

# Kant's Refutation of Idealism: Once More Unto the Breach

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## Abstract

In 'Kant's Refutation of Idealism' (*Noûs*, 47), I defend a version of the Refutation, pioneered by Paul Guyer in *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*, whose core idea is that the only way that one can know the order of one's own past experiences, except in certain rare cases, is by correlating them with the successive states of perceived external objects that caused the experiences. Andrew Chignell has offered a probing critique of my reconstruction of Kant's argument (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 60), and I have responded (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 61). In a rebuttal of my response, Chignell raises three new objections (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 61). My purpose in this paper is to reply to these.

**Keywords:** Jonathan Bennett, causal relation, Andrew Chignell, Paul Guyer, induction, Immanuel Kant, memory, mental clock, P. F. Strawson, temporal succession

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In 'Kant's Refutation of Idealism' (Dicker 2008) I defend a version of the Refutation (*Critique of Pure Reason* B274–279)<sup>1</sup>, pioneered by Paul Guyer, whose core idea is that the only way that one can know the order of one's own past experiences, except in certain rare cases, is by correlating them with the successive states of perceived external objects that caused the experiences (Dicker 2008, Guyer 1987: 305–16). My reconstruction goes as follows:

- (1) I can correctly determine the order in time of experiences of mine that did not (a) occur within a specious present, and that do not (b) belong to a remembered sequence of continuous experiences or (c) include a recollection of the sequence of all the earlier experiences within each of the later ones.
- (2) When I remember two or more past experiences that are not of types (a)–(c), my recollection of those experiences does not itself reveal the order in which they occurred.

- (3) If (2), then I cannot correctly determine the order of two or more past experiences of mine that are not of types (a)–(c) just by recollecting them.
- (4) I cannot correctly determine the order of two or more past experiences of mine that are not of types (a)–(c) just by recollecting them. [From (2) and (3).]
- (5) If I cannot correctly determine the order of two or more past experiences of mine that are not of types (a)–(c) just by recollecting them, then I can correctly determine the order of two or more past experiences of mine that are not of types (a)–(c) only if I know that at least some of my experiences are caused by successive objective states of affairs that I perceive.
- (6) I can correctly determine the order of two or more past experiences of mine that are not of types (a)–(c) only if I know that at least some of my experiences are caused by successive objective states of affairs that I perceive. [From (4) and (5).]
- (7) I know that at least some of my experiences are caused by successive objective states of affairs that I perceive. [From (1) and (6).]

Andrew Chignell has offered a probing critique of this reconstruction of Kant's argument, and I have responded (Chignell 2010; Dicker 2011). I do not propose to rehash that debate here. But in a recent rebuttal of my response, Chignell (2011) raises three new objections. My purpose in this note is to reply to these.

Chignell's first objection challenges step 5; it claims that there is no reason why I could not order my past experiences by reference to 'a digital clock in the corner of [my] visual field ... or "a voice in [my] head" counting off seconds throughout [my] conscious life' (Chignell 2011: 185). Suppose, then, that there were a digital clock permanently situated in the corner of my visual field and perpetually counting off years, months, days, hours, and seconds. Could I order my past experiences by reference to this clock? My answer is no; for to be able to do that, two conditions would have to be satisfied. First, the numbers on the digital display must, of course, track the passage of time; it must not be the case, for example, that the number 8:00/1/1/2011 (8:00am on 1 January 2011) appears before the number 8:00/1/1/2010. Second, I must *know* that the numbers on the display track the passage of time. If I have no idea whether the 8:00/1/1/2010 display annexed to a remembered experience E<sub>1</sub> occurred earlier or later in time than the 8:00/1/1/2011 display annexed to a remembered experience E<sub>2</sub>, then I cannot use those displays to determine the order in which E<sub>1</sub> and E<sub>2</sub>

occurred. The trouble lies with this second condition. Absent perceptible external objects whose states I can correlate with the numbers in the display, and given the point, elaborated in my original presentation of the argument, that memories of more remote past experiences are not necessarily 'fainter' than memories of more recent ones, I have no way of knowing that the order in which the numbers occurred does correspond to the passage of time; my ability to know this is subject to exactly the same difficulty as my knowledge of the order in which any of my other experiences occurred. For example, the number 8:00/1/1/2010, for all I can tell purely on the basis of my memory of the display, may have appeared later than 8:00/1/1/2011. Of course, I know that this reversal would not happen on a real digital clock in good working condition, but that only illustrates the need for an objective reality by reference to which I can order my past experiences. Analogous considerations apply to the voice counting off seconds in my head.

