

Symposium: Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant

Comments on George Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant”*

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Professor Walsh has provided an illuminating overview of Kant’s metaphysics and of Ayn Rand’s critique of Kantianism. As Walsh remarks, Rand viewed her own philosophy as diametrically opposed to Kant’s concerning every fundamental issue of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, and religion. Walsh’s paper is confined to issues of metaphysics and epistemology, which Rand regarded as most fundamental.

According to Rand’s interpretation, Kant’s epistemology and metaphysics leads to the view—as summed up by Leonard Peikoff—that “reason is impotent to discover anything about reality.”¹ Rand finds in Kant the argument that “man’s knowledge is not valid because his consciousness possesses identity.”² The gist of her interpretation is that reality as human beings perceive it

¹ Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels* (New York, 1982), p. 24; quoted in Walsh, p. 1.

² Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (New York, 1990; expanded second edition), p. 80 [cited henceforth as IOE]; cited in Walsh, p. 1.

is a distortion. The distorting mechanism is man's conceptual faculty: man's basic concepts (such as time, space, existence) are not derived from experience or reality, but come from an automatic system of filters in his consciousness (labeled "categories" and "forms of perception") which impose their own design on his perception of the external world and make him incapable of perceiving it in any manner other than the one in which he does perceive it. This proves, said Kant, that man's concepts are only a delusion, but a *collective* delusion which no one has the power to escape. Thus reason and science are "limited," said Kant; they are valid only so long as they deal with this world, with a permanent, predetermined collective delusion, but they are impotent to deal with the fundamental metaphysical issues of existence, which belong to the "noumenal" world [which is] . . . unknowable; [but] is the world of "real" reality, "superior" truth and "things in themselves" or "things as they are"—which means: things as they are not perceived by man.³

As Walsh correctly observes, Rand here ascribes a series of alleged statements to Kant but does not provide direct quotations in support of her interpretation. The source of the foregoing interpretation is Rand's essay, "For the New Intellectual," which is a polemic and a manifesto for Rand's intellectual followers rather than a work of scholarly exegesis. This work offers a broad-brush history of philosophy containing a number of unflattering cameos of famous thinkers, of which the above sketch of Kant is typical. This approach leaves Rand open to the charge that she is misrepresenting Kant or misunderstanding him, or both. Indeed, I think that Walsh has compiled detailed and persuasive evidence that the explicit statements regarding reason and reality which Rand has attributed to Kant do not agree with Kant's own characterization of his position.

However, even if one agrees with Walsh that Rand attributes to Kant claims regarding reason and reality that he does not explicitly make, there remains the more important question: has Rand accurately identified the fundamental implications or presuppositions of Kant's metaphysics and epistemology—regardless of whether Kant

³ Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York, 1961), pp. 32–33 [cited henceforth as FNI]; cited in Walsh, p. 1.

acknowledged them as such—when she asserts that “the entire apparatus of Kant’s system . . . [rests] on a single point: that man’s knowledge is not valid because his consciousness possesses identity.”⁴ The first question, then, is whether Rand is here offering a fundamental insight into Kantian epistemology or whether, as Walsh maintains, this is “a point of misinterpretation.”⁵ The second question is whether Rand has good reasons for rejecting the Kantian view. These are the principal questions which I wish to pursue in this commentary.

Let us begin with the form of argument which Rand imputes to Kant. Walsh denies that Kant ever endorsed this argument, although he correctly remarks that Kant’s alleged major premise is found in Aristotle. Aristotle himself derived this premise from Anaxagoras, a Pre-Socratic philosopher:

. . . since everything is a possible object of thought, mind in order, as Anaxagoras says, to dominate, that is, to know, must be pure from all admixture; for the co-presence of what is alien to its nature is a hindrance and a block: it follows that it can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity. Thus that in the soul which is called thought (by thought I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges) is, before it thinks, not any actually real thing. For this reason it cannot reasonably be regarded as blended with the body: if so, it would acquire some quality, e.g. warmth or cold, or even have an organ like the sensitive faculty: as it is, it has none.⁶

Anaxagoras evidently thought that the mind would be impeded from knowing its objects if it contained any foreign impurities. It would be like a frosted window or a tarnished mirror. Anaxagoras’s principle is that the mind can have knowledge of reality only if it possesses no determinate nature of its own. I shall refer to this as *the transparency requirement*.⁷ As we can see from the passage I just

⁴ IOE, p. 80.

