

## A Refutation of Idealism<sup>1</sup>

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It is my aim to concoct a proof for something very similar to Kant's fascinating claim, made in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that "the mere, but empirically determined consciousness of my own existence [over time] proves the existence of objects in space outside me"<sup>2</sup>. The proof will not be Kant's, and in fact is better than his; nonetheless, it is inspired by Kant<sup>3</sup>. But first, if I may set out the presuppositions of my enterprise, along with some basic notions that I will employ, I will be able to clarify what is to be proved.

To begin with, I will take for granted the sort of theory that makes a Kantian refutation of idealism necessary, namely that all that can be directly perceived is an "idea" or impression, where an impression is a thing it is in principle possible to perceive even when nothing exists independently of my mind. I will not bother with a complete exposition of what such a theory might assert, since all that is crucial to my effort is that it be compatible with phenomenalism. For, my second assumption is the phenomenalistic one, to which Kant may also momentarily subscribe in the second edition, that talk of physical objects is reducible to clusters of subjunctive conditionals that refer only to possible direct perceptions. As for basic notions, I will regard the following as more or less primitive relative to this study: that of simply being *conscious* or aware of something; that of the conscious *subject* or self; that of a thing of which a subject is conscious, which I will call an *impression*; and that of being conscious of something *as* falling under a particular concept (in other words, that of *judging* an impression to fall under a particular concept, simultaneously with the act of perceiving the impression). Finally, I will take *an experience* simply to be an act of being, becoming or ceasing to be conscious of one or more impressions (note that experiences, so far as their definition goes, need not involve judgment). And I

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Robert Ehman and Jeffrey Tlumak for very helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> B275. The inclusion 'over time' is justified by the next sentence, "I am conscious of my own existence as determined in time", and by subsequent remarks.

<sup>3</sup> . . .and inspired by recent Kantian commentary, notably Jonathan Bennett's *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge University Press, 1966). I believe my redoing of the Refutation of Idealism is an improvement over Bennett's, however, principally in that: a) it is more detailed; b) it makes clear, in Steps 3 and 4, why it is not enough that seeming memories be checked against other seeming memories (all of which, after all, do as Bennett astutely points out provide, independently of checking, prima facie evidence of what seems to be remembered); c) it is more explicit, in Steps 3 and 6, about the role of the principle of verifiability; and d) it explains, in Step 8, why objectivity entails independently existing objects, an explanation that seems impossible without my phenomenalistic assumptions.

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will speak of *experience-types*, with the understanding that two experiences are of the same type if and only if they are of the same description.

Kant attempts to derive that real objects exist from the premise that I am conscious of my own existence over time. It is unclear precisely what this self-consciousness amounts to, but I am willing to take it in a fairly weak sense (a sense that I do not claim necessarily to be Kant's): namely, that I *unify* my experience over time in the sense that I judge at least some of my experiences to be experiences *all belonging to the same self*, so far as their descriptions are concerned. More precisely, the sense is this: *even though my experiences occur over a stretch of time, I am justifiably conscious of at least some of them as belonging to a subject at least some of whose experiences are of the same types as some of mine*<sup>4</sup>. I will prove that if I know that I am self-conscious in this sense, then I am warranted in asserting that there are spatial objects that exist independently of mind and experience. (An object exists independently of mind and experience if and only if it exists, and could exist even if there had never been minds or experience.) My strategy, then, differs slightly from Kant's in that he does not (explicitly) take *knowledge* of self-consciousness as his premise, but only self-consciousness. Yet this difference, I think, hardly attenuates the power of the transcendental argument, since my knowledge of my self-consciousness seems as undeniable as my self-consciousness. Meanwhile, the objects whose existence will be inferred from this premise are, of course, to be conceived of as a phenomenalist's objects. And I should say that to judge an *experience* to *belong* to a subject some of whose experience-types are mine, is to judge the *impressions* whose perception constitutes the experience to be in the consciousness of such a subject at some time. Finally, the judgments in question must be justified, since my experience could hardly be called self-conscious if I were never warranted in believing that some of my experience-types belong to the same self.

