

# Kant's Freedom and Transcendental Idealism

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Kant's theory of freedom depends strongly on his account of causation, and must for its cogency make sense of the nomological sufficiency of events on the one hand, and the kind of undetermined freedom we seem to have on the other. In the Third Antinomy, Kant defuses a pair of apparently contradictory arguments concerning just these questions of causation, and therein develops his account of freedom. In this paper I will explicate the arguments of the Third Antinomy and certain passages concerning freedom in the first *Critique*, and I will briefly consider whether his account is intuitively plausible. I will conclude by suggesting how the account's resolution through Transcendental Idealism might make it susceptible to a charge of epiphenomenalism.

## The Third Antinomy

The Antinomies present a special kind of paradox, in that supposing either the truth or falsity of each of the theses entails a contradiction.<sup>1</sup> The argument form proceeds via an assumption of the opposite of what it intends to prove in order to derive an absurdity and thus to reject the original opposing assumption. The paradox arises since the assumed opposing view (which is shown to result in absurdity) is precisely that which Kant in the opposing thesis will argue *for*.<sup>2</sup>

**Argument for the thesis.** Kant here argues that natural causality according to the principle of sufficient reason (the laws of nature) does not exhaustively account for the appearances of the world – rather, it is “necessary to assume another causality through freedom in order to explain them.”<sup>3</sup> He begins by having us suppose that the world operated according merely to the laws of nature. On this

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hanna, R. (2006): “on the assumption of the thesis, *P*, a contradiction can be derived; and on the assumption of the antithesis,  $\sim P$ , another contradiction can be derived. So an antinomy is a proposition whose truth entails a contradiction and whose falsity also entails a contradiction” (p410).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Allison, H. (2007): “since it is assumed by both parties that these alternatives are themselves contradictory, the refutation of one is seen as equivalent to the demonstration of the other” (p394).

<sup>3</sup> Kant, I. (2000). *Critique of Pure Reason*. (P. Guyer, & A. Wood, Eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Hereafter *CPR*), A444/B472

assumption we would see that some event had a cause, which was itself caused, which was in turn itself caused and so on. This infinite regress entails that there was no “first beginning,”<sup>4</sup> and is thus never a complete chain. This, Kant contends, is an untenable result, as it conflicts with the demand of the law of nature that “nothing happens without a cause sufficiently determined *a priori*.”<sup>5</sup> This last point, although controversial,<sup>6</sup> does admit of one intuitive reading, namely that an infinitely regressive causal succession stands in contradiction to the claim that natural causality provides us with an *exhaustive* account of causation.<sup>7</sup> (This, Kant argues, is incorrectly to adopt a position of Transcendental Realism, taking the laws of nature in “unlimited universality.”<sup>8</sup>) From this, Kant contends that his initial assumption must be mistaken, and that

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<sup>4</sup> CPR A446/B474

<sup>5</sup> CPR A446/B474

<sup>6</sup> There are several queries about this premise. Firstly, it could be argued that Kant is helping himself to a version of the law of nature which he is not entitled to. Pruss (2006) points out a crucial difference between the ‘Causal Principle’ and the Principle of Sufficient Reason: “One major difference between a Causal Principle and a PSR is that a CP, *prima facie*, is compatible with an ungrounded infinite chain of causes, while a PSR is not, since there is no explanation for the whole chain” (p41). It is clear that since his premise depends on a version which is incompatible with an ungrounded chain, that his strength of his argument will turn on whether this is the correct version of the principle. There is an additional question of what precisely he is allowed to conclude from the Analogies regarding necessary causal laws. This point is related to the concern that, *contra* Kant, there is no absurdity in supposing an infinite causal chain. Furthermore, it might be wondered how he uses the term *a priori* in this formulation. However, given Kant’s explication of his use of the term (see CPR A1, B1, B4 etc.), his contention amounts unproblematically, I think, to saying that it is a necessary truth (thus not given in experience) that every event has a fully determining cause, which is one wholly sufficient to bring about that effect.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Grier (2001): “the assumption that mechanistic causality is exhaustive is self-contradictory” (p215). See also Guyer’s (2006) helpful way of putting this: “the principle of sufficient reason [here is] understood as the principle that every event does have a complete explanation, which in order to be complete must terminate in a cause that is not itself an effect of something else” (p141).

