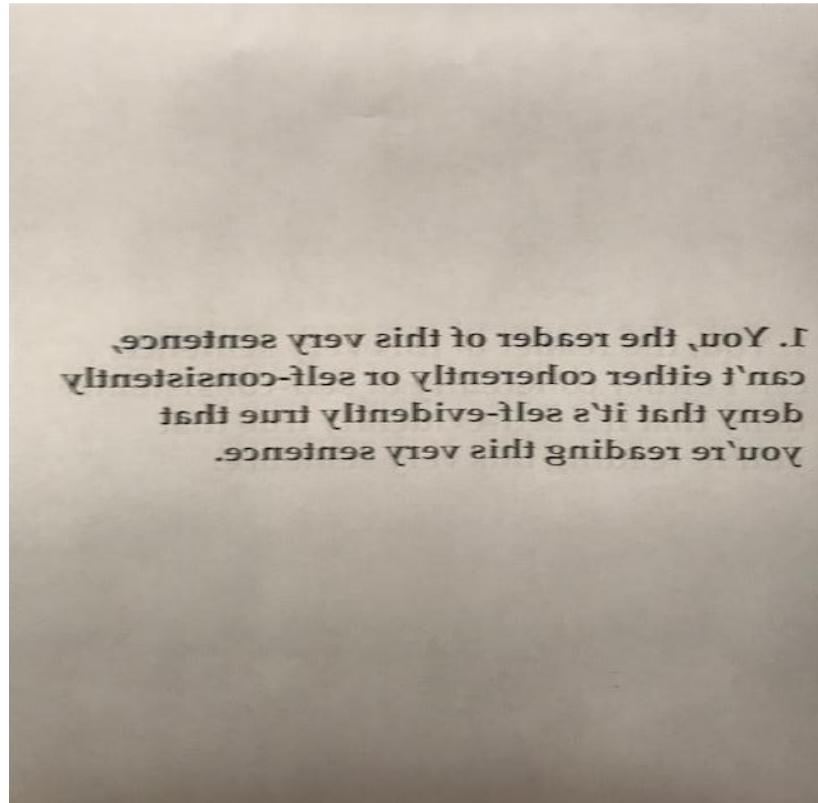


The Refutation of Digital Idealism: A Micro-Study in Kantian Futurism

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An enantiomorph of sentence 1 (Author's photograph, 2023)

1. Introduction

As any Kantian will tell you—without being prompted—2024 is the tercentenary of Immanuel Kant’s birth. With an eye to that fateful philosophical tricentennial, in “Kantian Futurism,” I presented and defended a view I call *Kantian futurism*, as per these introductory remarks, minimally redacted:

The future of philosophy and the future of humankind-in-the-world are intimately related, not only (i) in the obvious sense that all philosophers are “human, all-too-human” animals—i.e., members of the biological species *Homo sapiens*, and also finite, fallible, and thoroughly normative imperfect in every other way too—hence the natural fate of all human animals is also the natural fate of all philosophers, but also (ii) in the more profound and subtle sense of what I’ll call *philosophical futurism*. Philosophical futurism is

a critical, synoptic, and speculative reflection on the fate of humankind-in-the-world, with special attention paid not only to what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) *will most likely be*, if things continue to go along in more or less the same way as they have been and are now going, or *could conceivably be*, as in science fiction or other forms of imaginative projection, but also to what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) *ought to be, and therefore* (assuming that “ought” entails “can”) *can be*, as the direct result of our individual and collective free agency, for the purpose of rationally guiding humankind in the near future. In what follows, I’ll present, defend, and strongly recommend a version of philosophical futurism that I call *Kantian futurism*.

It’s a truth *not* generally acknowledged, that *all* Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since Kant—i.e., since the end of the 18th century—is *post-Kantian*. This is of course trivially true, in that all Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since the end of the 18th century literally temporally succeeds the publication and dissemination of Kant’s philosophical writings. But it’s also profoundly true, in that all Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since the end of the 18th century falls within a single comprehensive *Ur*-framework, according to which Kant’s philosophy is either (i) wholly accepted without revision-or-updating (*ortho-Kantianism*), (ii) at least partially accepted but also significantly revised-&-updated (*quasi-Kantianism*, *crypto-Kantianism*, and classical 19th and early 20th century *neo-Kantianism*, whose original rallying cry was: *back to Kant!*), or (iv) outright rejected (*anti-Kantianism*) (Hanna, [2008], 2020).

The paradigmatic example of ortho-Kantianism is *mainstream late 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st century Kant-scholarship*, allowing of course for many and various domestic or in-house scholarly disagreements about how best or correctly to interpret Kant’s writings. Paradigmatic examples of quasi-Kantian philosophy are *classical German idealism* (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, etc.), *British neo-Hegelianism* (Bradley, McTaggart, etc.), *early, transcendental, and existential phenomenology* (Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.), *other varieties of post-phenomenological “Continental” philosophy* (existentialism, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, postmodernism, etc.), *New England Transcendentalism* (especially Emerson), *classical American pragmatism* (especially Peirce), *process philosophy* (especially Bergson and Whitehead), and *Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism* (especially Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom). The paradigmatic example of crypto-Kantianism is *Wittgenstein’s philosophy, both early and late*. And obviously, *classical 19th and early 20th century German and French neo-Kantianism* are paradigmatic examples of neo-Kantianism. As to anti-Kantian philosophy, paradigmatic examples are *classical and post-classical Analytic philosophy* and *identitarian multiculturalist social justice philosophy*.

