

CHARLES S. PEIRCE, *Kant and his Refutation of Idealism*, in CHARLES S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers*, vol. I, chap. 4, paragraph 35-39, p. 15-17, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960 [c1931-1960].

## KANT AND HIS REFUTATION OF IDEALISM<sup>1</sup>

35. Kant's whole philosophy turns upon his logic. He gives the name of logic to the greater part of his *Critic of the Pure Reason*, and it is a result of the great fault of his logical theory that he does not extend that name to the whole work. This greatest fault was at the same [time] the greatest merit of his doctrine: it lay in his sharp discrimination of the intuitive and the discursive processes of the mind. The distinction itself is not only familiar to everybody but it had long played a part in philosophy. Nevertheless, it is on such obvious distinctions that the greater systems have been founded, and [Kant] saw far more clearly than any predecessor had done the whole philosophical import of this distinction. This was what emancipated him from Leibnizianism, and at the same time turned him against sensationalism. It was also what enabled him to see that no general description of existence is possible, which is perhaps the most valuable proposition that the *Critic* contains. But he drew too hard a line between the operations of observation and of ratiocination. He allows himself to fall into the habit of thinking that the latter only begins after the former is complete; and wholly fails to see that even the simplest syllogistic conclusion can only be drawn by observing the relations of the terms in the premisses and conclusion. His doctrine of the *schemata* can only have been an afterthought, an addition to his system after it was substantially complete. For if the *schemata* had been considered early enough, they would have overgrown his whole work.

36. Kant's refutation of idealism in the second edition of the *Critic of the Pure Reason* has been often held to be inconsistent with his main position or even to be knowingly sophistical. It appears to me to be one of the numerous passages in that work which betray an elaborated and vigorous

---

<sup>1</sup> 35 is an unpublished, uncompleted review of T. K. Abbott's translation of Kant's *Introduction to Logic*, etc. Longmans Green & Co., 1885. 37—38 is "Notes on the Question of the Existence of an External World." c. 1890. 36 and 39 are from fragmentary alternative mss. of that same date.

analysis, marred in the exposition by the attempt to state the argument more abstractly and demonstratively than the thought would warrant.

In "Note 1," Kant says that his argument beats idealism at its own game. How is that? The idealist says that all that we know immediately, that is, otherwise than inferentially, is what is *present* in the mind; and things out of the mind are not so present. The whole idealist position turns upon this conception of the *present*.

37. The idealistic argument turns upon the assumption that certain things are absolutely "present," namely what we have in mind at the moment, and that nothing else can be immediately, that is, otherwise than inferentially known. When this is once granted, the idealist has no difficulty in showing that that external existence which we cannot know immediately we cannot know, at all. Some of the arguments used for this purpose are of little value, because they only go to show that our knowledge of an external world is fallible; now there is a world of difference between fallible knowledge and no knowledge. However, I think it would have to be admitted as a matter of logic that if we have no immediate perception of a non-ego, we can have no reason to admit the supposition of an existence so contrary to all experience as that would in that case be.

38. But what evidence is there that we can immediately know only what is "present" to the mind? The idealists generally treat this as self-evident; but, as [[W.K.]] Clifford jestingly says, "it is evident" is a phrase which only means "we do not know how to prove." The proposition that we can immediately perceive only what is present seems to me parallel to that other vulgar prejudice that "a thing cannot act where it is not." An opinion which can only defend itself by such a sounding phrase is pretty sure to be wrong. That a thing cannot act where it is not is plainly an induction from ordinary experience, which shows no forces except such as act through the resistance of materials, with the exception of gravity which, owing to its being the same for all bodies, does not appear in ordinary experience like a force. But further experience shows that attractions and repulsions are the universal types of forces. A thing may be said to be wherever it acts; but the notion that a particle is absolutely present in one part of space and absolutely absent from all the rest of space is devoid of all foundation. In like manner, the idea that we can immediately perceive only what is present seems to be founded on our ordinary experience that we cannot recall and reexamine the events of yesterday nor know otherwise than by inference what is to happen tomorrow. Obviously, then, the first move toward beating idealism at its own game is to remark that we apprehend our own ideas only as flowing in time, and since neither the future nor the past, however near they may be, is *present*, there is as much difficulty in conceiving our perception of what passes within us as in conceiving external perception. If so, replies the idealist, instead of giving up idealism we must go still further to nihilism. Kant does not notice this retort; but it is clear from his footnote that he

would have said: Not so; for it is impossible we should so much as think we think in time unless we do think in time; or rather, dismissing blind impossibility, the mere imagination of time is a clear perception of the past. Hamilton stupidly objects to Reid's phrase "immediate memory"; but an immediate, intuitive consciousness of time clearly exists wherever time exists. But once grant immediate knowledge in time, and what becomes of the idealist theory that we immediately know only the *present*? For the present can contain no time.

39. But Kant does not pursue this line of thought along the straight road to its natural result; because he is a sort of idealist himself. Namely, though not idealistic as to the substance of things, he is partially so in regard to their accidents. Accordingly, he introduces his distinction of the variable and the persistent (*beharrlich*), and seeks to show that the only way we can apprehend our own flow of ideas, binding them together as a connected flow, is by attaching them to an immediately perceived persistent externality. He refuses to inquire how that immediate external consciousness is possible, though such an inquiry might have probed the foundations of his system.