



A Critical Analysis of Immanuel Kant's Transcendental Idealism

Ihejirika, Cardinal, I. C. & Tamunosiki, Markson

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities

University of Portharcourt, River State, Nigeria

cardinalihejirika@gmail.com/cardinal.ihejirika@uniport.edu.ng

+2347039474950

+2348028279646 ts.markson@gmail.com

Abstract

Kant's transcendental idealism is severally described as an 'immanetist' and 'agnostic' one. Couched mainly in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, critics have observed that it is bedeviled by many errors, violations of the principle of non-contradiction and incoherencies of method and content. His inability to bring to our full knowledge and understanding, his noumenal reality postulate, constitutes a weakness to the system he sets out to build. This paper consequently, situates Kant's transcendental idealism within the stream of related philosophical idealistic postulations and with the aim of highlighting the special reconciliatory role it plays between two rival cognitive pathways of empiricism and rationalism. The researcher also attempts to show how this Kantian contribution, enriches human cognition. However, the literary analysis method of enquiry is adopted in this study.

Keywords: Transcendental idealism, *Noumena*, Phenomena, Cognition.

1. Introduction

The 18th century intellectual atmosphere in Europe was heated-up by the epoch-making controversy between two popular schools of thought: rationalism and empiricism. While rationalists maintained that knowledge is attainable by reason alone, that is *apriori*; empiricists insisted that knowledge is accessible singularly through the senses, that is, *a posteriori*. Immanuel Kant's effort to resolve this hydra-headed intellectual rift led him into idealism. Although traces of idealistic thinking are found in early Ionian philosophers, Anaxagoras

to be precise; the earliest systematic versions of idealism as a philosophical current are identifiable with Plato, neo-Platonists, St Augustine, Chinese and Indian philosophers. It was dogmatized in the modern era, but got revolutionalised by Immanuel Kant. Kant's idealism popularly called the Kantian mediation struck a difference between the realms of the phenomena and the *noumena*. By means of this distinction, Kant spelt out the limits, sources and principles of the cognitive process. This is Kant's critical philosophy, otherwise known as Kant's transcendental idealism. In any case, Kant cannot historically be said to be the originator of philosophical idealism as its' traces abound from ancient times, especially in the works of Plotinus and Plato.

This paper therefore undertakes a critical examination of Kant's transcendental idealism, situating it among other versions of idealism. In order to bring clarity to the study, the research first handily considers the meaning and historical development of philosophical idealism before discussing in a succinct manner, Kant's own version of transcendental idealism. This is done so as to point out the marked difference between Kant's and other versions of idealism. Afterwards, the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's transcendental idealism are discussed. This exercise is hoped to place first comers to philosophy in a better pedestal to rightly understand and interpret Kant's transcendental idealism and to appreciate how it enriches our cognition.

2. The meaning and historical development of philosophical idealism

Philosophical idealism as Sprigge (1998) puts it, refers to the group of metaphysical philosophies that assert that reality (as humans can know it) is fundamentally mental, mentally constructed and therefore immaterial (p. 99). Idealism upholds the importance of consciousness as the pre-condition of material existence. Consciousness according to idealists, is the origin of material phenomena. It creates and determines sense experience (Guyer and Horstmann, p. 108).

This latest definition of idealism tallies with the character of subjective idealism, which considers nothing other than consciousness

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and its contents as truly real. Here, perception is equated with reality and truth is conceived to lie between one's name and that of another. In contradistinction to the claims of subjective idealism, we have divine idealism. This version of idealism presents the world as manifestations of some other mind such as the mind of one God. There is also ontological idealism, which holds that the material world exists but that it is made out of ideas at its basic level. Finally, we have epistemological idealism, which believes that it does not pinpointedly matter if there is a physical world beyond the mind – the mind being conceived as a mere tool of understanding the world. Therefore, this school of thought projects that all our perceptions and understandings get constrained by the structure of the mind.

A trial to understand that structure, will render us incapable of exploring the basic truths of the universe. Rather, we may end up in an attempt to understand the human mechanisms and tools that make all understanding possible. Historical idealists also hold that human history can be explained as the process of ideas changing and evolving and that ideas shape human beings rather, than the other way round. We also have scientific and political idealism but our major concern in this work fluctuates between subjective ontological and epistemological version of idealism hence, the more particularized Kantian term, transcendental idealism.