<sup>8</sup> CPR A446/B474.

merely natural causation is untenable if not supplemented by a causality through freedom.<sup>9</sup>

**Argument for the antithesis.** Here Kant considers an argument for the inverse conclusion that “There is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature.”<sup>10</sup> If we suppose that there were transcendental freedom, what untenable consequence might obtain? We would have an event, say, which is not caused – its causality will begin absolutely – and which itself leads to another event, which leads to a further event and so on. However, the principle of sufficient reason demands that every event has a fully determining cause which it follows in accordance with constant laws. Yet this is precisely what is *denied* of such a first beginning; such an event is posited specifically as having no prior causal connections whatever. This is plainly at odds with the causal law. Kant contends further that this shows that such a first beginning could not be a possible object of thought<sup>11</sup> insofar as it diverges from causal law, as it would not condition the unity of our experience.<sup>12, 13</sup>

## Resolution: Transcendental Idealism

The question which elicits the supposed dilemma is this: *Is the causal series complete?*<sup>14</sup> Prima facie, answering affirmatively entails positing an undetermined first beginning; answering negatively entails an infinite causal regress. Kant declines to eschew either one of the theses, but contends rather that they are not contradictory in the first place.<sup>15</sup> There is an element of illusion at

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. CPR A446/B474: This causality through freedom is specified as “an **absolute** causal **spontaneity** beginning **from itself** a series of appearances that runs according to natural laws.”

<sup>10</sup> CPR A445/B473

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A533/B561: “Freedom in this signification is a pure transcendental idea, which, first, contains nothing borrowed from experience, and second, the object of which cannot be given determinately in any experience.”

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CPR A194

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted for assistance in the exegesis of the Third Antinomy to Grier, M. (2006), p203, and Guyer, P. (2006), pp142-143, and Buroker, J. (2006), pp244-246.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Buroker, J. V. (2006). *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p229

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Grier (2001) “Unlike the mathematical antinomies, resolution of these involves establishing the possibility that both sides to the dispute are correct” (p214).

work, given reason's temptation towards transcendent metaphysics – that is, transcendental *realism*.<sup>16</sup> The illusion, which we cannot but be drawn towards,<sup>17</sup> arises as a result of conflating the phenomenal and noumenal aspects of an object<sup>18</sup> when we apply the unschematised category of causation.<sup>19</sup> In Kant's words, "If one represents everything through mere pure concepts of the understanding (the categories), without the conditions of sensible intuition (space and time), then one can say directly that for a given conditioned the whole series of conditions subordinated one to another is given."<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the unschematised category of cause cannot give us knowledge of appearances, as it does not contain the spatiotemporal determination which conditions our experience.<sup>21</sup>

Kant's Transcendental Idealism permits him to claim that the theses do not conflict,<sup>22</sup> as he can distinguish between that which is empirical and that which

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *CPR* A543/B571: "If we would give in to the deception of transcendental realism, then neither nature nor freedom would be left".

<sup>17</sup> *CPR* B354: "Transcendental illusion... does not cease even after it has been detected and its invalidity revealed by transcendental criticism... This is an illusion which cannot be avoided at all... just as little as the astronomer can prevent the moon from appearing larger at its rising."

<sup>18</sup> This way of framing the conflation is to presume a version of the "One World" or "Two-Aspect" view of Transcendental Idealism. Cf. Reath (2006): "By claiming that spatiotemporal properties are features of objects as they appear to us, transcendental idealism creates the possibility of thinking about objects under two aspects, both as phenomena and as noumena" (p276). A "Two World" view would likely suggest that the conflation obtains between phenomenal and noumenal *objects*, rather than *aspects* of one object.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Grier (2006): "the attempt to engage in metaphysical speculations, the attempt to acquire knowledge of 'objects' through 'pure concepts' alone, is precluded by Kant's transcendental epistemology. Such a procedure, which erroneously deploys unschematized forms of thought as principles yielding material knowledge, leads to the mere semblance of knowledge" (p193).

<sup>20</sup> *CPR* B444, my parentheses added. See also *CPR* A409/B436: "If the conditioned is given, then the whole sum of conditions, and hence the absolutely unconditioned, is also given, through which alone the conditioned was possible."

