

24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

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Causality and Community

Response to Strawson's objection

Last time we looked at Strawson's charge that Kant commits a 'fallacy of numbing grossness' in his argument of the Second Analogy. Kant conflates perceptions with events; and conflates a conditional conceptual necessity with causal necessity. One possible response is to say that Strawson fails to give full due to Kant's idealism. An alternative interpretation could go like this.

Recall the dialectic. According to Hume, we have experience of events, but we have no experience of causality. Kant wants to conclude, on the contrary, that mere experience of events requires experience of causality. The argument as a whole might proceed as follows.

Premise 1. Experience of events requires that one distinguish *events* from other items in experience, such as *things*.

Premise 2. Distinguishing events from things requires that one views events as determined.

Conclusion. Experience of events requires that one views events as determined.

Why should we believe Premise 2? Perhaps because of this little sub-argument:

1. To distinguish representations of things from representations of events is to distinguish two time relations, co-existence and succession.
2. Representations themselves are always successive.
3. Our only way of distinguishing the two time relations is to view the successive representations of the event series as determined, irreversible (e.g. the boat); and to view the successive representations of a thing as not determined, reversible (e.g. the house).
4. To view the *representations* of the event series as irreversible, determined, *just is* to view the *event series* itself as irreversible, determined.

On this way of thinking, the argument's cogency depends on an assumption of idealism: the only difference between 'representations' and 'objective events' is in how we view or think about them. So-called 'objective events' just turn out to be representations *regarded* or *viewed* in a certain rule-governed way.

Comments. It is an interesting and plausible idea that experience of things involves distinguishing a subjective from an objective time order; and that irreversibility of perceptions is somehow involved in the way we distinguish events from things. Suppose (contrary to Strawson) the argument were to work, what would be proved? Apparently, that events happen in a 'necessary time order', and are in this sense 'determined'. What is meant by 'necessary' here, and 'determined'? Is this really causation? How would Hume respond?

4. *The Third Analogy: Community.* ‘All substances, so far as they co-exist, stand in thorough-going community, that is, in mutual interaction’ (A211). ‘All substances, in so far as they can be perceived to co-exist in space, are in thoroughgoing reciprocity’ (B256). Here Kant is interested in a different kind of causal relationship that he calls ‘community’, which holds between substances, rather than events. If perceptual order-irreversibility is somehow the mark of objective succession, and causation holds between events, perceptual order indifference is the mark of objective co-existence, for example between the parts of a thing (door, roof of a house (A191/B236)), or different things (moon, earth (B257)). According to Kant, this time order of co-existence in turn requires, according to Kant, a ‘dynamical community’, where each phenomenal substance reciprocally influences all the others. The argument, however, is not very clear.

5. *The Analogies and some general principles of science.* Observe that Kant takes the First Analogy to establish a Conservation principle; the Second Analogy to establish a Causal principle; and the Third Analogy to establish, effectively, an Ether, i.e. that space, insofar as it is an object of experience, cannot be empty (B261).