⁵ Walsh, pp. 15–19.

⁶ Aristotle, *De Anima* III.4.429a18-27; revised Oxford translation.

⁷ The Greek word for “transparent” is *diaphanes*. Hence, this is referred to as *the diaphanous model* of consciousness. The mirror metaphor is also used by Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York, 1991), p. 47

cited, Aristotle accepts Anaxagoras's transparency requirement and reasons from it by *modus ponens* that the mind (or intellect, as *nous* is usually translated in Aristotle) is unmixed or pure:

1. The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.
2. The mind can know reality.
3. Therefore, the mind has no determinate nature of its own.

For Aristotle the mind or intellect is a pure capacity to know. Since it lacks any material admixture, it is in principle separable from the body and immortal.

However, the transparency requirement is a double-edged sword. Already in ancient times skeptical philosophers were at least implicitly using the transparency requirement as the major premise of a *modus tollens* argument:

1. The mind can know reality only if it has no determinate nature of its own.
2. But the mind does have a determinate nature of its own.
3. Therefore, the mind cannot know reality.

As applied to perception the transparency requirement amounts to the following: "if the means by which we perceive affect the way things appear in perception, then we cannot perceive things as they are, but only their effects on us."⁸ The main argument of the ancient skeptics (e.g., Aenesidemus of Cnossus) was that the mind is inextricably bound up with the senses, which depend on the body, are situated in particular places and times and are influenced by all sorts of environmental factors. The more extreme, Pyrrhonian skeptics went so far as to argue that the human beings cannot know *anything*

[cited henceforth as OPAR]: "The mirror theory holds that consciousness acts, or should act, as a luminous mirror (or diaphanous substances), reproducing external entities faithfully in its own inner world, untainted by any contribution from its organs of perception," p. 47). The mirror metaphor is also used by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979).

⁸ David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses* (Baton Rouge, 1986), p. 104 [cited henceforth as ES].

whatsoever and should reconcile themselves to a state of invincible ignorance. According to Rand, Kant fully grasped the import of this skeptical argument and accepted it, as long as ‘reality’ denotes things-in-themselves or things as they are independently of consciousness.⁹ However, Kant sought to evade the snares of skepticism by redefining ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’. Reality, for Kant, is a construct of consciousness and knowledge is a determinate form of awareness of this construct.

On this interpretation Kant is using a persuasive definition, redefining ‘knowledge’ as a delusion but continuing to use the word because of its comforting, anti-skeptical connotations. As Walsh remarks, Kant’s theory has been interpreted along similar lines by Schopenhauer among others, who states that for Kant, like Plato, “the world presenting itself to the senses has no true being . . . and that the grasp of it is a delusion rather than knowledge.”¹⁰ Because the reality which we perceive is the result of forms which are “hard-wired” into every human mind, the world as all humans perceive is, in Rand’s words, a “collective delusion.”¹¹

Walsh objects that this criticism is unfair to Kant, because Kant held that the scientific reasoning was able to grasp empirical reality. Empirical reality is characterized by spatio-temporal relations, which are forms imposed by the mind in perception. To be sure, these forms are “ideal,” in that they do not characterize things-in-themselves independently of being perceived by us. Nonetheless, since the mind cannot escape their use, space and time are predictable features of our future experience.¹² Secondly, Walsh objects that Kant would not agree that the use of space and time and the categories represents a “delusion,” because Kant makes a distinction within our sensory representations between how objects look and how they really are. The distinction is based on empirically observable regularities. We can say

⁹ The connection between Aristotle’s transparency requirement and Kant is also noted by John Herman Randall, *Aristotle* (New York, 1960), p. 91; compare Kelley, ES, p. 38n.

¹⁰ Cited in Walsh, p. 17.

¹¹ See note 2 above.

