

# Preface

This book identifies and tries to remove the greatest single obstacle faced by students and teachers in their attempts to understand Kant's theoretical philosophy. We can approach this obstacle through the phrase *transcendental idealism*, which is one of the titles Kant gives his philosophy as a whole. These words naturally suggest that Kant is presenting some form of idealism, but in fact he is not. An idealist philosophy is any conception of consciousness and knowledge according to which the things we immediately apprehend in experience are realities that exist in our own minds. If there are nonmental realities at all, they are posited realities or, if we can know things outside our minds, they are known mediately and by inference from our unmediated experience of mental things. Apart from a few voices to the contrary, most readers of Kant, from well before the appearance of the *Critique of Pure Reason* up to the present, have assumed that transcendental idealism is, first of all, idealism, and that the relevant problem of interpretation is that of finding the difference, if any, between Kant's idealism and that of other idealist philosophers. I say that this view is incorrect and that its dominance has been extremely harmful to thinking about Kant. Although I approach Kant through only one issue, the discussion involves the main contentions and features of Kant's theoretical philosophy. I am convinced that a sound understanding of this issue is crucial to comprehension of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a whole.

Readers frequently find some version of phenomenalism in Kant's account of experience and knowledge. For our purposes, we can treat phenomenalism as a form of idealism because phenomenalism is reductive, and it is nonmental things that are reduced. By including phenomenalism as a variety of idealist interpretation, I am willing to disregard distinctions some philosophers want to respect.<sup>1</sup> A putative contrast between phenomenalism and idealism is supported by the thought that phenomenalism does not deny the existence of nonmental objects but instead presents an explanation of just what such objects are. For example, they are "logical constructs out of sense data." A common objective of the reduction attempted by a phenomenalist logical construction is ontological parsimony. The same parsimony is intended by any phenomenalist translation of statements about physical objects into a language the referring terms of which are confined to sense data and other mental existents. While we ordinarily allow for the existence of mental realities such as thoughts and perceptual experiences and also allow for the existence of outer nonmental objects as entities in addition to and other than mental things, the logical construction, or the translation program, proposes the deletion of the nonmental objects from our ontology. Advocates of phenomenalism speak of outer physical objects but do not thereby go beyond an ontology of mental things, and thus an idealistic ontology.

I have also included under the broad umbrella of idealism views sometimes ascribed to Kant that are not reductive and that merely confine the evidence for the existence of nonmental things to mental representations. Such theories are not phenomenalist, but they do belong to the class of views that Kant brings together under the heading "problematic idealism." They do not close the door to skepticism but virtually invite the skeptical thought, "Any amount of such 'evidence' is compatible with the nonexistence of outer objects," and the skeptical question, "With what right do we regard mental states as evidence for nonmental realities at all?"

Again, many readers think that, in the face of critical reactions to the obviously idealistic tenets of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant contradicted those tenets in the second edition, or exacerbated contradictions that were already present in the first edition.

The understandable thought that Kant's transcendental idealism is a genuine form of idealism is conveyed, for example, by the definition of the term *idealism* in Simon Blackburn's 1994 *Oxford Dictionary of Phi-*

*osophy*: “Any doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental in nature . . .” and “major forms of idealism include subjective idealism, or the position better called immaterialism and associated with Berkeley, according to which to exist is to be perceived, *transcendental idealism*, and absolute idealism” [emphasis added].<sup>2</sup> If we judge in the light of two hundred years of idealist interpretation of Kant, this dictionary entry seems to be in good order. If, on the other hand, that interpretation is fundamentally wrong, as I mean to argue, the explanation for such a widespread misunderstanding must lie not merely with this army of readers but just as much with Kant himself. Indeed, the supposition that Kant’s philosophy is a form of idealism is by no means a simple prejudice read out of the words “transcendental idealism.” The *Critique of Pure Reason* abounds in apparent confirmations of that supposition. Many confirmations take the form of what sound like flat statements of an idealistic thesis. There are also fundamental and large-scale developments in Kant’s system that seem to require idealism if they are to make any sense at all. For illustration of the flat statements, consider Kant’s repeated contention that we can apprehend only appearances and that appearances are “representations” and can exist only in *our faculty of representation*. Surely all the things that exist in our faculty of representation are mental things. As an illustration of the fundamental developments, consider Kant’s grand effort to show that objects of experience are products of a *synthesis* we perform, that is, of a mental combinatorial activity operating on mental representations.