Chignell might here reply that there are two possible ways that I could know, or justifiably believe, that my mental clock tracks time.<sup>2</sup> First, there might be, on the model of an externalist account of knowledge, a reliable connection between moments of time and the times displayed on my mental clock, and the mere fact that there was such a connection might enable me to order my past experiences by reference to the clock even if I did not know that fact. Although my own internalist intuitions about knowledge and justification run counter to this suggestion, I need not appeal to those intuitions here. Rather, my response would be that the supposed reliable connection would have to rest on a causal (nomological) relation between moments of time and the times displayed on the clock. But the notion of a causal relation between mere moments of time and the times displayed on the clock seems quite unintelligible, because mere moments of time, unlike events in time, cannot enter into causal relations at all.

The second way that Chignell might say I could know that the clock tracks time correctly is by induction. This would work as follows. As Jonathan Bennett (1966: 228) has shown, there are some relatively rare cases – the ones labelled (a), (b), and (c) in my reconstruction – involving the memory of experiences that occurred within a remembered specious present (in an extended sense that includes remembering that one had E<sub>1</sub> while having E<sub>2</sub>, or remembering a continuous series of experiences from E<sub>1</sub> to E<sub>2</sub>), in which one can determine the order of one's past experiences 'straight off', without any appeal to an external world. Suppose that during those 'Bennett-related' experiences, as well

as during the rest of one's conscious life, the clock that Chignell imagines is always in one's visual field, and that during the 'Bennett-related' experiences it manifestly tracks time correctly: it always displays a later time after an earlier one. Then, Chignell might say, one can infer inductively that it also tracked time correctly when E<sub>1</sub> and E<sub>2</sub> did not occur within a specious present. I would reply that such an inductive inference could at best show that the clock always tracks time correctly *during specious presents*. Since we necessarily can never observe it tracking time when E<sub>1</sub> and E<sub>2</sub> are 'separated' by not being 'Bennett-related', we do not have a sample of similar cases from which we can infer inductively that the clock tracks time during cases of the same kind. Perhaps there is a psychological mechanism such that the clock only 'engages', so to speak, for experiences that are remembered as having occurred during a specious present; for other remembered experiences it just 'runs freely'. Perhaps there is a 'constant conjunction' between (a) *only* the clock's readings and the *awareness* of temporal succession but *not* between (b) those readings and succession in time *per se*. I do not see by what good inductive argument (b) could be shown to be less probable than (a).

Chignell's second objection is to premise 1. He objects to my view that the Refutation begins from the contingent premise that I can correctly determine the order in time of (many) of my own past experiences. His objection (2011: 186) is that, despite Kant's first-person formulation of the opening premise in his own expositions of the Refutation (in the *Critique*: 'I am conscious of my existence as determined in time', which Kant glosses as 'The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence' that 'proves the existence of objects in space outside me', B275), 'the first premise is really about the general character of subjective experiences for creatures with faculties like ours ... [I]t is just Kant's way of saying that our inner experience is (by necessity) *temporally* ordered'. I certainly agree that according to Kant it is a necessary truth that our experience is temporally ordered. But this 'temporality thesis' (as P. F. Strawson 1966: 24 calls it) is not the premise from which the Refutation begins; it is a presupposition behind that premise, which has no implications about the specific order in which my experiences occurred, or about the way in which I can know that order. Further, if as Chignell evidently thinks, all the premises of the Refutation had to be necessary truths, then its conclusion that there exist bodies that I perceive outside me in space would have to be a necessary truth too. I think the principle of charity counts against Kant's having held such an implausible view.

Third, Chignell offers a putative counterexample to a principle that I employ in order to justify the claim in step 5 that the objective states of affairs by reference to which I must order my past experiences must be ones *'that I perceive'*. The principle in question is that 'unless we have some independent justification for believing that there are Bs, we can correlate As with Bs only if we perceive Bs'. Chignell offers an amusing putative counterexample – that of correlating pains in parts of my body with the first letter of the name of an ancient Greek deity that matches the first letter of the name of the aching part of my body (2011: 186). But when I think of the Greek god with the first letter of whose name I associate the name of the part of my body that aches, I am not correlating my pains with Greek deities, in the relevant sense of discovering or establishing a correlation between the occurrence of my pains and the existence of some deity. Rather, I am only making an association in thought between my pains and the intentional object that bears the name of that deity.

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### Notes

- 1 References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are given to the B edition and translations from Kant follow Kant (1997).
- 2 Chignell suggested both of these, in conversation.

### References

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