
Van Cleve and the Neglected Alternative

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One of the most persistent worries voiced by students of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is the "neglected alternative objection" (NA). In setting out the components of his transcendental aesthetic, Kant explicitly states that space and time—respectively, the outer and inner forms of sensible intuitions that underlie all our phenomenal experiences—are *merely* pure forms of sensible intuition. By this he means that they do not have any objective reality as things in themselves (i.e., they are not noumena).¹ It is crucial for Kant's overall project in the *Critique*, especially in relation to his "Copernican Revolution," that both space and time be given *a priori* for us as necessary components of our experience. However, inferring from this that the independent existence of space and time can, or must be, denied outright seems irrelevant to Kant's overall project and, more importantly, an unjustified dogma inconsistent with the claims of the overall project. I take it that Kant leaves readers with the following two general questions:

- 1) Motivation—If Kant thinks that space and time must *necessarily* be *a priori* intuitions for our experiences, he must therefore deny the existence of space and time independent of our perception. Are there deeper philosophical motivations for this claim, and is Kant's overall project threatened if this claim is undermined?

¹ See Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2003). A49/B66, A369, A490-1/B518-19 to cite just a few instances.

2) Justification/Soundness—No matter Kant’s own reasons for making the negative ontological claim regarding space and time, the question remains whether Kant is at all philosophically justified in making the inference. Considerations here include, but are not limited to, the seemingly contradictory Kantian tenet that we can have *no* knowledge of things in themselves. So, are there any good reasons for us to accept his claim?

In short, the NA asks both why Kant holds, and whether he is justified in holding that space and time could not be “*both* a form of intuition *and* a form of things as they are in themselves?”² In other words, why could the world not *possibly* be similar to the scenario described in the “red spectacles analogy”—that just because one is wearing red-tinted spectacles and thus perceives everything to be reddish, it does not follow that the world, once the spectacles are removed, will not have been red to begin with.³ These questions will serve as the background inquiry for this paper.

As this topic has been written on extensively over the years, I am not proposing to offer a particularly novel interpretation of how to explain either (1) or (2) above, or even to offer much of a literature review regarding the issue. Instead, my focus is to examine James Van Cleve’s treatment of the issue in his *Problems from Kant*. In analyzing Kant’s transcendental idealism and some of the traditional objections against it (including the NA), Van Cleve explicitly promises to “show that under [his] interpretation of the argument from geometry, Kant has answers.”⁴ It seems reasonable that any truly satisfying treatment of the neglected alternative should provide responses to *both* (1) and (2) above. Van Cleve’s proposed “solution” thus should be judged by how well he addresses them.

However, less than one page later, when Van Cleve dismisses the NA outright on the basis of his particular empirically idealistic interpretation of Kant, it is not at all clear how Van Cleve’s interpretation adequately responds to *either*, let alone *both*, aspects of the objection. At best, Van Cleve explains away the objection on the basis

² James Van Cleve. *Problems from Kant*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Hereafter “VC”.

³ VC 267 n.1

⁴ VC 36. I will subsequently refer to this as Van Cleve’s “promise”.

that it only exists due to naïve understandings of Kant's commitment to idealism. However, when one attempts to apply Van Cleve's own more extreme interpretation of Kant's idealism as a resolution to the objection, it still remains mysterious why this is supposed to serve as an answer. This leaves the reader wondering if they are missing something important. Unfortunately, there is no help forthcoming elsewhere in Van Cleve's work, as these two pages contain the only explicit references to the NA in Van Cleve's entire book. My purpose is to clarify why Van Cleve believes he has explained away this objection so easily, and whether his proposal has any merit. I conclude that his proposal is completely devoid of merit, and there is no reason to think Van Cleve's particular idealistic interpretation of Kant in any way helps resolve the NA.

As I am only concerned with answers to the problems raised by the NA, Van Cleve's in particular, I will not engage with Kant's arguments for space and time being necessarily *a priori* for all *our* subjective experience—I will take it as given that Kant has succeeded in establishing what Guyer refers to as Kant's "transcendental theory of experience."⁵ What is at question here is the justification of Kant's "transcendental idealism"—How Kant can go from concluding that space and time is necessary *a priori* for our perception of objects to the conclusion that objects themselves necessarily lack spatial and temporal properties. In addition, in keeping with other commentators on this issue, and Van Cleve in particular, the specific arguments considered herein will relate only to *space* being denied ontological objectivity—the similarity of the arguments with time should generally follow suit.

