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Kant's Existential Dualism

Chris L. Firestone
Philosophy Department
Trinity International University
Deerfield, Illinois
cfiresto@tiu.edu

Abstract: Various scholars in Kant studies (e.g., Watkins, Chignell, Ameriks) seem to agree that Kant is a dualist of one sort or another. For example, his commitment to transcendental rationalism, to the phenomenal/noumenal distinction of the theoretical philosophy, and to the human disposition of his moral and religious philosophy makes materialism of any kind a hard sell in Kant interpretation. What kind of dualist Kant must be is more difficult to determine and garners much less agreement. In three stages, this paper seeks to argue for a particular body-soul dualism that is entailed by Kant's philosophy. First, by addressing how Kant is not a materialist. Second, the establishment of Kant's epistemic grounds for dualism. Third, the rational dimension and existential significance of faith that will account for the specific way Kant's dualism unfolds in the critical philosophy.

Introduction

It should not be surprising that Kant's anthropology is dualistic. After all, his philosophy is stock full of dualisms. Three are well known. There is, of course, the boundary line between things-as-they-appear and things-in-themselves. Another is what Friedrich Paulsen calls "the two hemispheres of the *globus intellectualis*"—the theoretical philosophy and the practical philosophy. Kant's famous denial of knowledge to make room for faith in the "Introduction" to the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a third. None of these dualisms, however, gets us specifically to the body-soul dualism that I want to argue for in this paper—namely, what I am calling "existential dualism."

Making the case that Kant's philosophy entails this unique type of dualism will take us through three stages of argumentation. The first is the elimination of materialism; this will turn our gaze towards the Eric Watkins essay "Kant on Materialism." The second stage is the establishment of Kant's epistemic grounds for dualism; this will require that we make clear the fundamental distinctions between Kant's understanding of knowledge, two

types of cognition (empirical and pure), and plain thinking. The third and final stage is the rational dimension and existential significance of faith that will account for the specific way Kant’s dualism unfolds in the critical philosophy.

Stage One—The Specter of Materialism in Kant

Eric Watkins begins our account by way of negation in his 2016 essay “Kant on Materialism.” He effectively shows in this essay why Kant is not a materialist. In the second edition Preface to *The Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth, the first *Critique*), Kant announces his intention to “sever the very root of materialism” (Bxxxiv). Watkins points out that, other than this blunt assertion, Kant devotes very little attention to this topic elsewhere in the first *Critique*.¹ Watkins notes that Karl Ameriks has taken some of the mystery out of this strange omission by appealing to the basic argument of Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: “if matter is defined as movable in space, then it is essentially spatial but if, as Transcendental Idealism maintains, things in themselves are not spatial, then things in themselves cannot be matter. Given Kant’s commitment to the existence of things in themselves, there must be things that are not matter.”² So far so good; materialism is clearly not a neat fit for Kant’s system.

Watkins, however, is not sure that materialism in all its forms can be dismissed in this way. He distinguishes between three types of materialism—universal materialism (that everything is matter), cosmological materialism (that everything in the world is matter), and psychological materialism (that human beings are essentially matter). The first two can be handled sufficiently by Ameriks-type arguments. But this is not so with the third. In order to eliminate materialism completely, this third form of materialism must be eliminated as a logical possibility. Watkins, like many philosophers, wants to be thorough and his argument for the elimination of psychological materialism is instructive for our purposes.

One of the distinctive features of Kant’s system, Watkins notes, is that Kant is not only looking for the necessary conditions for the possibility of

¹ In fact, it only surfaces once as “an almost accidental corollary to the Second Paralogism’s treatment of the soul’s simplicity (B420)”. Eric Watkins, “Kant on Materialism,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 24:5, 1035-6.

² Watkins, 1036. This rendering of Kant’s Transcendental Idealism is indebted to the Ameriks’s version of the “Two-World” reading of Kant. On Henry Allison’s “Double-Aspect” interpretation, materialism is merely one way of considering the world, namely, as a scientifically/empirically knowable thing or series of things in the unity of apperception. It is not an ontic designation but an epistemic one. For this reason, materialism as an ontological judgment on the nature of things is simply a misnomer.

experience (including, of course, Space, Time and the 12 Categories), but for the totality of those conditions. To this end, Kant distinguishes between logical and real conditioning. The understanding schematizes the world of objective appearances according to the analytic nature of logical conditioning. Real conditioning, however, pertains to “*real* conditioning relations between objects (taking ‘object’ here in a very broad sense so as to include both physical and mental entities).”³ Kant points to four such real conditions that correspond to the four antinomies of reason.⁴