However, the history of philosophical idealism can be traced back to the pre-Socratic era; especially the work of Anaxagoras (480 BC), who held among others that all things were created by *Nous (mind)*. According to him, mind held the cosmos together and connected human beings to the cosmos or gave man a link to the divine. Sprigge (1998) maintains that more systematic approach to philosophical idealism also began with ancient philosophy; especially with Plato, (pp. 98-99). In his theory of forms, Plato portrays ideal forms as universals, which exist independently of any particular instance. In his theory of innatism, he reduced knowledge to the ability of the human mind to recollect ideas which it had, prior to birth. Consequently, Plato is viewed as one of the earliest proponents of philosophical idealism (Ruggiero, 2003, p. 39). Howbeit, Plato's material realism (his

view that matter is real) makes him a dualist and thereby raises doubt on his status as an idealist in the modern sense of it (Klein, 2011, p. 99). After Plato came the neoplatonists, another group with notable polemics on idealism. Neoplatonism is apparently the foremost glaring manifestation of idealism in the history of Western Philosophy. According to MacDonald (2003), "With the neoplatonist, Plotinus, there appears probably for the first time in Western philosophy, idealism in its purest forms" (p. 22). Plotinus' idea of the demiurge or the nous is the most critical aspect of Neoplatonist idealism. As stated by Wallis and Bregman (1992), "what Plotinus understood by the nous is the highest sphere accessible to the human mind, while also being pure intellect itself. The demiurge is the energy or 'ergon' which manifests or organises the material world into *percievability*" (pp. 43-45). Be that as it may, Plotinus became the first proponent of a version of metaphysics that evokes a general recognition as absolute idealism. The idealism of the Neo-Platonist Plotinus had undeniable effects on later thinkers, especially Christian philosophers. As revealed by Dunham, et al (2011), "Augustine pays tribute to the influence of Plotinus' writings on him; inspiring him to conceptualise the true nature of spiritual and sensible realities and the relationship between them" (p. 69).

Before Augustine came in contact with the writings of Plotinus, he had held firmly on Manichaeism, especially its explanation of reality, which logically implies the materiality of God. However, his contact with the writings of Plotinus and the preaching of Ambrose, led him to the realization of the fact that God is not material but is rather divinely real (Dunham, et al 2011, p. 202). Thus as a metaphysical reality, God as well as other divine/spiritual entities, are not sensibly perceptible, but only accessible through an act of the human mind-mental abstraction. This forms the foundation of idealistic claims in Christian philosophy. Perhaps, Augustine's theory of knowledge presents a version of idealism derived from his epistemological refutation of skepticism. According to Sprigge (1998),

St. Augustine views the soul as complete spiritual
substance which enjoys epistemological

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independence. Man for him is a thinking subject whose knowledge is not gained through the sense but by divine illumination. Thus like Plotinus, Augustine believed that the human soul has access to genuine knowledge independently from the senses or the material world (p. 201).

Another glaring manifestation of idealism after St. Augustine of Hippo is apparent in Chinese philosophy. According to Smidly (2012), the influence of Augustinian epistemology on idealism in Chinese philosophy is undeniable, and is most glaringly noticeable in the thoughts of Wang Yangming, a neo Confucian (p. 88). As Smidly (2012) elucidates, Yangming, in his contribution to the development of Chinese idealism, held that the human mind shapes the objects of the world of experience. Objects therefore do not exist entirely apart from the world, neither does the world shape the mind. Rather, as the spring of all reason, the mind shapes and gives reason to the sensible world (pp. 87-89). Like Augustine, Wang Yangming holds that the human mind comes to the acquisition of reason/knowledge through an act of illumination. While Augustine explains this act of illumination as divine, Yangming sees it as self-iminent (Smidly, 2012, p. 96).

On the other hand, the historical development of philosophical idealism can also be traced to Indian Vedic thoughts. According to McDonald (2003) "currents of idealism abound throughout Indian philosophy and as a matter of factual elucidation, the term consciousness, which later became very crucial and recurrent in the works of German idealists after Kant, most apparently had its origin in Vedic idealism" (p. 212). Hindu or Indian idealism is a non-dualist or monist metaphysics, which presents the idea of a unitary "consciousness" that gives meaning to the plurality of reality in the phenomenal world (McDonald, 2003, p. 223). Howbeit there can be no thorough tracing of the development of idealism without the mention of the subjective idealism of George Berkeley who is widely acclaimed as the most prominent proponent of subjective idealism. Berkeley's attraction to subjective idealism was most likely fashioned

by his contact with the writings of some members of the Yogacara school of Indian Buddhism, especially the 7th century epistemologist, Dharmakirti, who reduced ultimate reality to sense perception (MacDonald, 2003, p. 204). According to Sprigge (1998),

George Berkeley, as a subjective idealist, presents the monistic metaphysical doctrine, which holds that only minds and mental contents exist. This version of idealism fuses phenomenalism or empiricism, which emphasizes "the immediately perceived" with idealism, which lays emphasis on "the mental" (p. 201).