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *CPR* A139/B178

<sup>22</sup> *CPR* A541/B569

is merely intelligible.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, determinism is true of the world of appearances (phenomena), while it is in principle possible that freedom is true of the noumenal realm of things in themselves.<sup>24</sup> Kant suggests in the Second Analogy that the principle of sufficient reason *must* govern the realm of appearances – events must appear to follow their causes according to strict causal rules in order for them to obtain within a temporal order, and thus to be objects of experience *for us*.<sup>25</sup> Thus, considered at the level of *phenomena* we view our actions as determined – they follow systematically according to preceding circumstances. However, as the Third Antinomy has shown, reason demands that we provide an *exhaustive* account of causality, and an infinite regress of causes according merely to natural law would not suffice.<sup>26</sup> Thus reason “creates the idea of a spontaneity, which could start to act from itself.”<sup>27</sup> This faculty is freedom, transcendently specified, and which is the ground of the practical freedom we desire and the effects of which are presented to us in experience. It is an account of an *alternative* causality,<sup>28</sup> or a causality according to alternative laws: “a causality in accordance with unchangeable laws, but of a particular kind.”<sup>29</sup> Free events are thus *differently* determined – determined according to a free will.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As Allison (2006) correctly notes, Transcendental Idealism permits Kant a “distinction between conditions of experience and conditions of thought” (p395).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. CPR A537/B565: “The effect can therefore be regarded as free in regard to its intelligible cause, and yet simultaneously, in regard to appearances, as their result according to the necessity of nature.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. CPR A201/B246: “If, therefore, my perception is to contain the cognition of an occurrence, namely that something actually happens, then it must be an empirical judgment in which one thinks that the sequence is determined, i.e., that it presupposes another appearance in time which it follows necessarily or in accordance with a rule.”

<sup>26</sup> Cf. CPR A533/B561: “In such a way no absolute totality of conditions in causal relations is forthcoming”

<sup>27</sup> CPR A533/B561

<sup>28</sup> Cf. CPR A539/B567: There is “another **causality** that is not appearance, even though its **effect** is encountered in experience.”

<sup>29</sup> Kant, I. (1786). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (2002 ed.). (A. W. Wood, Ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press, 4:446

<sup>30</sup> Cf. CPR A802–3/B830–1: “We thus cognize practical freedom through experience, as one of the natural causes, namely a causality of reason in the determination of the will.”

## Kant's Freedom Evaluated

Reath takes Kant's Transcendental resolution to offer an intuitively satisfying account.<sup>31</sup> He notes that the Third Antinomy evinces two claims which we typically take each in *different senses* both to be true, and that Kant provides a good explanation of what those senses might be. The empirical (phenomenal) realm obtains at a *third-person* perspective, and views effects as determined according to preceding physical and psychological states of affairs. Yet the noumenal realm allows the intelligible notion of freedom, which does justice to the sense that our actions feel genuinely autonomous from the *first-person* perspective: we deliberate over choices we make as representing live options with potentially moral consequences derived from that freedom.<sup>32</sup>

However, Robert Hanna has suggested that Kant's proposal might be inadequate to answer the charges of epiphenomenalism or causal overdetermination.<sup>33</sup> Jaegwon Kim's argument for the explanatory exclusion of the mental works as

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<sup>31</sup> Reath, A. (2006). Kant's Critical Account of Freedom. In G. Bird (Ed.), *A Companion to Kant*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp276-277

<sup>32</sup> Watkins (2005) finds this view attractive too: "From the deliberative standpoint we must consider ourselves free, since the very act of deliberation that defines such a standpoint presupposes that the outcome has not already been determined. However, from the theoretical standpoint, scientists, who are simply investigating the causes of natural events in the world, are perfectly justified in considering our actions to be fully causally determined, since our actions are merely a subset of the events occurring in the world for which they hope to find the proper causes" (p320). Nelkin (2000) evinces the same idea in terms of two standpoints: "According to the two-standpoints account, the propositions to which reason commits us are indeed contradictory. But we are not irrational in believing that we are free and undetermined, on the one hand, and believing that we are determined and so unfree, on the other, because we hold the apparently contradictory beliefs from different standpoints. For example, it is from the deliberative standpoint that we believe that we are free and our actions undetermined, while it is from the theoretical or scientific standpoint that we believe that every event (including our actions) is caused by previous natural events in accordance with the laws of nature, and so determined" (p567).