Kant understands that the thing-in-itself is not the only real condition required for a complete understanding of appearances. The mental subject is likewise a real condition of having representations at all. Things cannot think themselves, they must be thought by actual subjects, for such is a real condition for the possibility of representations. This is the nature of the first Paralogism. The second and third Paralogisms extrapolate further those conditions of the soul that make the idea of the mental subject unique (those being unity over composite parts, for example, and simplicity of the mental subject).⁵

The mental subject in this robust sense (a thinking, unified, and simple thing) is a representation of reason and as such a mere idea. It is also a real condition for understanding the possibility of any perception at all. We must believe the mental subject exists to account fully and rationally for things as they appear. Thus, a complete understanding of representations via transcendental deduction entails this token subject. The moral nature of this soul cannot be ascertained in theoretical reason. We will need to make a transition to another employment of reason to make this determination. Freedom and God are likewise ideas of reason that are given insofar as they too are required for the understanding of representation. We can “choose” to think in certain ways and can represent things using God as an infinite source of

³ Watkins, 1038. According to Watkins, Kant seems to be working with a “generic notion of real conditioning that involves an asymmetrical, transitive, and intelligible relation of metaphysical dependence”. Watkins, 1039.

⁴ They are successive moments of time, parts coming together as a whole, causation as a condition of its effect, and the unconditioned object as a condition of the appearance to which it is related.

⁵ Some of these, of course, are not acts of volition, but others indeed are. In the former case, there is a soft responsibility in so far as we must experience something even if we wish we did not have to. In the later case, there is hard responsibility in that we could have chosen otherwise. Watkins summarizes as follows: “the first three Paralogisms are concerned with how different features of the I – its substantiality, simplicity, and personal identity – are different real conditions of different conditioned features of representations – their accidentality, unity, and attributability –if the I is thinking these representations.” 1041.

predication.⁶ As Andrew Chignell notes, we need a basic idea of God as a well of predication to “avoid the abyss of non-being.”

It is well-known that Kant calls God, freedom and the soul “problematic” ideas from a theoretical perspective. Because no appearance of them in space/time is possible, theoretical reason accepts them as mere tokens, whose basic existence we must assume but whose nature is decidedly underdetermined. Things in themselves are not a problem from a theoretical perspective. Why? Because the *thing in itself* is a required concept of the first order for a transcendental analysis of theoretical reason to make sense. As we come to find out in the *Groundwork* and *The Critique of Practical Reason* (or second *Critique*), freedom likewise is not a problem from a practical perspective. It is “known” to the mental subject in reflective act of obedience to the moral law (i.e., whenever “I” make the moral law my highest incentive). In Kant’s scheme, freedom is immediately required for moral action while God and the immortality of the soul are postulated for moral stability.

So far, so good. It is here, however, that Kant scholars of the first *Critique* begin to object. I could name names, but Watkins is a good case in point. Watkins asserts, “It does *not* follow that we must be able to have *cognition* of the existence of the unconditioned. For to have cognition of an object, that object would have to be both given in sensibility and thought through the understanding, and Kant thinks that unconditioned objects cannot be given to us through the senses (A308/B365, A311/B367, A327/B383, A483/B511, A531/B559).”⁷ Surely, there is some semantic ambiguity here.

My research program has, on a several occasions, been criticized because I use the word “cognize” (*Erkenntnis*) to refer to unconditioned objects as proper objects of faith. Robert Hanna, for example, worries that, in my basic notion of “rational faith” or *Glauben*, “Firestone in fact confuses the propositional attitude of (i) believing that P when you have no sufficient epistemic reason for believing that P, with the propositional attitude of (ii) choosing or acting as if you believed that P when you have no sufficient epistemic justification for believing that P.”⁸ What Hanna, Watkins, and other empirically-minded interpreters like them seem to miss is that Kant attains “sufficient epistemic reason for believing” not from synthetic *a posteriori* appearances but from transcendental resources, namely, synthetic *a priori*

⁶ We need freedom as a real possibility to explain the apparent intentionality behind our representations.

⁷ Watkins, 1039.

⁸ Robert Hannah, “Review of ‘Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason,’” *Ars Disputandi*, Vol. 10 (2010), 104.

conditions and the real possibilities required to understand fully consciousness as sparked within reason by the original act (or acts) of representation.