Before I get to my argument, I ought to anticipate two objections. First, one might complain that if I suppose ahead of time that the phenomenalist analysis of physical-object talk is correct, then I can hardly claim to refute idealism. After all, the phenomenalist has it that talk of physical objects reduces to talk of possible perceptions anyway, and so in proving the existence of such physical objects I would at best prove the existence of perceptions. But I think it is reasonable to take metaphysical idealism as a view about the ideality of what we *normally* think of as the real external world, viz. the likes of tables and chairs (though there are doubtless other ways to take it). And phenomenism claims that for these very tables and chairs to exist independently of mind and experience just *is* for certain subjunctive conditionals about perceptions to be true. To deny this is merely to presume phenomenism false, not to show it is idealistic. A phenomenalist's tables and chairs can indeed exist independently of mind and experience, because it is quite possible that 'there are tables and chairs', whose analysis is a conjunction of subjunctive condi-

<sup>4</sup> I do not require unification of *all* my experiences for this reason: my experience is clearly self-conscious, even though I cannot be said to believe justifiably of *all* my experiences that they belong to the same subject as instances of the types of all the rest. On the contrary, I often have no recollection of nor evidence regarding many past experiences.

tionals referring to possible perceptions, be true even when there have been no perceptions. This is possible because a subjunctive conditional can be true even when both its antecedent and consequent are false, and as a result, even when the referents of the antecedent and consequent (perceptions) never existed. So, if I can show that tables and chairs exist in a phenomenalistic sense, then I will have refuted the ideality of the world of tables and chairs, and in so doing will have refuted idealism in the above sense.

A second objection is that once phenomenalism is granted, the idealist is a straw man. The reason presumably is that a phenomenalist, in order to establish the existence of the external world, need only *seem* to see such things as tables and chairs. But as I will explain later, a phenomenalist can attribute reality only to those apparent objects that occur during a certain portion of *law-governed* experience (a portion without which none of experience would be law-governed). Apparent objects not seen in this way are figments of dream or illusion. Or as Kant might put it, the phenomenalist must be able to distinguish objective from merely subjective experience, and must realize that the appearance of objects in the merely subjective experience says nothing as to their reality. The burden of my proof, then, is principally to show that I am justified in supposing that experience is law-governed in a sense to be explained (roughly, in the sense that one is justified in using induction on it), and this is the considerable burden of refuting Humean skepticism of the principle of induction. Finally, that a phenomenalistic idealist is no straw man is shown by the amount of argumentation, drawing on a number of important Kantian insights, that will have to be mustered in order to refute him.

Now for the proof, which will consist of eight steps.

*Step 1.* I am beginning with the premise that I know that I have been justifiably conscious of some of my experiences, experience *F* for example, as belonging to a subject having some of my experience-types. Let me suppose I am now having *F*. Thus for me justifiably to judge *F* to belong to a subject having some of my experience-types obviously requires, since *F* is *my* experience, that I justifiably believe that I myself have had experiences of these types. In other words, I must have justified beliefs about the description of my own experiential history.

*Step 2.* I take it as self-evident that any descriptive knowledge of my own experiential history can only be knowledge *a posteriori*. I therefore must have some sort of *experience, now*, in virtue of which I can now have reason to believe I had instances of the experience-types in question. I will call this sort of experience a *retroexperience*.

*Step 3.* Now these retroexperiences are not necessarily those very experiences we describe as seeming to remember; they can be experiences of any sort that warrant beliefs about my past experiences. I bring up retroexperiences in order to show that no given set of retroexperiences is large enough to account for the knowledge of my past I need for self-consciousness. To see this, take any experience *E* of mine and let *M* be any class of experience-types whose instances would serve as retroexperiences evidencing *E*, if I were to have them after *E*. Then note that it is possible in principle that I continue to have experiences after having *E*, and yet have no instance of one of the experience-types in *M*.