<sup>33</sup> Hanna, R. (2006). *Kant, Science, and Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp422-423

follows:<sup>34</sup> Suppose that there is a mental event *M* at time *t* which causes a physical event *E*. Does *E* also have a *physical* cause at time *t*? It is generally accepted that we cannot answer the question negatively – asserting that the mental event had no physical grounding – as this would undermine the materialism and causal closure to which we are committed. However, answering affirmatively raises a live problem: if *E* has a physical cause at time *t*, then what work does the mental cause *M* do? The physical cause, it is argued, is *wholly and independently sufficient* to bring about the effect, thus rendering the mental component epiphenomenal.

There have been few responses to this seemingly debilitating charge. Kim recommends that we adopt a form of local physical reduction, where the mental properties retain efficacy because they are ultimately physical properties, and would have all the causal power of their physical constituents.<sup>35</sup> I contend (and I am in excellent company<sup>36</sup>) that this need not be the case: we could adopt a thesis of strong supervenience in order to tether the physical and mental properties to a single event, without necessarily identifying or reducing the properties.<sup>37</sup> Supposing my contention is correct, the question then is whether *Kant's* view has the resources required to preclude the epiphenomenalism of the mental in this way. This matter turns on how noumena are causally related to phenomena. I will suggest that two traditional ways of interpreting Transcendental Idealism (the “Two World” and the “Two Aspect” interpretations) fall into exclusory territory.

According to Kim, the “general principle of explanatory exclusion states that two or more complete and independent explanations of the same event or

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<sup>34</sup> Kim. (1998). *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p37

<sup>35</sup> Kim, J. (1993). Mental Causation in a Physical World. *Philosophical Issues (Science and Knowledge)*, 3, p171

<sup>36</sup> Those who agree that strong materialist supervenience can secure the mental without entailing physical reduction include Horgan, T. (1997), McIntyre, L. (2002), Kallestrup, J. (2006), Loewer, B. (2001), and Raymont, P. (2003)

<sup>37</sup> Supervenient relations are cashed out as strong relations of *dependence and determination* between the supervening properties and their subvening base. Under a materialist conception of mind, for example, this thesis has been evinced in line with slogans such as “no difference without a physical difference” or “fixing the physical fixes the mental.”

phenomenon cannot coexist.”<sup>38</sup> Thus any cause posited in addition to the independently sufficient physical cause might be epiphenomenal. To avoid the charge one must propose that there are not really two causes, just two *descriptions or aspects* of a single causal event, related strictly through identity, supervenience or reduction.

The “Two World” view, therefore, is prey to the charge of overdetermination. On the “Two World” reading noumena and phenomena are ontologically distinct entities.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, since each effect is sufficiently and independently determined by a physical cause according solely to natural causal laws, the causal powers of the noumenon seem otiose. The problem for Kant’s account on this reading is clear: if we have freedom only in virtue of the causal powers of noumena, then since the noumena are not causally efficacious because they are ‘screened off’ by causally efficacious physical causes, then we are not rationally justified in thinking we are free.<sup>40</sup>

The “Two Aspect” readings<sup>41</sup> appear at first glance to be better off as they claim that “the *very same things* that appear to us as being a certain way have a certain

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<sup>38</sup> Kim, J. (1989). Mechanism, Purpose, and Explanatory Exclusion. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 3, p89

<sup>39</sup> As Watkins (2005) explains, “the ontological interpretation asserts that the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is not merely a distinction between ways that we consider objects, but also a distinction between two different realities. For example, one particular version of this line of interpretation maintains that appearances are the set of spatio-temporal objects while things in themselves are an ontologically distinct set of non-spatio-temporal objects. Since this version holds that appearances and things in themselves are numerically distinct sets of objects or “worlds,” it is often called the “two world” interpretation” (pp317-318). I have here painted the “Two World” readings with a broad brush in not delineating the various versions held by their proponents. However, my point is fair insofar as someone who holds a “Two World” view is committed to the view that noumena and phenomena are *individually sufficient causes of the same effect*.

