest content with this rather modest conclusion. Instead he must show that I actually experience or perceive, not merely imagine or believe that I perceive, something persisting. [...] [T]he skeptic could readily accept an entailment relation between beliefs, and thus acknowledge the necessity of outer representations. What he would not grant is the contention that this licenses a conclusion about actual experience or real existence. (Allison 2004, 293; original emphasis)

²³ [C]e qu'il fait en réalité est progresser de la *conscience* d'une détermination spéci que de mon existence (sa détermination empirique dans le temps) à une condition nécessaire *de cette conscience* qui est elle même une autre conscience (la conscience d'un permanent dont Kant soutient qu'elle doit être la conscience de quelque chose dans l'espace)[...] La question demeure de savoir si les objets dont je suis nécessairement conscient *comme* d'objets ontologiquement distincts de moi-même et de mes états mentaux, sont effectivement distincts de *moi* et de mes états mentaux (2006, 69)

To be sure, we must be *aware of* or *represent* this persistent something since this persistent is meant to be the condition of the awareness of the time-determination of my own existence. Still, this does not mean that this persistent something is *a mere representation in me*. Longuenesse and Allison completely misunderstood the nature of the argument. This nature is revealed by the third note to the Refutation:

Note 3. From the fact the existence of outer objects is required for the possibility of a determinate consciousness of our self it does not follow that every intuitive representation of outer things includes at the same time their existence, for that may well be the mere effect of the imagination (in dreams as well as in delusions); but this is possible merely through reproduction of previous outer perceptions, which, as has been shown, are possible through actuality of outer objects. Here it had to be proved only that inner experience in general is possible only through outer experience in general. (B278 f.)

The argument is a classical regress. This persistent cannot be a *mere representation in me* because as such, it is also in time and hence it also requires something persistent for its own time-determination. In this way, a regress is launched. The only way to avoid this regress, according to my interpretation of Kant's idealism, is to assume that what is causing the alterations is something external to our representations, namely, a mind-independent thing-in-itself that is cognized by me as a material substance in space. The remaining question, according to my interpretation, is how Kant proves that this thing-in-itself causing the changes of mental states in time is represented by those states.

- AA *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1902–. As usual, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited according to the A and B editions. Eds. J. Timmermann/H. F. Klemme. Hamburg 1998. The first *Critique* is quoted in the translation of P. Guyer and A. Wood: *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge, 1998.
- Refl. Kant's *Reflections*. AA, volume 18. Kant's *Reflections* are quoted in the translation of P. Guyer, C. Bowman and F. Rausher: *Notes and Fragments*, Cambridge 2005.
- Prolog. Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* from 1783 is quoted in the translation of G. Hatfield, M. Friedman, H. Allison and P. Heath: *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, Cambridge, 2004.

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