This possibility is guaranteed by Hume's principle of the logical independence of events occurring at different times. For, at the heart of the notion of a time continuum is the provision that the occurrence of an event at one time is never logically (though perhaps causally) sufficient for any sort of occurrence at other times. In particular, then, the occurrence of *E* does not logically entail that subsequent experience (if any) must include an instance of something in *M*.

It might be objected that *E* and my continued having experiences are, at least, logically sufficient for the later instantiation of a member of *the class of all types of the experiences I have after E*, and that Hume's principle therefore fails to hold in general: here, it is possible that *E*'s occurrence logically necessitate the instantiation of an experience-type in a certain class. But the necessity here is only *de dicto*; the following does, indeed, hold:

Necessarily, if I have experiences after *E*, I will have after *E* an instance of a member of whatever class happens to be *the class of all types of the experiences I have after E*.

But this does not show what the objection claims, namely:

The particular class that is in fact *the class of all types of experiences I have after E* is such that, necessarily, if I have experiences after *E*, I will have after *E* an instance of a member of *this class*.

The latter necessity ensues only if it is presumed that *the class of all types of the experiences I have after E* could not have failed to bear this description. And this is a mistake, since I might have had experiences of other types after *E*. A similar treatment will, I believe, dispel numerous other apparent counterexamples to Hume's principle. Another objection, however, might be that *E*'s occurrence would at least be logically sufficient for the subsequent instantiation of something in *M*, if the experience-types in *M* happen to be logically exhaustive (i. e., the type of any possible experience can be found in *M*). But if *M* were logically exhaustive, it would be impossible that each type in *M*, when instantiated, evidence *E*. Otherwise, the mere fact that I am now experiencing *anything at all* would evidence the prior occurrence of *E* (since *any* experience's type is in *M*), and this is preposterous. I conclude, then, that so long as instances of *M*'s types are (as stipulated) retroexperiences evidencing *E*, *E*'s occurrence and my continued having experiences are not logically sufficient for the instantiation of an experience-type in *M*.

So far I have shown that, given any set *M* of experience-types whose instances would be retroexperiences evidencing *E*, it is possible in principle that I once had *E* and that I never have had nor will have a retroexperience from *M* that evidences *E*. At this point I call on the following version of the Principle of Verifiability:

(PV) If it is possible in principle that a proposition be true, it is possible in principle that I confirm it.

I will shortly have to reject (PV) in favor of a weaker principle, but it is more convenient to run through the argument using (PV) first. Now, consider the proposition,

(1) I had *E*, and I never have had nor will have an instance of an experience-type in *M*.

I showed above that when *M* is any class of retroexperience-types whose instances would evidence *E*, it is possible in principle that (1) be true. Thus, by (PV), it is possible

in principle that I confirm (1). Obviously, I cannot confirm (1) unless I obtain reason to believe I had *E*. But since knowledge of my past must be *a posteriori*, I can at any time gain grounds for believing that I had *E* only in virtue of some retroexperience *R* evidencing *E* that I might have at that time. Yet if *R*'s type is in *M*, then I clearly cannot appeal to *R* to help confirm (1), since the very occurrence of *R* would refute (1). Hence *R*'s type, if *R* is to help confirm (1), must be outside *M*. Since *M* was an arbitrary class of retroexperience-types whose instances would evidence *E*, it follows that no class *M* of retroexperience-types whose instances would evidence *E* contains all the types with instances evidencing *E* that are needed to account for my knowledge of my past. There must be other retroexperience-types (such as that of *R*), outside *M*, whose instances would also evidence *E*.