¹² Walsh, p. 18, citing Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (translated by Norman Kemp Smith, London, 1933), B56 [cited henceforth as CPR].

the stick in the water only “looks” bent but is really straight, because the latter judgment coheres better with our overall observations of the stick. We cannot similarly say that the stick only “looks” spatio-temporal because we have no way of observing it as not spatio-temporal.¹³

Rand’s reply to Walsh’s objections would presumably be that Kant is using the terms ‘reality’ and ‘delusion’ in an equivocal fashion. The shift in meaning is quite explicit and recurs throughout Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, in the following passage from “The Antinomy of Pure Reason” where Kant distinguishes his position from two others: His position, called *transcendental idealism*, holds that “everything intuited in space or time, and therefore all objects of any experience possible to us, are nothing but appearances, that is, mere representations, which, in the manner in which they are represented, as extended beings, or as series of alterations, have no existence outside our thoughts.” This position differs from two other positions: *transcendental realism*, which treats representations, or the modifications of our sensibility, as self-subsistent things or things-in-themselves; and *empirical idealism* (e.g., Berkeley’s theory) which admits only the objects of inner sense but “denies the existence of extended beings in-[space], or at least considers their existence doubtful, and so does not in this regard allow of any properly demonstrable distinction between truth and dreams.” Kant’s own transcendental idealism “admits the reality of the objects of outer intuition, as intuited in space, and of all changes in time, as represented by inner senses. . . . But this space and this time, and with them all appearances, are not in themselves *things*; they are nothing but representations, and cannot exist outside our mind.”¹⁴ In support of this, earlier on, in the “Transcendental Aesthetic,” Kant makes the following statement:

Time and space, taken together, are the pure forms of all sensible intuition, and so are what make *a priori* synthetic propositions possible. But these *a priori* sources of knowledge, being merely conditions of our sensibility, just by this very fact determine their own limits, namely, that they apply to objects

¹³ Walsh, loc. cit., citing D. P. Dryer, *Kant’s Solution for Verification in Metaphysics* (London, 1966), p. 517.

¹⁴ Kant, CPR, A491–92=B519–20.

only in so far as objects are viewed as appearances, and do not present things as they are in themselves. This is the sole field of validity; should we pass beyond it, no objective use can be made of them.¹⁵

I call attention to the clause regarding time and space: “. . . being merely conditions of our sensibility, just by this very fact determine their own limits . . .” This passage suggests that Rand is on target when she claims that Kant is assuming the transparency requirement. Otherwise, it would be hard to see why from the mere fact that the sensibility has certain conditions it follows that it is limited and does not reveal things as they are in themselves. It would seem then that Kant’s solution is to distinguish between reality *per se* and “empirical” reality and to say that we can know the latter but not the former.

Rand might also reply that Walsh’s second objection requires a similar redefinition of ‘delusion’ or ‘untrue experience’.

Here ‘untrue’ is no longer defined in terms of the correspondence theory of truth but the coherence theory. For ‘delusion’ no longer means ‘an experience not corresponding to things as they are in themselves’ but merely ‘an experience not cohering with our other regular experiences’. The conviction of a group of paranoid schizophrenics that they are being spied on and persecuted by the Salvation Army may turn out to [be] “true” and “nondelusory” in Kant’s coherence sense, even though their belief does not correspond to the facts of reality.

Next, we turn to the question of whether Rand is correct to reject Kant’s view of knowledge and reality. The situation of the human knower for Kant has been compared to that of a person viewing the world through colored spectacles.¹⁶ If I view the world through rose-colored glasses, all objects I see will have a rosy tint. I may be uncertain whether a given object before me is actually rose colored or merely appears to me this way because of my peculiar condition. If other people tell me that the object is white rather than rose-colored, I may conclude that my senses are deceiving me. Of course, I could remove the spectacles and look directly at the object. But the analogy

¹⁵ Kant, CPR, A39=B56.

¹⁶ H. J. Paton, *Kant’s Metaphysics of Experience* (London, 1952, second edition).

to Kant's theory of sensibility requires that I do not have this option; the spectacles are a permanent part of my sensory equipment, more like the lens in my eye. I may, however, ultimately accept the hypothesis that I see only rose-colored objects because this is a condition of my sensibility. This is analogous to Kant's *Copernican hypothesis*: instead of assuming that all our knowledge must conform to objects, we instead assume that objects must conform to our knowledge. Only in this way, Kant says, can we have *a priori* knowledge of objects.¹⁷

The analogy of the spectacles is, however, misleading in an important way. By using color perception, the analogy implies that we can perceive external objects, although this awareness is distorted with respect to certain accidental qualities. In contrast, Kant maintains that what the mind contributes to awareness comprehends the necessary and universal properties of things: including space, time, causality, and existence. Therefore, the mind does not merely "color" its objects; it constructs them in a much more radical way. This feature gives rise to questions regarding the overall coherence of Kant's view. Kant never abandons the idea of things-in-themselves, he cannot say *stricto sensu* that these things "exist" or that they are the ultimate "cause" of our experience, because existence and causality themselves are categories which are applicable only within the domain of experience. Hence, Kant's intellectual successors jettisoned things-in-themselves and embraced pure idealism according to which the objects of awareness are entirely constructed through the act of knowing.

