

# 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 metaphysical possibility.
2. Transcendental Realism is false. (from contradictions demonstrated in Antinomies)
3. Hence, Transcendental Idealism is the correct metaphysical doctrine.

Argument based on First Antinomy (A506-7/B534-5)

1. If the world is a whole existing in itself, 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.
4. Transcendental realism entails that the world is a whole existing in itself.
5. Hence, Transcendental realism is false.

## What are the Antinomies?

At stake: the "euthanasia of pure reason" (A407/B434)

Logical Principle of Sufficient Reason: every true proposition must have a ground or reason; what is the ground/reason of the proposition that "it is now 12:00 noon"?

- This principle leads to antinomies via the application to the world as a whole of certain categorial ideas (e.g., quantity, composition, causality, necessity, substance).
- The application of some categorial ideas to empirical objects invites a regress creating problems for reason (provided, that is, one isn't aware of Transcendental Idealism). Kant calls this a serial synthesis or ordering: the conceptual process by which we conceive a totality as consisting in such a series.
- For example, the notion of a present moment (involving the Categorial idea of quantity – a quantum of time) invites the thought of the previous moment, and the moment prior to that, and so on.
- This leads naturally (for the unsuspecting) to the postulation of a whole temporal order. And it's an expression of the following principle:

Principle of Synthetic Totality: "if the conditioned is given, then the entire sum of conditions and hence the absolutely unconditioned (through which alone the conditioned was possible) is also given" (A409/B436)

- The conditioned: the empirical as conditioned by the categories of reason; e.g., quantity (space, time), reality, causality, necessity (only these invite a regress to the unconditioned)
- The unconditioned: a totality extrapolated from the requirements of understanding a thing to be conditioned; e.g., the present moment is conditioned by the totality of past moments – i.e., we think a moment of time in terms of there being previous moments; the totality of past moments (of time) is not itself conditioned (on this mistaken way of thinking)

Cosmological Ideas: the result of extending to the whole world the categories of reason; e.g., the whole of space or time

*The* Cosmological Idea: that the world is a whole existing in itself.

- The specific Cosmological Ideas are expressions/determinations of this overarching idea.
- E.g., the notion of a whole temporal order, or of a whole spatial order is the notion of a world embodying such an order.
- Cosmological Ideas are all mistakes of reasoning. They are due to the failure to recognize the Transcendental nature of the a priori. Because one does not recognize that time, for instance, is simply a form of the representation of Inner Sense, one has no reason not to extend the notion of a temporal object of cognition (a given moment) to a whole temporal order. The mistake here lies in failing to recognize that time is not a characteristic of a thing in itself, but, rather, a characteristic of a way of representing an appearance.

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.
- 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: they are mistakes of reasoning born of failure to recognize the Transcendental nature of human knowledge.

### Are the proofs of the Antinomies sound?

First Antinomy: from quantity (A426/B454f)

Thesis: The world has both a beginning in time and a limit in space (world is finite).

Antithesis: The world has neither a beginning in time nor a limit in space (world is infinite).

Both time and space are quantities, as we understand them; the regress implicit in any given unit of these quantities raises the question of how the quantity, considered as a whole, applies to the world. Is the world infinite or finite in respect of time and space?

Note: it is the character of *the world itself*, not time or space, that is in question here. I.e., is there an infinite series of prior states of the world? is the world itself spatially unlimited. Space and time, as such, are already given as infinite. Another way of putting the matter: can these notions (and the infinity they imply) be applied to the world as a whole existing in itself?

The arguments (re time): both *reductios*

Thesis

1. The world has no beginning in time.
2. If so, then up to any given moment, an eternal (infinite) series of world states has elapsed.
3. The concept of an infinite series is the concept of a series that cannot be completed by successive synthesis.
4. Hence, the concept of a world having no beginning in time is the concept of a world in which an incompletable synthetic series has been completed.
5. Hence, the concept of a world that has no beginning in time is self-contradictory.
6. Hence, the world must be finite in time.

Antithesis

1. The world has a beginning in time.
2. The concept of a beginning presupposes a preceding time in which the thing in question does not yet exist.
3. Hence, there is a time prior to the world's beginning which is empty (since the world is all there is).
4. It is impossible that anything should come into being from an empty time (a time in which nothing exists).
5. Hence, the world cannot have a beginning in time.
6. Hence, the world must be infinite in time.

Lemma for (4)

- 4a. If time is empty, then there is nothing to distinguish one moment of time from another.
- 4b. If so, then it is meaningless to speak of an event as beginning at one moment of empty time as opposed to any other.
- 4c. If so, we cannot speak meaningfully of that event as having a beginning in empty time.
- 4d. If it is meaningless to speak of a given event, then there is no possibility that that event occur (i.e., we aren't really thinking of any determinate event at all).
- 4e. Hence, it is impossible that anything should come into being from an empty time.

The problem here (concerning the Thesis argument):

- There is no reason to think that the past must be represented as a *totum syntheticum*.
- Why not think of the past as an infinite series closed at one end?
- Indeed, Kant elsewhere rejects this idea: the notion of the world as a complete whole is a Transcendental Illusion. So, it's illegitimate to think of the preceding portion of the world as a completed whole.

- This problem affects all the antinomies in some form or other. Kant ascribes to the Transcendental Realist claims which are unnecessary for that theorist to hold and which Kant himself explicitly rejects.
- Hence, we need to supply a replacement argument, if possible.

### Allison's replacement argument

(See Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, pp. 56-59)

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 have a replacement argument.

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 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.
- Note the correspondence between the Realist desire to think of the whole world and the Theistic conception of epistemology. The God's eye view on reality is precisely one from which one might “experience” the whole of the world. Obviously, however, such a view is not possible for humans (at least, not by the usual sensory or intellectual means).