Van Cleve's Interpretation of Kant

As Van Cleve's "promise" to resolve the NA explicitly states that the answers will be forthcoming on his interpretation of Kant's argument from geometry, which it is reasonable to assume could somewhat turn on Van Cleve's overall perspective on Kant, it is necessary to first understand how Van Cleve views Kant overall. Van Cleve

⁵ Paul Guyer. *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). 344.

believes the appropriate way to interpret Kant is as an “‘honest-to-goodness’ idealist regarding the entire world in space and time.”⁶ Van Cleve does not mean, of course, that Kant is a *total* idealist—even Van Cleve will not deny that Kant believed that there are really things out there existing independent of us and thus committing him so some level of realism (the noumenal realm, or things-in-themselves). What Van Cleve is opposing are views of other Kant scholars that tend to describe the phenomenal realm as merely the result of a particularly human subjectivity imposing its particular viewpoint, composed of certain forms of intuitions, upon things-in-themselves. Here the phenomenal is just our way of thinking about, viewing, or theorizing about the actually existing world, and as such may be very different from the way things actually are in themselves. This way of thinking about the phenomenal/noumenal distinction is common in the “one-world, dual-aspect” view of Kant that has become popular in the recent decades.

Why is this not enough for Van Cleve? These views do *not* yield the result of making phenomenal objects depend upon us for their very *existence*. Instead, there is only one type of existent thing, a particular object, but two ways of describing it—how it really is (the noumenal) and how we know it in appearance (the phenomenal). Van Cleve thinks this level of realism is not supported by the text:

By transcendental idealism, I mean the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations given as existing by themselves, nor conditions of objects viewed in themselves.⁷

So, Van Cleve takes from this that space and time do not exist in themselves, and thus no appearances do either, as all phenomena are viewed by us as spatially and temporally extended. The very existence of space and time must depend upon something if they do not ground themselves, and that “something” is us. Thus Van Cleve’s conclusion that Kant is an “honest-to-goodness” idealist, in

⁶ VC 4.

⁷ Quoted in VC 5. KS 345. (A369).

the Berkeleian sense of *esse est percipi*—appearances are completely mind-dependent.

Furthermore, Van Cleve argues that appearances must have this sort of mind-dependence for Kant's Copernican Revolution to work. For by Kant's revolutionary inversion of our perceptive model, the object must conform to our knowledge rather than our knowledge conforming to what is actually out there in the world. Van Cleve thinks that no sense can be made of objects conforming to our knowledge unless they also depend upon us for their very existence. The intuition seems to be something like this: if objects exist independent of us, how could our knowledge possibly affect properties of that object? However, if we bring the object itself into existence via the faculties of our mind, one can understand how we can affect its properties; for we give it the apparent properties it has in our cognizing it.⁸ Van Cleve puts it this way:

How is it possible for objects to owe any of their traits to our manner of cognizing them? The answer I find most satisfying is this: the objects in question owe their very *existence* to being cognized by us. An object can depend on us for its *Sosein* (its being the *way* it is) only if it also depends on us for its *Sein* (its *being*, period). It is in this way that the Copernican Revolution is bound up with idealism. I say more about how this is so in the next section and elsewhere (especially chapter 3).⁹

This particular passage will prove to be the key to Van Cleve's supposed solution to the NA, as is hinted at here by the parenthetical

⁸ While virtually nothing Van Cleve says regarding the appropriate way to interpret Kant's idealism, here and in what follows, is lacking in controversy, as my purpose is not to evaluate his perspective overall but to evaluate whether his view offers any positive contribution to the neglected alternative objection, I treat all background information concerning Van Cleve as the antecedent to an hypothetical conditional: "If V.C. is right about Kant holding x, y, and z, does it thereby follow that the neglected alternative objection loses its force?" Since I hold the argument to be invalid, it would be superfluous to my purposes to evaluate for soundness by arguing against the controversial premises themselves rather than simply showing the conclusion fails to follow from the premises.

⁹ VC 5

notation promising to take up the issue again in chapter 3 (the only place the NA is mentioned).

Based upon the above considerations, Van Cleve concludes that the traditional “two-world” view is a more appropriate way to interpret Kant—that there are really two kinds of existent things in the world—the noumenal and the phenomenal. However, Van Cleve does not accept just any old “two-world” view, as he recognizes many problems with this view as well. In attempting to avoid these problematic issues, his interpretation requires not only that there be two different kinds of objects, but that one kind (the phenomenal) must be *completely mind-dependent*. We only *talk* of these phenomenal objects as “existing”—they are in fact merely “virtual objects,” existing in relation only to our cognizing them, yet simultaneously lacking any sort of independent being. They are mere representations that may supervene upon, or in a sense even be caused by, things in the real world, but simultaneously lack any ontological existence themselves. Much as a tree’s shadow moves across the lawn on a sunny day, we can speak of the shadow and have it represented to us, but we are not then simultaneously committed to positing the existence of a new object called a “shadow”. A shadow’s existence and apparent motion is completely dependent upon and explained by the other things and their relation between each other (e.g. the sun and its own movement, the lawn, and the shade tree that stands between the light from the former reaching the latter).¹⁰

