

Kant's Antinomies

The Central Argument for Transcendental Idealism

The form of the argument: $P \vee Q, \neg P \vdash Q$ (disjunctive syllogism)

1. Transcendental Idealism and Transcendental Realism are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of metaphilosophical possibility.
2. Transcendental Realism is false. (from contradictions demonstrated in Antinomies)
3. Hence, Transcendental Idealism is the correct metaphilosophical doctrine.

The Basic Error: applying the Categories to in-itself reality

Source of this Error: Transcendental Realism

The Antinomies are conflicts reason encounters when it fails to recognize the Transcendental nature of its forms of thought.

- I.e., this sort of mistake is made inevitable by Transcendental Realism.
- Application of a Category to in-itself reality results in what Kant calls a "Cosmological Idea." A Cosmological Idea is representation of in-itself reality (or some portion thereof) in the terms the mind uses to depict empirical reality. Since empirical reality is not (at all) the same thing as in-itself reality, the categories (basic concepts defining empirical reality) do not apply to in-itself reality.
- This mistake is common and understandable. Our basic metaphysical concepts (the categories) have the explicit function of representing something as Real, Objective, Mind-Independent. So it is natural to think that the things so-represented should be real, objective, and mind-independent in themselves. But, of course, they are not, according to Kant. They are merely *ways* that we represent things; and in-itself reality happens to appear to us in the same way.
- For example, we represent the world as composed of objects and events. Does this mean that the world, in itself, is an object or event? According to Kant, the answer is 'No.' Neither of these concepts applies to the world in itself. But it is a common error for reason to "extend" itself from transcendental appearance to in-itself reality, so that we tend to think of the world as a big object or big event. Thinking in this transcendental realist way, however, leads to antinomy.
- Argument based on First Antinomy (A506-7/B534-5):
 1. If the world is a whole existing in itself (i.e., an object or event), then the world is either finite or infinite.
 2. The first antinomy demonstrates that the world is not either finite or infinite.
 3. Hence, the world is not a whole existing in itself (object or event).
 4. Transcendental realism entails that the world is a whole existing in itself.
 5. Hence, Transcendental realism is false.
- [To be more precise: This first antinomy derives from the concept of Quantity, a Category of reason. Reason tends to think as follows: I experience a certain amount of space, say in this coffee cup, here. (Or, a certain amount of time, as in writing this

sentence.) This gives me a “conditioned” element in my experience: i.e., part of my experiential manifold is conditioned by the concept of quantity, or a certain amount of something. Given this notion of a certain amount, the mind easily moves to the “unconditioned” form of this thought, a totality (of space, or of time) of which the part I experience (that cup) is but a small portion. Unless I am careful, here, I shall mistake myself to be thinking, now, of “the whole world.” But I am not: I am only moving beyond possible experience (of a certain amount) into a realm which I cannot experience. Here, however, my concepts (which apply only to what I can experience) no longer apply. So, rather than taking “the whole of space” to represent the whole world, I should recognize, simply, that that concept (“the whole of space”) has no application to any intuition. Frequently, however, I am less cautious (because I haven’t read my Kant), and so mistake the extended whole-of-space concept for the world-in-itself.]

- This explains the endless (mistaken) disputes over whether the world has a cause; whether the world has a beginning; whether there exists a necessary being; whether an object is composed of atoms or, rather, is endlessly divisible into parts.
- I.e., here Kant makes good on his promise to resolve certain metaphysical dilemmas: the dilemmas are mistakes of reasoning born of failure to recognize the Transcendental nature of human knowledge. They derive from Transcendental Realism. The solution is Transcendental Idealism.

The Argument in the First Antinomy

The simplest representation of the argument is this (after Henry Allison):

The Falsity of Transcendental Realism follows directly from the falsity of the Cosmological Idea. So, if we can find independent reason for thinking the Cosmological Idea a defective idea, we can show Transcendental Realism false.

The Cosmological Idea: The world is the sum of appearances.

- I.e., it is a *totum syntheticum*, a whole composed of parts.
- I.e., it is a vast empirical object composed of lesser empirical objects.

The problem with this idea is not simply that there is no such object; that would make the concept empty, but not incoherent.

Incoherence of this idea:

1. The notion of the world as a sum of all appearances is one that purports to refer – i.e., to such a world.
2. The notion of the world as a sum of all appearances explicitly exempts itself from the possibility of referring.
3. Hence, this notion is incoherent.

The argument for (2):

- 2a. The conditions of empirical reference are determined by the conditions of empirical experience. (The idea here is that what counts as an empirical object in

- the first place is determined by the possibilities of experience. If I can experience it, it is, by definition, an empirical object; if not, not.)
- 2b. It is not possible to experience either an infinite space or an infinite time, nor a bounded (totality of) space or a bounded (totality of) time.
 - 2c. If so, then it is not possible to experience the sum of all appearances; the world is not a possible object of experience.
 - 2d. Hence (with 2a), the sum of all appearances is not a possible object of reference.

I.e., since the notion of a whole world, a synthetic whole, is clearly one that is intended to refer to an empirical object, and since it precisely cannot refer to any such object, the Cosmological Idea is a defective, incoherent object.

- Note, again, that this does mean that “the world” as a whole is not, then, an empirical object and thus not a self-contained entity as we may ordinarily think it to be. Part of the lesson of the Antinomies is that such a notion is in itself defective. The mistake is made in reifying a Transcendental Idea, a rule of thought. The rule of thought in question here is, generally, that of the world as a whole. More specifically, the rules Quantity, Causality, Necessity, and Reality all invite the regress from conditioned to unconditioned; these notions generate the notion of the world as a whole, a sum of appearances. Unless one is aware of the fact that the “unconditioned” here is merely a rule of thought, a way of thinking, and not an entity of any kind, one falls into error. I.e., only the Transcendental Idealist has the proper philosophical method by which to avoid this kind of mistake.