Rational faith is really *only* germane to the unconditioned in Kant's system. These noumenal objects are ideas supplied first by theoretical reason insofar as they are required for a complete understanding of real possibility. These objects include the *ding an sich*, the soul, freedom, and God. Admittedly, the *ding an sich* takes center stage in the first *Critique*. Things in themselves are the "efficient" cause of appearances in terms of real possibility. However, the ultimate cause of the real possibility rests with the whole collection of ideas that Kant deems problematic insofar as they are not given in experience but rather sit waiting for a more full explication in the unfolding of his critical system.⁹

Stage Two—Epistemic Distinctions in Kant's Philosophy

This epistemic quandary can be straightened out with a careful articulation of the Kant's terms. I have passed out a summary sheet of key terms in Kant's epistemology. As you can see from the sheet, knowledge or *Wissen* refers to an idea whose original source is in the senses. It is more strictly speaking an original synthesis of intuition and concept in an act of judgment. Knowledge forms representations that can refer to individual objects of experience, a particular collection of or subset of objects, or to the whole of nature or the cosmos.

Empirical Cognition (*Erkenntnis* or Cognition A) refers to an idea whose original source was through the senses and concepts of the understanding that are synthesized into an original representation. This form of representing includes knowledge or *Wissen* and complementary forms of knowledge based on memory, imagination, conjecture, and theory. To cognize something is to know it in thinking or to extrapolate it as an idea logically inferred from an original known source.

Pure Cognition (*Erkenntnis* or Cognition B) refers to the generation of an idea in conception that forms the real condition for the possibility of

⁹ Nowhere do I dribble on my philosopher's cloak and suggest that empirical cognition is possible of God, freedom, or the soul. By pure cognition, I mean and have always meant "to think" (*Denken*), but with transcendently sufficient support. No one in Kant studies (or in traditional metaphysics for that matter) holds that we can perceive God as God is in God's self through the five senses. It would be worth exploring how close this reading of Kant comes to Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* or Plantinga's properly basic beliefs. That work has not yet been done to my knowledge. What seems clear to me is that Kant holds that we can get God, freedom and the soul in mind, and we have good transcendental reasons for predicating content with these ideas from the various perspectives of reason in its "encounter" with them.

experience (i.e., *Ding an sich*, freedom, the soul and God as *ens realissimum*). This is a thought or representation with a special epistemic status based on inferences derived from a transcendental understanding of reason. Reason too is real and as such contributes these ideas to the understanding. We recognize that we must posit the existence of things-in-themselves, mental subjects (the soul), freedom, and God in order to come to a full understanding of the totality of conditions that make experience possible.

Watkins and others are reticent to use the word cognition (as opposed to “thought”) because it can be and often is identified with Empirical Cognition (or more specifically *Wissen*) and thereby risks assuming the excesses of traditional metaphysics (i.e., enthusiasm, fanaticism, and superstition). Thought (*Denken*) overlaps in meaning with knowledge, empirical cognition, and pure cognition but does not necessarily have a corresponding reference in senses or an implied real possibility. It can refer to anything that can be gotten in mind.

Faith, in Kant’s rational economy, is an aspect of the will. More precisely, it is an act of the human will that can be conjoined with any of the four cognitive states. Kant calls faith grounded on knowledge (or empirical cognition) “doctrinal.” Doctrinal Faith is essentially an inferential commitment to a pure idea of reason with empirical/historical content. As such, it is contingent on an original source of the senses. It therefore has an epistemic status that is dependent on erudition and an empirical leap over Lessing’s Ditch. Kant calls this type of faith the husk of the corn (or vehicle). Rational religious (or moral) faith is the kernel or pure essence of true belief that has to traverse no such empirical ditch. Rational Faith (*Glaube*) concerns inferential commitments about pure ideas of reason (originally thought as real possibilities and problematic ideas) inferentially derived from rational resources other than immediate sense perception (i.e., reflections on moral action and on aesthetic and religious experience).

Stage Three—Kant’s Existential Dualism

We find a careful articulation of these terms in the “Canon of Pure Reason” section of the first *Critique* (A795/B823-A831/B859). There, Kant unpacks the various distinctions between knowledge, opinion, and faith. The purpose of the Canon is to carve out space for what Kant means by *faith* in the face of both the strictures he has previously articulated regarding knowledge and those speculative positions that have only private validity and thus no rational foundation in the critical philosophy (what Kant calls “persuasion” [*Überredung*]). He labels knowledge, belief, and opinion as three forms of truth assertion.

Opinions are the lowest-level form of truth assertion, since the one asserting some truth as an opinion is conscious of the assertion's objective and subjective insufficiency. Belief is somewhat like opinion in terms of its objective insufficiency, that is, there is no sensation corresponding to the concepts of belief. However, it is not groundless, but rather has a subjective sufficiency that opinion lacks. It finds its rational support in the transcendental nature of reason. This grounding is significant for Kant, not only because subjectivity is the foundation of all experience and transcendental inquiry into experience, but also because it enables faith to gain a reasonable, indeed critical, foothold in our noetic structure, one that gains a more full explication in further employments of reason that are not purely empirical.