For Van Cleve, “If Kantian appearances are virtual objects, then to say that someone is aware of an appearance of a certain sort is only to say that he is sensing or intuiting in a certain way.”¹¹ While we may predicate things of these “objects,” and say that they “exist” in our awareness (if only for the sake of convenience), we are really only saying that we are sensing a particular sensation, not that the sensation exists independently of our perception of it.¹² While the details of this view are somewhat complex and certainly controver-

¹⁰ VC 9. The significance of this particular example for Van Cleve seems to be that shadows are not actually *something*, but in reality the *lack of something* (light) in a particular location, which only seems to be a separate existent thing due to our perceptual apparatus.

¹¹ VC 9.

¹² VC 9.

sial, the only important concerns herein are 1) appearances are “virtual objects” which do not in fact exist alongside noumenal objects out in the world but only occur in our minds, and 2) noumena are objectively real, while appearances are mind-dependent. I will subsequently refer to this as Van Cleve’s 2W1MD (two-world, 1 mind-dependent) thesis.

Van Cleve’s Treatment of the “Argument from Geometry”

The second part of Van Cleve’s “promise” relates directly to his idealistic interpretation of Kant’s “argument from geometry” (or at least Van Cleve’s particular reconstruction of Kant’s argument). Since this argument is what motivates Van Cleve considering the NA in the first place, we must examine it before continuing forward.

Here is Van Cleve’s reconstruction of the argument:¹³

1. We cannot construct [visualize] any cubes with more than eight corners (or, any polygons that do not have at least three sides, etc.)
2. Therefore, there cannot *be* any cubes with more than eight corners.
3. The inference from 1 to 2 must be legitimate—otherwise, there would be no accounting for our knowledge of geometrical truths such as 2.
4. However, the inference from 1 to 2 would *not* be legitimate if cubes were things in themselves.
5. Therefore, cubes are not things in themselves, but only appearances [and so forth for all geometrical figures].¹⁴

The inference from 1 to 2 does seem to hold, as long as we realize that we are talking about some kind of logical contradiction in constructing a cube (or any other geometric shape) with fewer or more corners than required by its definition rather than some failure

¹³ I will again refrain from the inquiry into whether Van Cleve does Kant’s argument from geometry justice—for if Van Cleve’s argument is to go through, it has to be valid on the parameters he establishes first, which I again deny.

¹⁴ VC 35. Brackets mine—add qualifications VC himself makes to his argument in subsequent passages.

of our imagination. However, this likely requires an *analytic* view of geometry, while Kant is dedicated to geometrical knowledge being *synthetic*. Either way, let us accept that this inference is *a priori*, as it depends upon logical possibility, and grant the inference for the sake of argument at this time.

The proposition in 3 invokes the necessity of such *a priori* knowledge for geometrical knowledge—for “if the inference from 1 to 2 were *not* legitimate, I could not know that no cube anywhere has more than eight corners, but...I do know this.”¹⁵ So *a priori* knowledge of geometrical figures is necessary for us to have any universal knowledge of them, or as Van Cleve puts it, “the validity of the inference from 1 to 2 is a necessary condition of our having geometrical knowledge.”¹⁶

In moving from 3 to 4, Van Cleve argues, Kant asks himself what would be metaphysically necessary (in the world, not for us) for the inference from 1 to 2 to be valid. Kant’s answer, mysteriously still, is that space and time cannot be things-in-themselves. Thus, for now I am willing to grant premises 1-3 as true on whatever grounds Kant or Van Cleve wish they be accepted. The tricky part here is how we get from premises 1-3 to premise 4: the denial of the inference from 1 to 2 if cubes were things in themselves. This is the NA—why must the necessity of our possessing certain knowledge of something *a priori* necessarily rule out that those very things we possess *a priori* as knowledge (or more correctly for the NA, as pure forms of intuitions) must be denied objective reality in the realm of the noumenal?

Van Cleve considers two objections to this argument, the first being the synthetic v. analytic dispute over the conception of geometry, which as I mentioned above would undermine premise 3. I parallel Van Cleve and just accept that Kant is right about this, as for the purposes of this inquiry as it has no bearing on Van Cleve’s response to the NA. Though it would certainly defeat the argument if Kant is wrong about geometric knowledge being synthetic, which he likely is once non-Euclidean geometries are considered, my purpose is to address proposed solutions to how and why Kant himself moves from

¹⁵ VC 35.

