

**Discuss Kant's claim that the antinomies are a refutation of  
transcendental realism.**

In this essay I will argue that Kant is correct in his claim that the antinomies are a refutation of transcendental realism. In order to do this, I will begin, in section one, by introducing transcendental realism. In section two I briefly analyse its rival theory, transcendental idealism in order to explore the differences between the two theses and thus arrive at a more complete understanding of transcendental realism. My third section discusses the role of the antinomies – I here demonstrate how Kant attempts to use them in his refutation of transcendental realism. Section four introduces criticism of the antinomies apparent success in the role Kant sets out for them. I argue against these in order to conclude that Kant's claim is, in fact, correct.

### 1. Transcendental Realism

In order to discuss Kant's claim that the antinomies are a refutation of transcendental realism, we must first begin by exploring the nature of transcendental realism. Kant proposes that transcendental realism "regards space and time as something given in themselves, which exist independently of our sensibility."<sup>1</sup> That is, the transcendental realist holds that appearances exist "independently of us and of our sensibility, and which are therefore outside us"<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, this is the doctrine that appearances are "self sufficient things"<sup>3</sup>. We see here that Kant's recurrent claim about the transcendental realist is that they confuse the appearance, or representation, of a thing, with the thing itself.

Kant argues that transcendental realism leads to empirical idealism. Empirical idealism is the thesis "that the mind can only have immediate access to its

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'Transcendental Dialectic'. A369

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'Antinomy of Pure Reason'. A491

own ideas or representations.”<sup>4</sup> This has its roots in the fact that the transcendental realist confuses appearances with objects external to the mind. The appearances are deemed to be imperfect shadows of a transcendent reality. This mistake is made because the transcendental realist believes space, time and objects to be transcendentally real. We have no reason to suppose that our ideas correspond to transcendentally real objects, and so are led to empirical idealism and Cartesian scepticism. Indeed, this final theory bears a striking similarity to Descartes thesis that the only objects of which we are aware are ideas in the mind.

## 2. Transcendental Idealism

Where Kant talks of transcendental realism, he frequently introduces it as the opposing view of his own doctrine of transcendental idealism. By briefly analysing this theory, we will be better equipped to understand the transcendental realism which it seeks to replace. Kant defines transcendental idealism as “the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition.”<sup>5</sup> That is, our experience of things is how they appear to us and not about these things as they are in themselves. Kant seeks to distinguish his idealism from that of Berkeley and Descartes. He does so by stipulating that though appearances are “mere representations”<sup>6</sup>, this simply refers to the manner in which they are represented. Therefore, Kant does not claim that the objects that create the appearances do not have an independent existence, it is rather that we cannot attribute an existence to them such as we perceive through the manner in which they are represented to us.

This manner, through which objects are represented to us, is that of a representation as spatiotemporal entities. Kant argues in the *Transcendental*

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<sup>4</sup> Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure reason*, A369

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, A491

Aesthetic that space and time are “forms” of human sensibility, rather than features of the external world. Appearances take a spatiotemporal form because of the “cognitive structure of the mind (its manner of representing) rather than the nature of the object as it is itself.”<sup>7</sup> This seems an entirely sensible assertion. Indeed, to suppose otherwise is to make the claim that one’s mind is able to access an object “independently of the very elements that have been stipulated to be the conditions of the possibility of doing this in the first place.”<sup>8</sup> That is, one’s mind is only able to access an object because one’s mind is so formed in a certain way. It is through this cognitive structure that one accesses objects, rather than through the structure of the objects themselves. Therefore, it is our mind that imposes the sensations of space and time upon appearances, rather than the objects having these features and imposing them on our appearances. Allison states that the transcendental realist is only able to avoid this conclusion by rejecting the assumption that there exist such conditions of possibility within the mind. I take this to mean that the transcendental realist denies that the relation between our mind and the world is limited by the mind’s cognitive structures in the manner that Kant describes.

### 3. The role of the antinomies

Kant seeks to decisively refute the possibility of transcendental realism. He does this by employing the antinomies. Each antinomy comprises of a thesis and an antithesis. For example, the first antinomy is of the form:

- i) “The world has a beginning in time, and is also limited as regards space”<sup>9</sup>
- ii) “The world has no beginning, and no limits in space; it is infinite as regards both time and space.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A426

Kant points out that if space and time exist in the world, as the transcendental realist suggests it does, then one of these two theses must be correct. If i) is false, then ii) must be true and vice versa. Given the assumption that space and time exist in the world, the two statements are mutually exclusive. However, as the mutual exclusivity of the statements relies upon this assumption, the statements are contrary rather than contradictory. This is the form of all of the antinomies.

Kant's next step in each of the antinomies is to show that both of the alternatives must be false. He does this by employing a *reduction* in order to demonstrate that a valid proof can be provided for each thesis and antithesis. For example, the proof of the thesis of the first antinomy (i)) assumes that the world has no temporal beginning. If this is so then an infinite number of events must have elapsed up to the present moment: "There has passed away in the world an infinite series of successive states of things."<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, then there must also be a corresponding synthesis of those events. Gardner states that "the successive synthesis of an infinite series cannot however be completed, since an infinite length of time is required to complete this task."<sup>12</sup> However, the synthesis must be complete as the present would not exist if it were not. Therefore, time must be finite and have a beginning. Much the same argument is used for the finitude of space.