*Step 4.* My next task is to show that the retroexperience-types needed to account for my knowledge of my past must include what I will call *inductive* retroexperience-types. An inductive retroexperience is one that can serve as evidence of a past experience *only if* I can rationally apply the principle of induction to my experience. Typically, an inductive retroexperience will consist of a memory of a regularity or pattern that has characterized my past experience, plus an awareness of certain other impressions similar to impressions that have consistently appeared as one stage of the regularity. This retroexperience would be inductive if it evidenced to me the past occurrence of an instance *E* of some experience-type only on the condition that I can look at this recalled regularity, and rationally infer from the fact that experiences having certain of *E*'s properties have in the past preceded impressions similar to my present ones, that my present impressions themselves were preceded by an experience having these properties of *E*. (Perhaps it is this inference plus the memories of other inductive inferences, which supply the rest of *E*'s properties, that permits me to conclude that I had an experience of *E*'s type.) The point is, this retroexperience is inductive if its evidential value depends on my rational assumption that a regularity that I recall being manifested in experience will continue to be manifested. Rationally to assume this, of course, is to be able rationally to apply the principle of induction to my experience.

My argument that some of the retroexperience-types needed to account for my knowledge of my past must be *inductive* ones is simple: Consider for experience *E* the class *M* of experience-types whose instances would serve as *noninductive* retroexperiences that evidence *E*'s past occurrence. By my argument in Step 3, *M* does not contain all the types with instances evidencing *E* that are needed to account for my knowledge of my past. Rather, there must be other retroexperience-types, which therefore are inductive ones, whose instances would also evidence *E*.

*Step 5.* Up to now I have argued that if I know that I make justified judgments about the description of my experiential history, then I know there are inductive retroexperience-types whose instances would serve as evidence of my past. This means in particular that if I were now to have one of these inductive retroexperiences, then since it is an *inductive* retroexperience, and since it does evidence the past, I know I would be rational in assuming that regularities that have occurred in my past govern all of my experience (by defini-

tion of 'inductive retroexperience'). They *govern* my experience in the sense that *whenever impressions resembling the latter stages of the pattern appear, I can justifiably infer that impressions resembling the earlier stages preceded them (or vice-versa)*. But I know that there are retroexperiences that if now instantiated would inductively evidence my past, only if I am justified in believing that my past is in fact susceptible to inductive retrodiction; that is, that my past is in fact law-governed in the sense explained.

*Step 6.* I must now return to principle (PV) and face up to its falsehood. Note that even if  $M$  in (1) contains *all* retroexperience-types whose instances would evidence  $E$ , (1) is yet possibly true. For, it is possible in principle that I have  $E$  and thereafter have experience bereft of any evidence I had  $E$ . Nonetheless it is quite impossible that I, in particular, confirm (1), since the type of any retroexperience  $R$  whereby I might warrantably believe I had  $E$  will be in  $M$ , and thus any such  $R$  is unsuitable for the confirmation of (1). Oh, (1) may yet be confirmable, all right, but only by someone other than myself. (This insufficiency of possible confirmation on my part alone for my self-conscious experience captures, I believe, what validity there is in the private-language arguer's insistence on intersubjective checks.) Thus (PV) is false, and I must replace it with something weaker:

(PV') If it is possible in principle that a proposition be true, then it is possible in principle that *someone* confirm it.

Now it might appear that (PV') is false for much the same reason that (PV) is. For, consider the following proposition, which is as possibly true as (1) is;

(2) Someone had  $E$ , and no one has ever had nor will anyone ever have an instance of an experience-type in  $M_s$ .

$M_s$  is the set of all and only experience-types whose instances would provide evidence that *someone* had  $E$ . Note that (2), even though its truth is possible in principle, seems in principle unsusceptible to confirmation by *anyone*, since one could establish that someone had  $E$  only by having an instance of a type in  $M_s$ . (2), then, furnishes a counterexample for (PV'). The difficulty here is serious, but I believe it is more a technical difficulty in the analysis of verifiability than a difficulty in the application of (PV') to the present argument. I say this because propositions *that universally quantify over observers* (as (2) seems to do) are exceptional in that they, in certain cases, already present their own puzzle for the very analysis of verifiability. (2) itself is a good illustration of this, since it is really amphibolous between the following two renderings, only one of which is troublesome:

(2a) There has existed someone who had  $E$ , and no one has ever nor will ever exist who at some time his life has an instance of an experience-type in  $M_s$ .