MacDonald (2003) asserts that for George Berkeley, the material world is non-existent. The phenomenal world however exists, dependent on humans (p. 204). Therefore, objects have being in so far as they are perceived by a mind. For Berkeley therefore, only subjects and objects of perception exist.

3. Kant's transcendental idealism in brief

George Berkeley's immaterialism attracted a number of vehement criticisms, especially from Samuel Johnson and Immanuel Kant (Dudley, 2007, p. 203). As a matter of fact, Kant's critical philosophy was an intellectual response to Berkeley's immaterialism. Dicker (2011) tells us that, while Berkeley insisted that mind-independent world is non-existent; Kant argued that it exists but is not knowable in itself (p. 104). Ochulor, et al (2011), asserts that Kant makes a distinction between mind-dependent world (phenomena) - things as they appear to us and mind-independent reality (noumena) - things as they are in themselves. Unlike Berkeley therefore, Kant believes that the *noumena* exists, but is not cognizable (pp. 34-35). Kant (1929) clearly states: "though we cannot know these objects (noumena) as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise, we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears" (pp. xxvi-xxvii).

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Kant's transcendental idealism mediated and resolved the protracted rivalry between rationalists and empiricists. Rationalists had claimed that reason is the only valid source of knowledge; hence whatever is not 'analytic a priori' cannot count as knowledge. On the other hand, empiricists insisted that all knowledge must proceed from experience - 'synthetic a posteriori' (Ochulor et al, 2011, pp. 35-36). Kant laid this problem to rest by introducing a third epistemic platform into the cognitive process. This, he called, 'synthetic a priori', by which he meant that true knowledge must be 'synthetic' as the empiricists claimed and at same time 'a priori' as rationalists argued (Allison 2004, pp. 250-261). The objects of sensible experience are the raw materials with which the human mind, using its own categories as tools, produce valid knowledge.

4. Critique of Kant's transcendental idealism

One important merit of Kant's transcendental idealism is his differentiation of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself, with his assumption that the intellect mediates between things and knowledge. His distinction of a priori knowledge from a posteriori knowledge reflects the classical 'ideal' and 'real' dichotomy. Kant therefore retains the classical anti-thetical relationship between the empirical and the intelligible. The intelligible character of a phenomenon is free; while the empirical character is completely determined because it is the thing-in-itself, which is experienced as a phenomenon. Phenomenon becomes a product of the *noumena* as tailored by the human mind (Oswald 2009, p. 89).

The strength of Kant's transcendental idealism does not in any way negate its weaknesses. It is therefore intellectually worthwhile that we point out some of Kant's fundamental errors. Most glaring among these flaws is the problem of ambiguity.

Accordingly, in his craving to establish the categories as the key to all knowledge, Kant focused on making a system but he was flawed for improper philosophical clarification of the concepts that would intellectually institutionalize and ground this system. Hence, he did

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not define terms like perception, conception, reason, understanding, subject, object etc. He also failed to distinguish between the concrete, intuitive, perceptual knowledge of objects and the abstract, discursive, conceptual knowledge of thoughts (Oswald, 2009, p. 79).

In so doing, Kant neglected one important aspect of the philosophical enterprise, which is the elimination of conceptual ambiguity.

Consequently, Kant's transcendental idealism has been criticized for its obscurity, especially in his choice and usage of technical terms and concepts. For instance, as Schopenhauer (1910), cited in Oswald (2009) p. 56), reports, the Greek word 'noumena', originally meant "that which is thought". However, Kant employed it to depict "things-in-themselves". Thus just like the biblical metaphor of the man, who started to build a house without first taking stock of the available resources or materials; Kant embarked on creating a logical, overly-symmetrical system, but did not embark on a pre-reflection on the rigorous technical content and demands.

Kant's inability to adequately explicate the conceptual content of his philosophy therefore contributed greatly to the unnecessary and avoidable syntactic over-complexity of his writings. He left the task of technical conceptual appreciation and interpretive understanding of his philosophy to the discretion and intellectual prowess of his readers, without providing adequate linguistic keys to enable them unlock it. By so doing, he gave room for conceptual and technical misappropriations, ambiguous misinterpretations and misunderstanding. This is the reason behind what students generally call Kant-phobia among undergraduates and lay men.