It is important to note that the form of the argument for the finitude of time operates as a *reductio*. By employing this form of argument, Kant assumes the opposite of the thesis to be true, and shows how this results in absurdity. As such, in arguing for the thesis, Kant disproves the antithesis. Of course, in order for the antinomy to fulfil its function, the argument for the antithesis must be formed as a *reductio* assuming the thesis to be true and showing how this results in absurdity. Kant does just this.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid A427

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, A426

<sup>12</sup> Gardner, *Kant and The Critique of Pure Reason*

In the first antinomy, the antithesis is that the world has no beginning in time. Kant therefore begins his argument for this by assuming that the world has a beginning in time. If this is so, then there must have been a time when the world did not exist: "Since the beginning is an existence which is preceded by a time in which the thing is not, there must have been a time in which the world was not."<sup>13</sup> However, nothing could come to be in this pre-world time, "because no part of such a time possesses, as compared with any other a distinguishing condition of existence rather than of non-existence."<sup>14</sup> That is, nothing exists in this pre-world time, and so there can be nothing that causes the world to come into existence. Therefore, the world cannot have a temporal beginning. Again, a very similar argument is found against the spatial limitation of the world.

This pattern is repeated for each of the four antinomies. The thesis of the second antinomy is that "every composite substance in the world is made up of simple parts."<sup>15</sup> That is, there is a limit to how many times one may divide an object, for every object is comprised of ultimately indivisible parts. The antithesis of this is that no simple parts exist and, consequently, everything may be divided infinitely. The thesis of the third antinomy is that there does not just exist causality "in accordance with laws of nature"<sup>16</sup>. In addition to this, there exists another causality, "that of freedom."<sup>17</sup> The antithesis is that everything in the world takes place in accordance with the laws of nature and that no other form of causality exists. The thesis of the final antinomy is that "there belongs to the world, either as its part or as its cause, a being that is absolutely necessary."<sup>18</sup> Its antithesis is that an absolutely necessary being does not exist either within our world or outside of it as its cause.

#### 4. The Antinomies' Success

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<sup>13</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A427

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, A434

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, A444

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* A452

By arguing that, for each antinomy, the thesis can be shown to be true by disproving the antithesis, and vice versa, Kant attempts to refute transcendental realism. Kant also takes it that if he is able to show transcendental realism to be false, he will show that transcendental idealism to be true. This assertion rests upon the premise that the two doctrines are mutually exclusive. Whilst this is a contentious issue, it does not fall within the scope of this question, and, as such, will not be discussed here.

However, the success of the antinomies in refuting transcendental realism is far from apparent. In order to fulfil the role that Kant sets out for them in this respect, the antinomies must demonstrate that the understanding of the world that is required by transcendental realism is patently false. Focussing upon the first antimony, Kant argues that “If the world is a whole existing in itself, it is either finite or infinite. But both alternatives are false (as shown in the proofs of the antithesis and thesis respectively). It is therefore also false that the world (the sum of all appearances) is a whole existing in itself.”<sup>19</sup> This is why the antinomies may be described as contrary rather than contradictory: they both share a common assumption – that the world is a whole existing in itself. Therefore, in each case, one may logically deny both the thesis and antithesis, simply by rejecting the assumption upon which they both rest.

It seems reasonable for Kant to suggest that, by showing the falsity of the antinomies, he is able to infer the falsity of transcendental realism. If transcendental realism is true, then the world must exist as a whole. If this is so, then it can be shown to be both finite and infinite – as Kant seems to have succeeded in doing in the first antimony. Therefore, one can derive contradictions from transcendental realism. Therefore transcendental realism is false. It is fairly uncontroversial that transcendental realism requires one of either of the antinomies’ thesis or antithesis to be the case. The area of Kant’s argument that faces the most criticism is therefore the validity of the antinomies’ proofs. Gardner argues that for each antimony, “some more or

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, A507

less *ad hoc* set of assumptions can always drawn up which will allow contradiction to be avoided.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, one could perhaps use the antinomies to draw the conclusion that the cosmological questions that they deal with are simply unanswerable. The antinomies do not, therefore, reveal some truth about the nature of the world. Rather, they reveal some truth about the epistemological limitations of people.

However, I agree with Gardner when she states that “undecidability fails, in *this* context, to count as a philosophical solution.”<sup>21</sup> We can see this if we suppose that there is some truth about the cosmos – such as that it is, in fact, spatiotemporally finite. If we knew this, we would know the thesis of Kant’s first antimony were true and its antithesis false. However, we could not conceive of how the antithesis could be false: “Because what we can understand by the judgement ‘the world if finite in space and time’ is not something that we can consistently regard as conceivably true, we cannot regard it as representing a possible state of affairs.”<sup>22</sup> As such, the thesis and antithesis of this antimony are not options between which we can simply remain undecided – neither can actually be a candidate. Therefore, failing some more devastating critique of the validity of the antinomies, thesis by thesis and antithesis by antithesis, Kant has succeeded in demonstrating how the antinomies are a refutation of transcendental realism.

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<sup>20</sup> Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*