(2b) Either  $P_1$  or  $P_2$  or ... or  $P_n$  had  $E$ , and neither  $P_1$  nor  $P_2$  nor ...  $P_n$  has had or will have an instance of an experience-type in  $M_s$ ,

where  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ , are all the people who in fact have existed or will exist. (2a), which universally quantifies over observers, is indeed a puzzle for verificationists; it certainly calls

for a refinement in (PV') that will count (2a) confirmable, since there is nothing mysterious or metaphysical about the state of affairs (2a) describes. But (PV'), as is, will easily handle (2b), since it is quite possible that (2b) be confirmed by someone *besides*  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ . Granted, (2b) will as a matter of fact not be so confirmed (since  $P_1, \dots, P_n$ , include all the people that will ever exist), but there is a possible world in which someone else,  $P_{n+1}$ , exists and confirms (2b). (PV') seems adequate, then, so long as it is not applied to propositions, such as (2a), that universally quantify over observers. I am not prepared to solve here the verificationist's puzzle posed by propositions like (2a). But I need not worry with the puzzle, because the proposition to which I apply (PV'), namely (1), does not universally quantify over observers; it, like (2b), contains only a list of particular observers (actually, only one observer—myself), and so is no more troublesome for (PV') than (2b) is. My argument would doubtless be more satisfactory if I could appeal to an exceptionless formulation of the principle of verifiability, but since no such formulation seems forthcoming in the present state of the art, I will be content to apply (PV') to a proposition that seems not to be one of the anomalous propositions that (PV') is not equipped to handle.

What I have done, then, is to replace (PV) with a weaker version (PV') that is suitable at least for propositions like (1). What I now claim is that the weaker (PV') is yet strong enough to push my refutation of idealism through. Before I explain why, let me avoid misunderstanding by restating (1) without the token-reflexive 'I'.

(1n) Hooker had  $E$ , and Hooker has never had nor will have an instance of an experience-type in  $M_n$ ,

where  $M_n$  is the set of all and only noninductive retroexperience-types whose instances would evidence  $E$ . So far, my argument in brief has been that my experience is known to be self-conscious only if I know it is possible that I myself confirm (1n), and I know this only if I am justified in believing that my past experience has been law-governed. Now, however, due to the replacement of (PV) by (PV'), I know only that it is possible that *someone* confirm (1n). But since I have shown that *my* confirmation of (1n) requires that the use of inductive inference on my past experience be justifiable, if I can just show that someone else's confirmation of (1n) requires the same, then I will have shown that my knowledge that (1n) is confirmable (by someone) presupposes that I am justified in believing that the use of inductive inference on my past experience is justifiable. But to be able justifiably to believe this is to be able justifiably to believe that my past experience has been law-governed.

I will argue, then, that (1n)'s confirmation by someone else requires the justifiability of using induction on my past experience. To begin with, I should concede that the possibility of (1n)'s confirmation by someone else does not require that there actually be someone who could confirm it. But it does require that there be experience-types that, if instances of them *were* had by someone else, would warrant his believing (1n). Note that his confirmation of (1n) would involve his retrodiction that I had  $E$ . Clearly, the only way that he could know that I had  $E$  is by way of some kind of inductive inference, such as an argument from analogy. There seem to be two ways he might conduct such an inference.