Knowledge, of course, stands above belief in Kant's truth hierarchy, as it constitutes an assertion that is both objectively and subjectively sufficient, giving it the strongest type of cognitive assurance. But this does not mean that truth assertions that are only subjectively sufficient (viz., belief) are examples of vacuous opinion or somehow less important to human beings. To the contrary, Kant maintains that such assertions yield legitimate "conviction" (*Überzeugung*) because they deal with life's most important existential truths. People will die for the cause of freedom, dignity of soul, and belief in God. People will not die for the truth that they are being appeared to by a laptop as they write a paper. Kant thus lumps belief and knowledge together as properly rational enterprises receiving their principal justification from theoretical and practical reason, respectively, while leaving opinion to the realm of idle speculation.¹⁰

In this light, we can see clearly why, according to Kant, "In judging from pure reason, **to have an opinion** is not allowed at all" (A822/B850), while having faith is a different story. Faith, for Kant, finds its object in theoretical reason and infuses it with existential import and content in morality and in his subsequent critical inquiry that fleshes out hope for the sake of moral stability.¹¹

¹⁰ Friedrich Paulsen, *Immanuel Kant: His life and Doctrine* (London: J. C. Nimmo, 1902), 110.

¹¹ Kant writes in the first *Critique*, "[I]t is absolutely necessary that something must happen, namely, that I fulfill the moral law at all points. The end here is inescapably fixed, and according to all my insight there is only a single condition under which this end is consistent with all the ends together and thereby has practical validity, namely, that there be a God and a future world. I also know with complete certainty that no one else knows of any other conditions that lead to this same unity of ends under the moral law. But since the moral precept is thus at the same time my maxim (as reason commands that it ought to be), I will inexorably believe in the existence of God and a future life, and I am sure that nothing can make these beliefs unstable, since my moral principles themselves, which I cannot renounce without becoming contemptible in my own eyes, would thereby be subverted." (A828/B856)

Kant makes clear in the Canon of Pure Reason that rational faith in God and the soul are not just possible objects of faith, this has already been established in the understanding with their existence as real possibilities, but rather morally mandated and conditioning principles of any critical understanding of reason. Such faith, Kant suggests, “is not *logical*, but *moral* certainty,” which “rests on subjective grounds (of the moral sentiments)”; he asserts that it is “so interwoven with my moral nature, that I am under as little apprehension of having the former [(i.e., belief in God and in another world)] torn from me as of losing the latter [(i.e., my moral nature)].”¹²

According to Kant, reason’s quest to answer the most relevant metaphysical questions by a transcendental examination of pure reason is the driving force behind this process. What we understand from the Canon of Pure Reason and from the moral writings are the bare grounds for faith (namely, freedom “known” in its relationship to the moral law, and God and the soul as ideas of theoretical reason, postulates of practical reason, and sources of hope and meaning in judicial reason). It is only in further critical inquiries into the faculties of reason and only in the critical and creative judgments of individuals in their ongoing encounter with the world that we find a thoroughgoing account of true rational religious faith.

Leslie Stevenson probes Kant’s definition of faith in an essay entitled “Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge.” He affirms the position that faith (*Glauben*) has a definite place in Kant’s philosophical economy, and is a plausible concept when understood in terms of the transcendental development of Kant’s philosophy. Faith, Stevenson concludes, “is holding something to be true, and being practically but not theoretically justified in doing so.”¹³ The faith which Kant understands to be involved here is of a special kind, however: “The conviction is not *logical* but *moral* certainty, and, since it depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition) I must not even say ‘*It is* morally certain that there is a God’, etc., but rather ‘*I am* morally certain’ etc.” (A820/B857). Referring to this passage from the first *Critique*, Stevenson writes, “Here Kant strikes an existentialist note, giving us a sneak preview of his practical philosophy.”¹⁴

¹² A829/B857. This particular quote is taken from J.M.D. Meiklejohn’s translation of the first *Critique* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990).

¹³ Leslie Stevenson, “Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge,” *Kantian Review* 7 (2003), 88.