But whether Kant’s philosophy is wholly accepted, partially accepted, or outright rejected, *it’s inescapable*. This is simply because Kant’s philosophy determines the total logical space of relevant philosophical options for all post-Kantian Anglo-American-&-European philosophy. In this sense, all post-Kantian Anglo-American-&-European philosophy,

including of course all contemporary philosophy up to 6am this morning, *has come out from under Kant's wig*, whether positively (pro-) or negatively (anti-)....

[A]ll foreseeably future philosophy worldwide *will be a series of positive or negative footnotes to Kant*. Moreover, as regards negative footnotes, the 140-year-long anti-Kantian tradition of Analytic philosophy is in fact now coming to an end, as post-classical Analytic philosophy finally goes down into the ash-heap of history, locked in a death-embrace with anti-Kantian identitarian multiculturalist social justice philosophy. And as regards positive footnotes, obviously ortho-Kantianism is historically and philosophically backward-looking, not forward-looking. Therefore, (i) the times they are a-changing, and (ii) the near-future emergence of some or another creatively revised-&-updated version of Kant's philosophy, as the central and dominant world philosophy, is historically inevitable. For all these reasons, *forward to Kant!* must be humankind's philosophical futurist rallying cry.

That all being so, then self-evidently, this question must also be asked:

Precisely *how* should we creatively revise-&-update Kant's 18th century philosophy for the purposes of bringing about the Kantian philosophy of the near future?

Humankind's existential predicament—including its epistemic, metaphysical, logical, mathematical, natural-scientific, moral, sociopolitical, and religious or spiritual modes—in this thoroughly nonideal natural and social world is what I call *the rational human condition*. Correspondingly, I call the general philosophical theory of the rational human condition *rational anthropology*. Since 2001, for better or worse, I've been developing, presenting, and defending a version of rational anthropology as the comprehensive Kantian philosophy of the near future (Hanna, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, [2015]). So if I'm right, then humankind's philosophical futurist rallying cry—the rallying cry of Kantian futurism—must also be: *forward to rational anthropology!*

To summarize so far: I've argued, **first**, that the near-future emergence of some or another creatively revised-&-updated version of Kant's philosophy, as the central and dominant world philosophy, is *historically inevitable*, and **second**, that a comprehensive Kantian philosophy of the near future that we can and should pursue and practice is what I call *rational anthropology*. Rational anthropology, in turn, is the general philosophical theory of *the rational human condition*, i.e., humankind's existential predicament—including its epistemic, metaphysical, moral, sociopolitical, and religious or spiritual modes—in this thoroughly nonideal natural and social world. In the rest of this essay, I'm going to present, defend, and strongly recommend three futuristic Kantian ideas that flow directly from rational anthropology, and jointly constitute the foundational tripod of a Kantian philosophy of the near future: (i) *moderately anthropic cosmology* aka *weak transcendental idealism* aka *top-down cosmology*, (ii) *cosmological and cognitive organicism*, and (iii) *the moral and sociopolitical primacy of human dignity*. (Hanna, 2023a: pp. 1-4)

In *this* essay, however, I'm going to demonstrate a crucial *presupposition* of that foundational tripod of futuristic Kantian ideas—namely, *manifest realism*, which says that

the natural universe is, at least in principle, *directly accessible* to rational human pure or a priori intuition and human sense perception alike, precisely because the natural universe consists of a complete, unified, structuralist system of *objective veridical appearances*, such that anything X appears to be F (or G, or whatever) to us if and only if (i) X *really and truly is* F (or G, or whatever), and (ii) the fact of X's being F (or G, or whatever) is, at least in principle, *intersubjectively directly accessible* to all actual or possible rational human minded animals, and *not* idiosyncratically restricted to any single rational human individual or to any particular rational human community/social institution or special set of such communities/social institutions.

In turn, my demonstration of manifest realism will employ a *negative* strategy, by refuting what I call *the skeptical thesis of digital idealism*. As such, it's a micro-study in Kantian futurism.