In light of these Kantian assertions and doctrines, it would be surprising if most students of Kant did not find an idealism in his work, since the appearance of idealism could not be much more prominent than it is. In the last chapter of this book, I discuss a number of interpretations of Kant by first-rate philosophers, past and present, in order to convey something of the history, the persistence, and the variety of idealistic readings, and I also take note of the work of several recent non-idealistic commentators. For the main body of this book, I do not talk about the interpretations of other writers on Kant. In order to understand the widespread incorrect interpretation, I use only Kant’s writing as the source for the seeming idealism of his work. One of the features that make the present study distinctive is the attention it gives to the problem of reconciling the most prominent and misleading idealistic-sounding assertions and themes in Kant with a wholly nonidealistic outlook. I will also locate the interpretation of Kant that I defend here with

respect to the small minority of recent commentators who do not present Kant as an idealist.

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This book is neither a brief general commentary on the *Critique of Pure Reason* nor an introductory text. I address only one topic, albeit a pervasive topic, and I try to make only one point, albeit a point of fundamental importance. The book discusses prominent themes in Kant's theoretical philosophy, with the single objective of making it possible to see apparently idealistic passages without the idealism. It is a commonplace that Descartes's introduction of the egocentric skeptical perspective in philosophy has had and continues to have a decisive role in modern thinking. In what follows, I try to show how the broadly Cartesian outlook of readers of Kant enables them to see in his writings assertions that are quite the opposite in meaning of the assertions he takes himself to be making. Of course, his vocabulary and rhetoric are partly to blame for misunderstandings. The term *transcendental idealism* is only the most obvious example. In spite of such difficulties in Kant's texts, the great preponderance of the misreading of Kant arises from Cartesian presuppositions on the part of the reader that make it hard or impossible to recognize the very many clear indications of Kant's opposition to idealism, root and branch.

The present work concentrates on Kant's conception of "representations," on his conception of space and time, on the nonfoundationalist stance of his famous "How-possible?" questions, and on his deep argument against the very possibility of a Cartesian subject enduring in time while surveying the contents of its own consciousness. I do not find a single discussion in the *Critique* or in any other of Kant's works where he presents this last argument in full. I draw on diverse materials on this point, most prominently on the Paralogisms and the Refutation of Idealism but also on Kant's repeated discussions of the need to represent the unity of time spatially. Where the precise wording of the text seems important for my single objective, I have not hesitated to present very detailed analyses of it. In these explications, I believe that the structure of Kant's arguments can be used to more or less *prove* his entirely anti-idealist intentions.

The sections of the *Critique* to which I have devoted the most detailed examination are the Transcendental Aesthetic and parts of the Tran-

scendental Deduction of the Categories, as well as the above-mentioned Refutation and Paralogisms. In order to profit from the reflections that are presented here, it seems to me that a reader must have made, or be in the process of making, a substantial effort to understand Kant through hard study of the *Critique*. Undergraduate and graduate students are certainly to be found among such readers of Kant, and I intend this work to be of interest and of use to students at all levels, as well as to professional philosophers and Kant scholars. I came to most of the ideas presented here in the context of efforts to help students in numerous seminars on the *Critique*. I hope that their understanding was helped, and since I am sure that mine was, I am grateful to those students. I have translated all of the quoted passages myself with consultation and help from other translations. At the same time, I have been careful not to let an appearance of support for my understanding of a passage rest on *my* translation. Where I find that options available to a translator impinge significantly on the issue of idealism, I discuss the translation explicitly and I include the German text in the notes.

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My interests in this topic are not merely historical. The skeptical moves that lead to one or another form of idealism in metaphysics are part of a widely shared philosophical inheritance. A broadly Cartesian outlook still dominates the preliminary “set” from which philosophical theorizing takes its start. The tenacity of this preliminary outlook derives from its apparent fit with obvious facts about experience. For the most part, if not in all cases, we know what our beliefs are even if they turn out to be false beliefs. We know how things appear to us, even if appearances prove to be radically misleading. What is the subject matter of the knowledge that survives erroneous beliefs and illusory appearances? Most philosophers accept the idea that the subject matter belongs, in some sense, to the contents of our consciousness. This much of the Cartesian method of doubt and its idealist resolution is retained, even by philosophers who repudiate Descartes’s dualism and conception of mental substance. Our states of belief and other “mental representations,” together with our perceptual experiences, are inner realities of some kind, although there is no consensus whatever about the kind of realities these mental things are. Debates flourish about the nature of these inner mental representations, while the idea that immediate experience

