

# Response to Seddon

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Fred Seddon's paper seems carefully crafted to miss the essential point of my book - and, more importantly, of the Objectivist epistemology. I think the errors in his analysis can be reduced to three.

1) The diaphanous model of awareness is not, as he represents it, another name for naive realism. The diaphanous model is the view that direct awareness must be passive and transparent, a revelation of its object in which there is no possible distinction between the way the object is and the way it appears. Naive realists hold that the relationship between a perceiver and an external object fits this description. Everyone else realizes that it does not. But most theorists retain the diaphanous model as an implicit definition of direct awareness, and so deny that the perception of external objects is direct. The diaphanous model is thus not a theory of perception per se; it is a basic assumption that most theorists accept as a constraint on any possible theory. Rand's great innovation was to reject this constraint.

She did so because she rejected an even deeper assumption that lies behind the diaphanous model, the assumption that if consciousness has an identity of its own, operating in specific ways dictated by its nature, then it cannot grasp the identities of things external to it. This is the assumption which, I argue in *Evidence of the Senses*, Kant first made explicit in full generality. I believe this is why Rand said that her philosophy was the opposite of Kant's on every fundamental issue. Kant, like Aristotle, accepted the assumption I have just stated. As a realist, however, Aristotle accepted the primacy of existence, which is the single most important issue in epistemology; Kant did not. So even though Kant recognized that every faculty of awareness does have an identity, he and not Aristotle is Rand's polar opposite. To put it differently, the key claim is not the categorical proposition that consciousness has an identity, but the hypothetical proposition that if it does it cannot grasp the identities of external things. (See *Evidence of the Senses*, 39.) It is because Kant accepted this hypothetical claim explicitly, and drew the anti-realist consequence, that he is the perfect foil to the Objectivist approach.

2) I am well aware, and I stated in my book, that Kant believed in objects existing independently of consciousness. That is why I never refer to him as a metaphysical idealist like Hegel or Bradley. But he was an *epistemological* idealist, because of his view about the objects of cognition. The term "object" in epistemology is a correlative of "subject." It means: that which a cognitive subject perceives, knows, is aware of, describes, refers to, etc. So the key epistemological question to ask about Kant is: Does he believe that the objects of cognition exist independently of the subject? Or conversely: Does he believe that things existing independently of the subject can become objects of its cognition? Although Kant waffles on the issue, it seems to me his general answer is clear. He says repeatedly that of things as they are in themselves we know nothing. The objects of knowledge are all *phenomena*: appearances constituted by the operation of our faculties.

Kant's writing is murky enough that there are legitimate debates about what he meant. In particular, there is an alternative interpretation according to which Kant was merely a kind of critical realist, holding that noumena and phenomena are the same things under different aspects; the things we perceive are independent of us, but we perceive them only as they appear to us, non-diaphanously. I don't think this interpretation is supported by the text, although the text does not unambiguously rule it out. But these debates are not relevant here, because as far as I can see Seddon does not invoke this interpretation.

My understanding of Kant is completely in agreement with the summary formulation which Seddon quotes approvingly from H.J. Paton (Seddon, 91). Sometimes, (1) Kant used the term "object" to refer to things in themselves, which exist independently and operate on us in some quasi-causal sense, but whose nature is completely unknown to us. More often, 2) "object" refers to phenomena, indicating that phenomena are objects of cognition (and so must be known). Kant drew a further distinction between the faculty of sense (receptivity) and the faculty of intellect (spontaneity). Neither one gives us access to things in themselves, but they play different roles in constituting the objects of knowledge. Sometimes 3) Kant writes as if phenomenal objects can be grasped at the sensory level, prior to thought - i.e. prior to the categories imposed on them by the intellect. Kant's fully developed view, however, seems to be that 4) we don't really have an object of knowledge until both sense and intellect have worked their constitutive magic on it, so that there are no objects apart from thought.

In describing Kant as an epistemological idealist, I do not rely on point (4), as Seddon alleges. I relied on point (2). What makes Kant an idealist is the view that things constituted by our own faculties are the objects of awareness and standards of truth and objectivity. The distinction between sense and intellect - and thus between what can and cannot be known apart from thought - is simply a further division of labor in the way subjects constitute objects. Most of what Seddon says about Kant's insistence that we can know objects is irrelevant; it rests on an equivocation between things in themselves, which do exist independently and are not created by us, and phenomena, which can be known but are not independent. An especially gross example is his citation of the passage at A277=B333. Kant is concerned in this passage with the relation between sense and intellect. He is saying that pure intellect cannot give us knowledge of nature, whereas sense and intellect together can give us ever-increasing knowledge of nature. The term "nature" here refers, as it does elsewhere in Kant's writing, to the realm of appearances, not to things in themselves. Indeed, just prior to the passage Seddon quotes, Kant says "What the things in themselves may be I do not know, nor do I need to know, since a thing can never come before me except in appearance"(A276-B332; Kemp Smith translation).

3) Despite Seddon's complaints about my use of the term "direct awareness," I use the term consistently in the passages he cites and throughout the book. "Direct" means: without conceptual processing, including inference and the special forms of automatic inference involved in taking one thing as a symbol, sign, or representation of another thing. All realists in perceptual theory hold that we perceive physical objects directly in this sense. Some realists also hold that we perceive such objects diaphanously. Since I take great pains in *Evidence* to separate these two issues, I certainly *can*, despite Seddon's

claim (Seddon, 94), "agree with the traditional realists that we directly perceive reality" even as I disagree with them about whether perception is diaphanous.

Nor was I switching my meaning when I said that "perception is a preconceptual mode of direct awareness of physical objects." As Seddon notes, if "direct" means preconceptual (which it doesn't exactly, but that's close enough), then the sentence is repetitive. Well, yes. Repetition is a device writers sometimes use for emphasis.

Nor is representationalism simply the denial that perception is diaphanous. It is the view that we are directly aware only of internal sense contents, from which we must infer external objects. (And this view is adopted because the representationalist shares with the traditional realist the assumption that direct awareness must be diaphanous. Every argument for representationalism reduces in one way or another to the core argument: Direct awareness is diaphanous; the perception of physical objects is not diaphanous; therefore perception is not direct.) So my position is not "an amalgam of both realism and representationalism," as Seddon says. It is a new position based on rejecting the model of direct awareness that representationalists share with traditional realists.