¹⁶ VC 35..

premise 3 to premise 4 in the historical context of Kant's sole commitment to Euclidean geometry.

The second objection Van Cleve considers, however, is analogous to the objection that is the focus of this paper:

Why does the legitimacy of the 1-2 inference preclude the possibility that some things in themselves are cubical? Could it not be the case that the laws of geometry govern not only the constructions that are possible for human beings, but also the configurations that are possible among things in themselves. Perhaps (as Kant sometimes charges) that would be an implausibly preestablished harmony, but what rules it out?¹⁷

Here is where Van Cleve draws the appropriate parallel, acknowledging that this objection to the argument from geometry is a special case of the NA. Here also is where we get Van Cleve's promise to provide an answer to this objection. At the very least, we should expect some sort of credible answer to the special case if not the more generalized claim.

Attempting to Explain Away the Neglected Alternative

In proceeding with his argument for why the NA is not a problem for Kant, I would like to first point out that Van Cleve does ask some of the right questions—it is only in his answers that he goes astray. Van Cleve acknowledges that the specific objection to the argument from geometry has bite (and assumedly, he also thereby acknowledges the more general concern of the NA), as it could certainly be the case that the 1-2 inference *could be* truth-preserving if cubes were things in themselves.¹⁸ He then suggests that the question to be answered is not whether it is *possible* for the noumenal realm to also be spatial and temporal. Instead, “our question...is under what conditions the 1-2 inference would be *necessarily valid*—not just contingently truth-preserving.”¹⁹

¹⁷ VC 36.

¹⁸ VC 36.

¹⁹ VC 36.

To add support to Kant's requirement for a *necessarily valid* proof, Van Cleve suggests the reader consider:

What further assumption would be needed to get from 1 to 2. The assumption that immediately suggests itself is this: cubes, and spatial figures generally, *exist only in the construction of them*. That is why the constraints on what we can construct are also constraints on all spatial objects: such objects exist only in being constructed.²⁰

To this "immediately suggestive" assumption, Van Cleve makes the following qualifications

1. A cube (or other spatial object) need not be constructed in the mind—it can be *perceived*.
2. Kant seems to allow that objects exist even if they have not actually been intuited—Van Cleve saves his 2W1MD approach to Kant by acknowledging that such objects can exist consistently with his idealism in that they *would* be intuited under certain conditions.²¹

Van Cleve then ignores the second objection (assumedly because it is the one that actually threatens his basis for his entire project) and proceeds to cash out how making this simple assumption about Kant (2W1MD) solves the NA.

With the 2W1MD underwriting the inference from 1 to 2 as valid, Van Cleve argues that this makes premise 4 "quite compelling."²² I take his reasoning to be this: since spatial objects only exist when being constructed, and since we cannot possibly and correctly construct any spatial objects that defy their defining qualities (cubes having more than eight corners), and since we are the only ones that construct spatial objects, there simply cannot be any spatial objects that defy our logical conception of them. If cubes were things in

²⁰ VC 36.

²¹ VC 36-37. One cannot help but think this is quite a blow to Van Cleve's 2W1MD—after all, now we have objects existing independently as long as they *would be* intuited were someone to come upon them and perceive them. It seems someone much more committed to realism could hold the same thing, especially if they think that all things that exist are those that can be perceived.

²² VC 37.

themselves, things we cannot experience and have no *a priori* knowledge of, let alone independent of us for their existence, the inference from 1 to 2 would not be *necessarily* valid; we could never be certain there were not cubes out there with more than eight corners that defy our constructive capacities but nevertheless *exist*.

My Response

Something certainly seems fishy, or unconvincing at best, with Van Cleve's proof. One almost might have the feeling that Van Cleve's solution to the NA is about as unjustified as Kant's outright rejection of the possibility in the first place. If this is the intuition the reader has, I have successfully recounted Van Cleve's argument—for in attempting to offer an answer to Kant's NA, Van Cleve has his own "neglected alternative" premise that essentially begs the question, and certainly does not establish the type of necessary validity of the inference from 1 to 2 that Van Cleve seeks. A formalization of Van Cleve's argument should make help the unjustified move clearer.

Argument for 2W1MD:

P1. Kant is an "honest-to-goodness" idealist (i.e., Berkeleyan idealist)

P2. All appearances are mind-dependent for their existence (from 1).

P3. All appearances are spatial (and temporal) (i.e., a posteriori).

C1. All spatial (and temporal) *appearances* are mind-dependent.