involves such realities, whatever their nature, is subjected to little critical reflection. Many contemporary philosophers of mind propose a physical constitution for mental realities. In a programmatic spirit, it is imagined that, with the advance of science, the inner states will prove to be neural states or, perhaps, causally defined functional states that are realized in the form of states of the brain. This prevailing, allegedly anti-Cartesian, materialism does not reject the Cartesian assumption that it is *inner* mental things with which we are first acquainted.

Kant's repudiation of the fundamental Cartesian outlook supports another way of thinking about experience and the mind, and in my opinion can yield real understanding that replaces the perennial quandaries of idealism. Kant brings into focus the conceptual deficiencies of the very idea of the Cartesian subject of experience, and he is not distracted by the issue of the metaphysical substance to which mental realities are assigned by Descartes. When it is liberated from idealistic interpretation, Kant's thinking needs no modernization and has immediate application to our own philosophical problems.

In three different ways, the prevalence of this Cartesian strand of thought in contemporary epistemology and the philosophy of mind is responsible for the widespread and mistaken view that Kant's philosophy is a form of idealism. First, the assumption that this starting point is broadly unavoidable encourages the associated assumption that Kant, in his wisdom, did not try to avoid it. Second, even those philosophers working today who might espouse an alternative to this idealist preliminary outlook are likely to ascribe the outlook to Kant because of the tradition of idealist reading of Kant stretching back to the first reviews of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. After all, Kant did not succeed in his efforts to correct the misinterpretations of his contemporaries, and their understanding, or misunderstanding, of him engendered the whole German idealist school. Third, Kant himself does not sufficiently appreciate the idealist bias with which his work will be greeted. He therefore contributes to misunderstandings by expressing himself in ways that philosophers of Cartesian orientation will take to imply a Cartesian starting point.

The influence of Cartesian thinking on the understanding of Kant is the topic of chapter 1. The pattern of the discussion thereafter is determined by the roster of themes that readily engender mistaken idealistic understandings of Kant's philosophy. In chapter 2, I consider Kant's conception of subjective conditions for the possibility of experience. The point is that Kant's radical subjectivism is not a commitment to the mental status of objects of apprehension, although it is easy to conflate sub-

jectivism and the mental status of objects within the framework of empiricist thinking with which we are all too familiar. There is no justification for passing from the contention that all of our knowledge of objects is subjective to the very different claim that the objects we apprehend and of which we have knowledge are mental realities. Chapter 3 anticipates the response “Even if one cannot equate subjectivism and the mental status of objects, doesn’t Kant explicitly assert that his subjectivism is a *subjective idealism*, namely, transcendental idealism?” The chapter examines just what Kant means by “idealism” versus “realism.” To this end I focus on the contrasts he employs—material versus formal, and empirical versus transcendental—to make it clear that transcendental idealism is only formal idealism. As such, transcendental idealism implies nothing about the mental or nonmental status of the realities we experience. Kant holds that real objects of experience have matter as well as form. True objects, the objects of outer sense, the objects that paradigmatically exemplify reality with both matter and form, are not mental objects. The same dialectical procedure links the successive chapters of the rest of the book. Chapter 4 corresponds to the question “Even if ‘transcendental idealism’ is a doctrine about forms that contains no idealistic claim about the objects of conscious experience, doesn’t the contrast of things-in-themselves and appearances entail an idealistic conception of the latter?” In the course of this discussion, I consider the relationship of Kant’s contrast of phenomena and noumena to the quite different dichotomy of appearances and things in themselves. By clarifying the difference between these often identified contrasts, one is able to see beyond the usual idealist interpretation.