<sup>40</sup> I couch the conclusion in terms of ‘rational justification’ to do justice to the intention of Kant’s argument not to prove that we have freedom, but to establish that there is no inconsistency in thinking that we do. The conclusion of the epiphenomenal charge against the “Two World” reading is to meet Kant head-on by suggesting that *it is inconsistent* to suppose we are free in the way he suggests.

<sup>41</sup> One passage which seems unequivocally to support the “Two Aspect” reading is at A538/B566: “one can consider the causality of this being in two aspects, as **intelligible** in its

way they are in themselves”<sup>42</sup> There are certain respects in which Kant’s account is similar to Davidson’s Anomalous Monism:<sup>43</sup> Mental events (the level at which we are free) cannot be wholly explained by or reduced to physical laws and prior events. Yet that same event, when described in physical terms, can be explained in terms of physical laws and prior events. There are *two descriptions of a single event*, a physical description and a purposive one. The physical explanation must be determined according to natural causality, while the mental explanation is anomalous – it resists capture in that nomological net – but rather is differently determined, according to autonomous mental states. One is rational in believing that one’s actions are free when intentionally described and that they are determined when physically described.<sup>44</sup> Kant certainly seems to endorse a “twofold meaning” view of the relationship between phenomena and the noumena that *ground* them – there are two descriptions of one and the same objects.<sup>45</sup>

Those theories of mind which avoid epiphenomenalism couch the relations between mental and physical properties in terms of identity, supervenience or reduction: non-causal relations. However, the “Two Aspect” reading<sup>46</sup> runs into trouble because Kant’s account of noumenal grounding of phenomena is a

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**action** as a thing in itself, and as **sensible** in the effects of that action in an appearance in the world of sense.”

<sup>42</sup> Allais, L. (2004). Kant’s One World: Interpreting Transcendental Idealism. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (4), 657, emphasis mine

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, D. (2001). Mental Events. In *Essays on Actions and Events* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Nelkin, D. K. (2000). Two Standpoints and the Belief in Freedom. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 97 (10), p565

<sup>45</sup> CPR B xxvi-xxviii: “the critique has not erred in teaching that the object should be taken in a **twofold meaning**, namely as appearance or as thing in itself; if its deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding is correct, and hence the principle of causality applies only to things taken in the first sense, namely insofar as they are objects of experience, while things in the second meaning are not subject to it; then just the same will is thought of in the appearance (in visible actions) as necessarily subject to the law of nature and to this extent **not free**, while yet on the other hand it is thought of as belonging to a thing in itself as not subject to that law, and hence **free**, without any contradiction hereby occurring.”

<sup>46</sup> And, *a fortiori*, the “Two World” reading as it is committed to the *causal* grounding relation between noumena and phenomena.

*causal* relation.<sup>47</sup> He says clearly that “this empirical causality itself.. could nevertheless be an *effect* of a causality that is not empirical, but rather intelligible.”<sup>48</sup> This is directly to run afoul of the exclusion argument as it is to posit an *additional independent cause, sufficient to bring about an effect which is already wholly physically determined*.<sup>49</sup> In view of the sufficient physical cause, there appears to be no work for the noumenal cause to do. Since the noumenal cause is that in virtue of which we might be free, we are not justified in believing ourselves to be free.

Thus it seems that the two traditional interpretations of Transcendental Idealism are neither of them capable of securing freedom, because they posit additional noumenal causes which seem otiose in view of the wholly sufficient physical causes. Additional problems for the accounts arise in supposing that the relations between noumena and phenomena are causal rather than synchronous metaphysical relations. In tentative response, it strikes me that the “Two Aspect” view could be amended in a Kantian spirit to emphasise the “two meaning” reading: there is a single cause, where the noumenal property of that cause grounds the physical property according to *synchronous supervenient relations*. On this view a *single cause* would be intentional under one description (noumena), yet determined under another (phenomena): there would be essentially one cause, and thus no additional cause which might be epiphenomenal. Though this seems the right route to take, it remains to be seen whether the text would support such a response.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Watkins (2005): “Kant explicitly asserts that the grounding relationship is causal, since he identifies appearances as the effects of an intelligible cause (or set of such causes)” (p326)

<sup>48</sup> *CPR* A544/B572, emphasis mine

<sup>49</sup> Kant says unambiguously at A555/B583 that the free cause is independently sufficient for its effect: “one regards the causality of reason not as a mere concurrence with other causes, but as complete in itself”

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