Nonetheless, Kant believes that only his approach can account for metaphysical knowledge. Why does he think this? Walsh correctly emphasizes that Kant is trying to explain how it is possible for human reason to arrive at universal and necessary knowledge of reality. Further, Kant maintains that such knowledge is *a priori* because it is not derived by abstraction and it cannot admit of exceptions drawn from experience, for example, "Every event has a cause." Walsh suggests that the key to Kant's theory is to be found in his distinction between two kinds of consciousness, namely intuition or direct awareness of concretes, and conception or thought, which is an indirect awareness of concretes via the awareness of what is common to them.¹⁸ However, I believe that Kant's argument really turns on a more

¹⁷ Kant, CPR, Bxvi.

¹⁸ Walsh, p. 9.

fundamental distinction, which is, ironically, expressed in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form. Knowledge is built up out of two components: the raw material of the senses and the forms which are imposed on this material by the mind itself. As Walsh himself notes,¹⁹ this distinction is found on both the level of sensible intuition and of conceptual thought. Space and time are treated as pure *a priori* forms of intuition, which serve to structure all incoming sensory material in a unified spatio-temporal matrix. My knowledge that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line is *a priori* and certain because it is based on my direct awareness of space and time as pure forms of intuition. Further, as Walsh again notes,²⁰ the matter-form distinction also appears on the level of conceptual thought. The forms of thought include the *a priori* concepts which enable us to synthesize the empirical concepts together into judgments. These formal concepts are called categories. For example, the category of causality enables us to make the judgment that a bolt of lightning caused a forest fire.

The underlying idea in Kant then is that our knowledge is a synthesis of sensory material and forms of consciousness. However, Kant rejects Aristotle's view that knowledge is a process in which forms are *passively* received from external objects by a mind which has a purely potential nature. For Kant accepted the conclusion arrived at by the modern empiricists through Hume that a mere inspection of the passive contents of sensibility cannot reveal universal and necessary metaphysical truths. Instead, the mind must be viewed as essentially active, as structuring the sensory material by means of its own innate forms. This has the two implications for Kant already noted: Because they are innate or "wired in," the forms provide the basis for our *a priori* knowledge. However, because these forms are conditions of our form of awareness, they cannot reveal the way that the world is.

Rand agrees with Kant and opposes Aristotle on a fundamental point: "All knowledge *is* processed knowledge—whether on the sensory, perceptual or conceptual level. An 'unprocessed' knowledge would be a knowledge acquired without means of cognition. Consciousness . . . is not a passive state, but an active process. And more: the satisfaction of every need of a living organism requires an act of processing by that organism, be it the need of air, of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

food or of knowledge.” However, Rand rejects Kant’s use of this very point: “From primordial mysticism to [Kantianism], its climax, the attack on man’s consciousness and particularly on his conceptual faculty has rested on the unchallenged premise that any knowledge acquired by a process of consciousness is necessarily subjective and cannot correspond to the facts of reality, since it is ‘*processed* knowledge.’”²¹ On Rand’s view, although consciousness is epistemologically active, it is not metaphysically active. As David Kelley remarks, “consciousness no more creates its own contents than does the stomach.”²² The rejection of the transparency requirement has a central place in Rand’s own epistemology. This leads us to the question of whether her repudiation of this requirement can be defended. I will conclude by briefly touching on two points. The first point concerns the matter-form distinction. If we hold that knowledge is the result of processing by the mind in accord with its own forms, how can we be assured that this is not a distorting process like the rose-colored glasses mentioned earlier? The objectivist epistemology must contain a theory of form different from both Aristotle’s and Kant’s theories. We find a hint of such a theory on the level of sense-perception in Rand’s notion of perceptual form: here ‘form’ denotes “the aspects of the way an object appears which are determined by the manner in which our senses respond to the object in the particular conditions at hand.”²³ For example, the color of an object might be a part of its perceptual form. The form is not in the external object considered as independent of being perceived; nor is the form “in the mind” as an object of perception in its own right. It is instead a relational state arising from the interaction between the object and our perceptual systems.²⁴ It needs, of course, to be shown that such an analysis can satisfactorily explain sense-perception and deal with the many traditional philosophical problems associated with it. This is a task to which David Kelley has dedicated an important book, *The Evidence of the Senses*.

