

Epicurus vs Kant and Modern Idealism - Introduction

Post by “Eikadistes” of April 2, 2026 at 10:52 PM

In his introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

Quote

“The light dove, cleaving the air of her free flight, and fleeing its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. It was thus that Plato left the world of the senses, as setting too narrow limits to understanding, and ventured out beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding.”

I think he agreed that the world of senses, by itself, is "too narrow", but at the same time, Kant heavily criticizes Plátōn for the same reasons that he criticizes the pure rationalism of Descartes. This is important, because as far as "Idealism" goes, Kant is distinguished.

... well, honestly, they're all unique, but, by comparison, Kant is especially analytical.

There are a number of types of Idealisms, and they are each a little different. Plátōn's "Idealism" sometimes reminds me of Descartes (who is **not**, so far as I know, considered an "idealist" by historians of philosophy) in that both thinkers privileged the substance of mind, but neither concluded that the observable world is *literally* composed of *mind*. Typically, we use the word "dualist" with Descartes, and use the word "idealist" with Plátōn, **however**, some scholars consider Plátōn to be a "Realist", in that his *Worlds of Forms* **does** objectively exist, and a world of gross matter is actually trapping our immortal souls in a tricky cage of flesh.

By contrast, the monistic Idealism of Advaita Vedanta, and of George Berkeley (e.g. "If a tree falls in a forest...") suggests that the stuff of existence **is** *literally* composed of *mind*. Both traditions entertained the idea that we are but ideas in the mind of God. Plátōn would have disagreed with this kind of "Idealism", as did Kant. *Something else* is real besides just thinking.

Kant's "Idealism" (if that's what we want to call it, and *I'm not sure if we do*) is **significantly** more analytical than his German peers, each of whom were much, much more influenced by the recently-translated (at the time) copies of the ancient Indian *Upanishads* and *Gita*, which heavily support a form of monistic Idealism that bleeds into 18th-century German philosophy (e.g. *we're just bubbles in an ocean of consciousness* and *life is but a dream*). Kant doesn't suggest anything (so far as I know) like this, and only his peers embrace a mystical kind of Idealism. Even the American Transcendentalists, entranced by Nature privileged (as Emerson wrote) an "invisible eye". This kind of "bubbles-in-an-ocean-of-consciousness" neither accurately describes Plátōn nor Kant.

[Quote from Martin](#)

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4983-epicurus-vs-kant-and-modern-idealism-introduction/?postID=39178#post39178>

The rejection of both plain rationalism and plain empiricism is an overlap between Epicurus and Kant.

I think this is the main thing. Both philosophers demand an 'observe-and-consider' approach to understanding reality. While I *personally* think that Kant's inclusion of "noumena" might qualify him as a kind of Idealist, that's just historical taxonomy. I'm comfortable being wrong on that point. If "Idealism" means "everything is mind", then neither Plátōn nor Kant are Idealists. (I see them both as Idealists, but, again, I think it's just historical taxonomy to an extent).

Outside of this historical significance though, Epíkouros and Kant would argue. Kant wouldn't steal a loaf of bread for a starving child. Epíkouros would have died rather than betray a loved one. They fundamentally disagreed on the question of the divisibility of space, and I think you'd have a tough time convincing Epíkouros that a "thing-it-itself" is any *thing* at all. Still, Kant is a unique enough thinker that we'll find *some* parallels and *some* points of tension with anyone.