On the one hand, he might infer my state of mind at the time, and retrodict my having had *E* on the basis of retroexperiences he determines that I am having. But this retrodiction requires the justifiable use of induction on my past experience. On the other hand, he might retrodict the state of the physical world at the time I had *E*, and infer therefrom that I had *E* at that time. But if my past experience has been unsusceptible to justifiable inductive inference, then there has been no physical world at all. For, as I will explain shortly, phenomenalism entails that for real, physical objects to exist is just for physical-object existence statements (when properly analyzed as perception talk) to describe something in a certain portion of *law-governed* experience. Thus, one's retrodiction of a past state of the physical world requires that the use of induction on my past experience be justified. In both this and the former case, then, (1n)'s confirmation by someone else requires that induction be justifiably usable on my past experience. This, in the way I specified above, insulates my refutation of idealism from the replacement of (PV) by (PV').

*Step 7.* So far I have established that my knowledge that I have self-conscious experience over time requires that I have justification for believing that my experience up to now has been law-governed. I now call on a Kantian thesis that I will gratuitously accept, since its defense is lengthy and not traditionally a part of a refutation of idealism. It is the claim of the First Analogy of Experience that any experience of change must be an experience of alterations in *what appear to be* enduring objects that exist in space. In particular, then, the lawful regularities in my experiences must be regularities in the behavior of what appear to be enduring spatial objects<sup>5</sup>.

*Step 8.* I have shown that I am justified in believing that my experience contains law-abiding objects, law-abiding in the sense that my experience of them is susceptible to the justifiable use of inductive inference. But this is not yet to show that these objects exist independently of me. For, it is possible that the objects of dreams, imagination or hallucination be as predictable in their behavior as real objects. Such in fact seems to be the case, inasmuch as psychologists are able to discover laws governing phantasms. Though the *laws* obeyed by illusory objects might be said to exist independently of me, the objects themselves do not exist independently, since they are but products of my mind. Now it might be asked how it is that a phenomenalist distinguishes phantasmic experience from experience of reality, if all of it is equally law-governed. The distinction is that phantasmic experience is necessarily *not* law-abiding when *it alone* is taken into account. Rather, lawfulness appears only when phantasms are compared with nonillusory, unimagined waking experience. This is why a dream psychologist who never studied dreams while awake, but only dreamt that he studied dreams, would not (or should not) be taken seriously. Dreams are the sort of thing from which I, in order to understand how they work, must eventually wake up, and similarly for other phantasms.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is implausible that all of these objects must be spatial, but the refutation of idealism could still be a successful refutation of idealism even if they were not. In the meantime, I realize that I have perhaps not captured Kant's precise meaning in either edition's First Analogy. But the claim I make is nonetheless Kantian in spirit, and aside from the claim about spatiality, is plausible.



This phenomenalist account of phantasms should make it clear that, although a given apparent object in law-abiding experience need not be real, it is an absurdity that *all* law-abiding objects be products of dreaming or imagination. Please note that I am not making the Wittgensteinian claim that it is senseless in general to speak of all experience being phantasmic. Rather, I am claiming that once one chooses to be a phenomenalist, and once he chooses to regard his impressions as susceptible to inductive inference, *then* it makes no sense for him to relegate all his percepts to the world of illusion. For, it makes no sense for a phenomenalist to speak of applying the principle of induction to purely phantasmic experience, since phantasmic experience is defined such that within *it alone* induction can never justifiably be used; there must be experience of reality during which the regularities can be gleaned and brought to bear. And, on phenomenism, to establish the independent existence of an object is just to note that some statement asserting its existence, when properly parsed out as perception talk, is confirmed by what happens during this “experience of reality”: i. e., during that portion of his law-abiding experience without which none of his experience would be law-abiding. Those existence statements which *appear* to be confirmed in *this* portion of experience, *are* confirmed, and the independent existence of the physical objects to which they refer (before parsing) is established. Therefore, since I am justified in believing that I have law-governed experience of apparent spatial objects (as argued above), I am justified in believing that some of these objects appear as part of my experience of reality and hence exist independently of me.

I have shown, then, that from the premise that I know that I am conscious of my own existence over time, in the sense explained, it follows that I can justifiably believe in spatial objects existing independently of me. Since I do indeed know that I am conscious of my own existence over time, I therefore conclude, with justification, that such objects exist. This completes my proof.