Van Cleve's Revised Argument from Geometry:

P4: We cannot construct [visualize] any cubes with more than eight corners (or, any polygons that do not have at least three sides, etc.)

P5. Spatial figures exist only in the construction [visualization] of them (Assumed Premise)

P6: Therefore, there cannot *be* any cubes with more than eight corners.

P7: The inference from 1 to 2 must be valid for us to have knowledge of cubes (spatial figures).

P8: The inference from 1 to 2 would not be *necessarily valid* if cubes (spatial figures) were things in themselves (things that were not dependent upon us for their existence)

C2: Cubes are not things in themselves (and by analogy, neither are space and time)

First of all, note that (C1) is a conclusion about spatial *appearances*. Van Cleve's 2W1MD only extends to the phenomenal realm when making claims such as "appearances being the way they are means *those very appearances* (and their qualities), must completely depend upon us for their very existence (qualified existence, of course, as "virtual objects")." Van Cleve's 2W1MD leaves the noumenal realm completely alone, as things that do exist independently from us and about which we can have no knowledge.

Second, note what follows from (P4) and (P5), keeping (C1) in mind. (P5) must be about appearances to be derived from Van Cleve's idealism, for it is something we can construct via 1) pure intuition or 2) empirical intuition, and only appearances depend upon us on Van Cleve's view.²³ Since (P5) is in the same language as (P4), (P4) must be about appearances as well. However, this means that what follows from (P4) and (P5) to justify (P6) in the proof is not that there cannot be *noumenal* spatial figures—only that there cannot be *phenomenal* spatial figures with more than eight corners. For an argument depending upon what we can construct, when we are the very source of those constructions, only tells us what can or cannot be *for our constructions*—it tells us nothing about the noumenal realm that is admittedly independent of us.

Next, consider Van Cleve's move to find an assumption that makes the inference from 1 to 2 in his original version of the argument *necessarily valid*. The inference only seems to meet the *necessarily valid* criteria if we have an assumption that completely rules out any possibility for cubes with more than 8 corners. Kant certainly seems to want to rule out noumenal spatial figures, as beyond our empirical experience, from serving as a possible counterexample to our

²³ VC 5, 36-37.

certainty of geometric knowledge. However, Van Cleve's 2W1MD, serving as the omitted assumption, effectively locks Kant further into knowledge of only the phenomenal realm rather than transcending to a negative ontological claim about the noumenal.

If Van Cleve's argument tempts anyone, it is because of the ambiguous language of (P5), suggesting that *all* spatial objects (phenomenal and noumenal) exist only when constructed, and thus if we cannot construct them and we are their source, there cannot ontologically *be* any. This is why I say his assumed premise, serving ambiguously, begs the question—it must be read as such, and thus beg the question, in order to go through. Only by reading it in the latter sense do you get a valid argument, necessarily valid or not. Read as it should be, it is simply invalid.

Conclusion

Considering all this as nothing more than an answer to the neglected alternative, just throwing out the argument that—1) since all spatial appearances are mind-dependent, and 2) that since we cannot conceive of spatial figures other than a certain way, that C) therefore no spatial objects can exist independently of us—simply does not follow or must beg the question—that *all* spatial *things* are *merely* appearances. Even were we to grant that Kant was such a Berkeleyan idealist as Van Cleve makes him out to be, Van Cleve's "to be is to be perceived" only concerns appearances. Van Cleve still has to admit, and does, that Kant is also a noumenalist. That appearances must depend on us for their *Sein* in order to depend on us for their *Sosein* (which is highly controversial, but even IF it was the case) only grounds the assertion that the existence of phenomena (*Sein*), as well as the phenomena being spatial (*Sosein*) depends upon us. It says nothing about the impossibility of noumena being spatial. Finally, the further textual evidence Van Cleve offers for his interpretation, as it best supports the Copernican Revolution, gains no further traction—for the 'objects' under discussion in relation to Kant's "revolution" must also be phenomenal, not noumenal.

Thus, Van Cleve simply does not provide any helpful solutions or explanations for the neglected alternative. He does not adequately address either of the criteria outlined in my introduction for sub-

stantively responding to the objection, though he does hint at Kant's motivation—that Kant in some way seeks to establish certain *synthetic a priori* knowledge (such as math, geometry, and science) as necessarily valid in order to protect them from relativism. Whether Van Cleve's "honest-to-goodness" idealist interpretation of Kant has merit in answering other "problems from Kant" I leave to the reader or other commentators—I am only certain it does not and cannot help with the infamous neglected alternative objection. Either way, Van Cleve's main problem for this inquiry is not (though it certainly doesn't help) asserting *esse est percipi*. It attempts to make an argument valid via *petitio principii*.