For Kant, there is absolutely no knowledge with the exclusion of thought. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had argued that if all thought (by means of categories) is taken away from empirical knowledge, no knowledge of any object, remains, because nothing can be thought by mere intuition or perception. For Kant therefore, perception is not knowledge because it is not thought; it is rather a

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mere sensation. The simple fact that there is within me an affection of my sensibility, Kant thought, establishes in no way any relation of such a representation to any object (Oswald, 2009, p. 76).

However, experience tends to favour the contrary: perception stimulates thought in the intellect. Since perception is an activity of the human mind on objects of experience, it cannot be devoid of thought. For perception to be established, there must be a perceiving subject and a corresponding perceived object. Therefore, perception is always perception of something. Kant is therefore wrong in his claim that perception is not knowledge because it does not presuppose thought; perception undeniably yields some level of knowledge. This error is connected with Kant's usual problem with concepts. Kant did not adequately represent the difference between perception and sensation. Hence, he had erroneously asserted that full, perceived objects, not mere sensations, were given to the mind by the sense organs (Oswald. 2009, p. 123). However, it is almost a generally accepted fact among scholars that perception is an act of the intellect and entails understanding. Hence, contrary to sensation, perception cannot be a function of mere data of the senses.

Additionally, Kant presents 'things in themselves' and 'their appearance' as different realms of reality. The latter is comprehensible, while the former transcends our cognitive abilities. While phenomena is intelligible, the *noumena* falls outside the domain of possible human experience and therefore cannot be known nor verified. The question then is, "if the *noumena* is unknowable, how does Kant know that it exists? Therefore to claim that 'things in themselves' exist and at the same time, posit their incognizability is self contradictory. Kant therefore falls very closely into the problem that Berkeley had to contend with. Perhaps, Kant chose to fall into inconsistency instead of stumbling into the extreme (dogmatic) idealism of Berkeley which *ab initio* he set out to refute.

All the same, if the *noumena* are not humanly intelligible, how did Kant presuppose the role they play, together with the mind and its categories in the reconstruction of the phenomena? Like Berkeley,

Kant denies phenomena, an external existence and still fails to affirm the *noumena* that would otherwise ground them in reality (Allison, 2004, pp. 78-80). Be that as it may, the shortcomings in Kant's transcendental idealism, notwithstanding, remain the undeniable fact that his contribution to philosophy and epistemology in particular would never be forgotten. By reasoning that knowledge presupposes a combination of sense experience as emphasized by the empiricists and reason as the rationalists maintained, he opened up a fresh horizon for philosophy in the face of the intellectual stalemate that resulted from the rationalist-empiricist rift. This marriage of empiricism with rationalism has greatly enhanced human cognition resulting in a better balanced perspective of interpreting reality.

Nevertheless, Ihejirika (2018) citing Winegar in his, "Hume and Kant on the critique of Metaphysics: A correlative" study asserts thus:

Against the much harped commonalities of Hume and Kant, Winegar in the abstract to his, "Kant's criticism of Hume's Dialogues" informs us against assertions such as that of Paul Gruyer that Kant agrees with Hume's *Dialogue concerning religion* namely (1): That physio-theology can never provide knowledge of God and (2) that the concept of God provides useful heuristic principle for scientific iniquity. For Winegar, Kant's critique of physio-theology reflects non-other than Kant's dissatisfaction with Hume's manner of argumentation (Ihejirika 2018, p. 27)

The implication of the foregoing is the impression that Kant's project of transcendental idealism neither reserved no respect for his master, Hume, who woke him up from his dogmatic slumber nor was he easily taken in by any proof of a transcendent God that was not grounded in experience.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted the tracing of the historical antecedents to Kant's version of philosophical idealism in order to situate the reconciliatory role his transcendental idealism played in the history of

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philosophy and more particularly, epistemology. Our study reveals that while the intellectual rift between empiricism and rationalism was successfully resolved by Kant. Yet, he created another problem by posting the *noumena*, that can only be conceived as things in themselves, which yields to non other interpretation and which is not cognizable. Kant's *noumena*, when stretched to its limits, has the capability of reviving skepticism. Besides, the ambiguity entailed in his struggle to establish the categories as the key to all knowledge, betrays the lack of clarity in his philosophy, which nearly dovetailed to the problem with Berkeley's philosophy, which Kant sets out to resolve. That said, this paper still recognizes Kant's contributions in his transcendental idealism postulate, as a novel and unique one, which warded off and still wards off much epistemic face-offs between empiricists and rationalists till date. Suffice it then to say, that that our paper besides serving as a lead-way to first comers to philosophy on the right understanding of the meaning of philosophical idealism as presented in Kant's transcendental idealism, also repositions and emphasizes the reconciliatory role Kant's submission plays. This affords humanity, a better balanced perspective of considering knowledge.

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