2. The Skeptical Thesis of Digital Idealism

By *the skeptical thesis of digital idealism*, I mean this thesis:

Possibly you're consciously living inside a *digital simulation*, or a *virtual reality*, and nothing exists outside it. (Chalmers, 2022)

Of course, this is closely related to the classical thesis of what Kant called “skeptical idealism” or “problematic idealism”:

[T]he **skeptical idealist** [is] one who **doubts** [the existence of matter], because he holds [matter and its existence] to be unprovable. (Kant, 1781/1787/1997: p. 430, A377, boldfacing in the original)

The **problematic** idealism of Descartes, who declares only one empirical assertion (*assertio*), namely, **I am**, to be indubitable.... Problematic idealism ... professes only our incapacity for proving an existence outside us from our own [existence] by means of immediate experience. (Kant, 1781/1787/1997: p. 326, B274-275, boldfacing in the original)

Kant also famously remarked that

it always remains a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason that the existence of things outside us (from which after all get the whole matter for our cognitions, even for our inner sense) should have to be assumed **on** [the basis of] **faith** (*auf Glauben*), and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof. (Kant, 1781/1787/1997: p. 121, Bxxxix n., boldfacing in the original)

Then he proceeded to present a “Refutation of Idealism” (Kant, 1781/1787/1997: pp. 326-329, B274-279) in order to prove the following thesis:

The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me. (Kant, 1781/1787/1997: p. 327, B275)

Not surprisingly, the correct interpretation and the soundness or unsoundness of Kant’s proof has been much contested by Kantians, non-Kantians, and anti-Kantians alike. Leaving all of that aside for the purposes of this essay, my own rational reconstruction of Kant’s Refutation of Idealism is this:

Necessarily, if I’m self-consciously aware of myself as an individuated stream of consciousness in inner sense, then my own manifestly real minded animal body also exists as a uniquely self-locating material entity in manifestly real space, essentially non-conceptually veridically represented by my outer sense. (Hanna, 2000, 2006: ch. 1, 2015: esp. chs. 2-3, 2016; see also Kant, 1768/1992)

And I do strongly believe that this is a true thesis and also that the argument I’ve presented for it is a sound argument.

Now, I think that it’s “a scandal of philosophy and universal human reason” that the skeptical thesis of digital idealism remains unrefuted and that not only leading contemporary Analytic philosophers (see, e.g., Chalmers, 2022), but also the general public, are still mesmerized by it. One reason for its meretricious appeal is undoubtedly the broad and continuing popularity of the *Matrix* movie franchise (Wikipedia, 2024). But the other and even more important reason is what I’ve called *the myth of artificial intelligence*, which causes people to *depreciate* their own rational human intelligence and *valorize* digital technology (Hanna, 2023b).

3. The Refutation of Digital Idealism

In this section, I want to use the basic proof strategy of my rational reconstruction of Kant’s Refutation of Idealism—namely, start with a premise that the skeptical idealist takes to be indubitable knowledge, and then formulate some necessary conditions or

presuppositions of the truth and knowledge of this premise, which entail the skeptic's uniquely self-locating embodiment in manifestly real space, and thereby contradict and refute the skeptical idealist thesis—and extend it to the skeptical thesis of digital idealism, with two crucial refinements: **first**, I've formulated the skeptical thesis of digital idealism *in the second-person, and not the first-person*, and **second**, the proof proceeds via *the philosophy of reading* (Hanna, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e). With those refinements in place, then here's my six-step refutation of digital idealism.

1. You, the reader of this very sentence, can't either coherently or self-consistently deny that it's self-evidently true that you're reading this very sentence.

2. Therefore, as soon as you've read sentence **1**, then you know it to be self-evidently true.

3. In order to read sentence **1**, you have to be able to scan it from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom, or from bottom to top, and also be able to tell the difference between sentence **1** and its mirror-reversed counterpart (aka its "enantiomorph"), as is self-evidently true when you look at this blown-up version of sentence **1**—

**1. You, the reader of this very sentence,
can't either coherently or self-consistently
deny that it's self-evidently true that
you're reading this very sentence.**

and then compare-&-contrast it with its enantiomorph, as depicted in the image at the top of this essay.

4. But necessarily, in order to be able to do those things, then not only (i) do you possess *the complex rational, conscious, and self-conscious human capacity for reading*, but also (ii) you have *minded animal embodiment* and are *locally embedded* in an egocentrically-centered, intrinsically directional (aka "orientable"), manifestly real 3-dimensional space (Hanna, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e).

5. But, if you *were* consciously living inside a digital simulation, or a virtual reality, with nothing outside it, then you'd be consciously living inside a *non-animal-embodied, non-egocentrically centered, non-locally-embedded, non-orientable, digitally-encoded, 2-dimensional representation*, and thereby *not* have minded animal embodiment and *not* be

locally embedded in an egocentrically-centered, orientable, manifestly real 3-dimensional space.

6. Therefore, necessarily, you're *not* consciously living inside a digital simulation, or a virtual reality, with nothing existing outside it, and the skeptical thesis of digital idealism is *false*. **QED**

4. Conclusion

I strongly believe that my refutation of digital idealism is decisive and definitive. Hence the only remaining philosophical task is to debunk the meretricious appeal of the skeptical thesis of digital idealism. I have no wish to contest the fact that *The Matrix* franchise is good and sometimes even great cinematic science fiction, even if it's conceptually ill-founded. But I do think that the myth of artificial intelligence most urgently needs to be bent, spindled, and mutilated out of existence, and replaced by an essentially better philosophy of digital technology that will *also* belong to the collective project of Kantian futurism (Hanna, 2023b, 2023f, 2024).¹

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