²¹ Rand, IOE, p. 81.

²² Kelley, ES, p. 41.

²³ Kelley, ES, p. 86. See Rand, IOE, pp. 279–82.

²⁴ As Peikoff remarks in OPAR, p. 46, this idea is anticipated in an embryonic form in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

A similar argument would presumably have to be offered on the conceptual level, to show how the rational faculty plays an active role without distorting its subject matter. Rand provides some suggestions of such an argument in her account of concepts in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. She defines a *concept* as “a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with the particular characteristics omitted.”²⁵ A concept is thus defined in terms of a *unit*, which is defined in turn as “an existent regarded as a separate member of a group of two or more similar members.”²⁶ The unit is the conceptual counterpart of perceptual form. However, whereas perceptual forms are the result of automatic processes, units are formed by conscious and volitional acts of consciousness, by isolating objects on the basis of differences and integrating them as units into separate groups according to their similarities. For Rand, then, “the concept ‘unit’ is the bridge between metaphysics and epistemology: units do not exist *qua* units, what exists are things, but units are things viewed by consciousness in certain existing relationships.”²⁷ The method used in concept-formation is measurement, which is defined as “the identification of . . . a quantitative relationship established by means of a standard that serves as a unit.”²⁸ The most basic concepts—existence, identity, and consciousness—are called *axiomatic concepts* because they cannot be analyzed or reduce to other concepts or broken into component concepts. Axiomatic concepts, which Rand calls “the foundation of objectivity,” are the closest counterparts in her epistemology to Kant’s categories. She discusses axiomatic concepts briefly in Chapter 6 in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, where she maintains that they are perceived or experienced directly, but grasped conceptually.²⁹ The question of the validation of putatively

²⁵ Rand, IOE, p. 13.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 55.

“axiomatic” concepts and of other basic concepts such as causality has, however, not received sufficient attention.³⁰

The second point concerns the character of metaphysical knowledge. I take it that Kant would not accept the sort of analysis offered by Rand because it makes form depend upon the interactions of perceivers and external objects. Since metaphysics aspires to necessary and universal knowledge, it cannot ultimately rest upon forms which are the mere products of contingent interactions. The difference here between Rand and Kant has to do, I think, with the question of whether metaphysicians should aspire to produce a privileged body of truths which are necessary and universal and hence *a priori*.³¹ Ayn Rand has a fundamentally different view of the metaphysical from Kant. On her view ‘metaphysical’ refers to facts in so far as they are not created by human action, and within the metaphysical sphere the distinction between necessity and contingency does not apply. In the metaphysical sphere, all facts are necessarily the case.³² Rand makes distinctions such as those between the essential and the accidental, the more or less fundamental, and the certain and probable; but these distinctions are valid only in well-defined contexts of knowledge.³³ In trying to validate a privileged body of synthetic *a priori* truths, Kant is pursuing a philosophical will-o’-the-wisp which in Rand’s view should be once and for all repudiated.³⁴

³⁰ Even the character such validation should take remains unclear. In what way does it rely on sense-perception? To what extent does it involve self-refutation arguments (or some counterpart of Kantian transcendental arguments)? Peikoff treats the validation of axiomatic concepts very briefly in OPAR, pp. [8–12].

³¹ This is presupposed by the “elimination” argument invoked by Walsh, p. 19.

³² Rand, IOE, p. 299.

³³ The axiomatic concepts and axiomatic truths (e.g., “Existence exists”) are presupposed by all other concepts in all contexts. But these are also fundamental in only an epistemic sense, and they are not marked off as a special set of metaphysically “necessary truths.”

³⁴ See Peikoff, “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” in IOE. The distinction attacked by Rand and Peikoff has also been criticized by academic philosophers—most notably Quine—over the past three decades, although for somewhat different reasons from Rand’s.