Kant states emphatically and often that appearances are representations and, as such, not things that exist outside of our minds. In chapter 5, I examine Kant’s conception of representations and his use of the term *Vorstellung* in order to dispel the impression that he espouses an unambiguous idealist philosophy in his prominent passages about representations and the nature of objects of experience. Since so very much hinges on the concept of representation, and since many idealist readings turn on misunderstandings of it, the chapter is long and detailed. In a similar spirit, chapter 6 deals with those passages in which Kant seems, in one stroke, to bring the “outer” itself into the mind via the assertion that “space is in us.” An examination of Kant’s concept of space suffices to dispel the idealistic impression that Kant’s language often creates. Kant plainly rejects the idea that space is itself a container-like entity, and as a consequence, his characterization of space

does not by any means imply the mental character of outer things apprehended as occupants of space.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Paralogisms in examining the Kantian thesis that seems most stubbornly idealistic. In a passage of thought that is very close to the spirit of Cartesian skeptical epistemology, Kant considers the fact that representations never guarantee the existence of any of the outer objects that are assumed to cause them. He seems to espouse the very “problematic idealism” he purports to reject elsewhere, and he seems to leave us with the traditional problem of the external world. This line of thinking, by itself, threatens to rule out the immediacy of our apprehension of outer things and to undermine any nonidealistic reading of Kant’s overall view. The full investigation of this issue is undertaken in chapter 8, where, with the help of a digression concerning Leibniz, it is urged that Kant is not a foundationalist in epistemology and that the idealist interpretation of his skepticism requires foundationalist assumptions; and in chapter 9, where the stance of the Kantian “How-possible?” questions is examined in order to show that Kant endorses and tries to justify both scientific and everyday conceptions of reality without trying to place those conceptions on a foundation of absolutely secure premises.

The same stance of acceptance of everyday experience is revealed in the “clue” for the identification of the Categories by means of forms of judgment in chapter 10, and this is linked, in chapter 11, to the difference between Kant’s attitude toward the parallelism of inner and outer sense and the radical repudiation of ordinary thinking about the outer by Cartesian and empiricist epistemology. This chapter articulates a fundamental asymmetry between the inner and outer intuition that has large implications for Kant’s conception of the mental and is mostly ignored by Kant himself. The fundamental concept of the self or subject of experience is examined in chapter 12. Kant’s Refutation of Idealism is located with respect to the absence of intuitive apprehension of the self. In Kant’s thinking, both inner intuition and self-knowledge are conceptually dependent on the accessibility of enduring spatial objects. He elucidates the doctrine of the unity of apperception and the conditions for such unity by relating it to the views of Berkeley and Hume on the absence of consciousness of a self as subject of experience. Kant’s justification of the ordinary and the theoretical presumption that subjects are enduring entities explains how the representation of an enduring self is possible in the absence of any intuitive apprehension of an enduring subject.



The realistic outlook ascribed to Kant throughout this study is confirmed in a discussion in chapter 13 of the sense in which Kant holds that “representations make objects possible.” Using Kant’s handling of the spatial representation of the unity of time as a paradigm, this chapter shows that Kant does not try to *argue for* the existence of external things or of an enduring subject, which he takes to be understood in everyday thought and which must be presupposed by all philosophical speculation. Chapter 14 discusses the sense in which lawlike connections among representations mark the empirical reality of objects. Chapter 15 is devoted, for the most part, to the views of others who have written about Kant’s philosophy. It attempts to relate a number of variants of idealist interpretation to the themes developed in this study and to explain why the misunderstanding of such a fundamental aspect of Kant’s thinking is as widespread as it is. Finally I discuss recent, more realistic, writings about Kant. I compare some of these with my account, and I acknowledge their influence on and confirmation of my ideas.

It goes without saying that I am deeply sympathetic with Kant’s general views, although I also find the details of his theories frequently unconvincing and regrettably dominated by organizational and methodological principles that make up the Kantian architectonic. For the most part, I confine myself here to the exposition of fundamental positions that I take to be essentially defensible. In the last few chapters, I raise serious criticisms of Kant’s claims concerning the parallelism of inner and outer sense. In chapter 5, I find decisive defects in his contrast of judgments of perception and judgments of experience. These criticisms are offered because they are immediately relevant and helpful to the exposition of Kant’s intentions. I do not mean to imply that apart from these matters I find everything else in the *Critique* to be in good order. There are of course endless difficulties, inconsistencies that I do not pretend to be able to resolve, passages that I cannot understand at all, and so forth. I cannot say, by any means, that Kant *never* slides into claims that are contrary to the basic anti-idealistic philosophy that he develops. In spite of very numerous and serious defects, I believe the overall thesis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, at least concerning the theme of idealism, is correct and is an enormous philosophical accomplishment. This short book is an effort to explain only that much of Kant’s philosophy.