¹⁴ Stevenson, “Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge,” 95. For Kant, the objects of pure cognition are possible objects of faith, and as such, these cognitions rise above the status of mere opinion: “I can think whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself but in order to ascribe objective validity to such a concept ... something more is required”

Conclusion

Watkins, Chignell, Ameriks, and most others in the field of Kant studies seem to agree that Kant is a dualist of one sort or another. His commitment to transcendental rationalism, to the phenomenal/noumenal distinction of the theoretical philosophy, and to the human disposition of his moral and religious philosophy makes materialism of any kind a hard sell in Kant interpretation. What kind of dualist Kant must be is more difficult to determine and garners much less agreement. There continues to be a strong empirical undertow in Kant studies that militates against the kind of argument I am making in this paper.¹⁵

I have argued, contrary to this position, that Kant's consistent concern throughout the first *Critique* is that we realize that what cannot be known in theory but is required for human flourishing can be purely cognized. By this, I contend Kant means two things: 1. Humans must think God and self to address the most important questions in life, and 2. The critique of pure theoretical reason provides the basic rational impetus and content for these ideas. These two implications of the critique of pure reason are necessary for the unfolding of other meaningful employments of reason as humans think about and respond to the perennial questions of life.¹⁶ It is clear that Kant is

(Bxxvi). We can apparently think and talk about matters that have this basic rational support (e.g., the nature of soul and the existence of God), and, because of varying empirical testimonials and differences in discursive reasoning, have many opinions about them; however, more is required to establish them as sufficient objects of rational faith. This *more*, argues Kant, "need not be sought in the theoretical sources of cognition; it may also lie in the practical ones" (Bxxvi).

¹⁵ Watkins, for example, writes, "What the argument provided above shows is that it is possible to *infer* the existence of something unconditioned without relying on the experience of that object. However, it is not possible to extend our cognition so that it would deliver substantive new results about unconditioned objects, such as that we are free or that God exists." Watkins, 1043.

¹⁶ Kant explicitly identifies the practical as its rational ground. Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*, particularly "Metaphysik Mrongovius" (1782-1783) and "Metaphysik Vigilantus" (1794-1795), bring into sharp relief the direct practical connection between cognition and faith via two key distinctions. On the one hand, Kant makes clear the distinction between cognitions as objects of knowledge and all other forms of cognition; on the other hand, he distinguishes between cognitions as mere opinions and cognitions that are possible objects of faith. In "Metaphysik Mrongovius," for example, Kant makes the important distinction between pure cognition and empirical cognition: "This is quite useful in a science, to separate the cognition of reason from empirical cognition, in order to comprehend the errors all the more distinctly" (29:940). Empirical cognition indicates a process of judgment whereby intuitions and concepts are synthesized into knowledge. These cognitions are immediately convicting of the truth, and as such, should be distinguished so as not to lose

willing to make inferences about the existence of God, freedom, and the soul as real conditions for the possibility of experience. Accordingly, each of us must choose that God we will serve, and there we will find the answer to the question of our identity.

Dr. Chris L. Firestone is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois.

sight of them in the process of rational deliberation on metaphysical matters. Pure cognition (or “the cognition of reason”) involves the basic capacity of reason to get something in mind and the possible rootedness of these ideas in reason. Pure cognition can consist of idle speculations or mere opinions about virtually anything. But it can also, thinks Kant, refer to the proper objects of rational faith.

The anatomy of pure cognition and its relationship to faith is spelled out twelve years later in “Metaphysik Vigilantus” (written one year after the publication of *Religion*) and is worth quoting at length:

Metaphysical cognitions must therefore be cognitions simply of reason, thus arise *a priori* through pure concepts of reason, i.e., the principles <*principia*> or grounds of cognition are so constituted that one connects the necessity of what one cognizes with the cognition itself, and the concepts are directed at objects that are not only cognized independently of all experience, but that also can never *possibly* become an object of experience. E.g., God, freedom, immortality.... [M]etaphysics thus has no *a posteriori* principles <*principia*>, but rather only *a priori*: they are given and are cognized through reason alone, but are not made (29:945).

Here, Kant makes plain, not only that we can cognize God, freedom, and immortality, but also that such cognitions—if they are pure cognitions of reason—are not human creations or mere figments or opinions, but ideas emerge in the natural course of reason’s development within the transcendental bounds of human understanding. According to Kant, “Belief in God and another world is inextricably bound with the cognition of our duty, which reason prescribes, and the moral maxims for living according to it” (29:778); and again, “the existence of God and the hope of a future life can be cognized by any human being by common sense by considering nature and one’s state ... But this is merely a practical faith” (29:938). Thus rational faith in God is not an arbitrary cognition or one necessarily relegated to mere opinion; rational faith is rooted both in the *a priori* cognition of God as *ens realissimum* and in freedom and the moral law as *a priori* constituents of practical reason.