The Thesis Argument of Kant’s Third Antinomy

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The Thesis of Kant’s Third Antinomy asserts that, because it is “necessary to assume another causality through freedom” in order to derive all the appearances of the world, “causality in accordance with the laws of nature is not the only one” (A444/B472). The argument Kant supplies in support of this, however, has been the subject of interpretative disagreement since at least Schopenhauer, with the most plausible reconstructions being dismissed as question-begging, resting on a conflation relating to the principle of sufficient reason, or attacking a straw-man of the Antithesis position. In this paper, I will attempt to provide a novel interpretation of the argument for the Thesis position, one that offers a more compelling case against a charitably interpreted Antithesis position. I will begin with a brief presentation of the Thesis argument, along with a consideration of its principal interpretative difficulties. I will then outline my own reading, according to which the inadequacy of the Antithesis position’s claim of the adequacy of natural causality stems from its inability to consistently account for the specific question of the “origin of the world [*Ursprung der Welt*].” After presenting this new argument, I will consider some potential objections to its textual and philosophical support.

As Kant presents it, the Thesis argument proceeds as follows (with numbers interpolated to distinguish premises):

[1] Assume that there is no other causality than that in accordance with laws of nature: [2] then everything *that happens* presupposes a previous state upon which it follows without exception according to a rule. [3] But now the previous state itself must be something that has happened [...] since if it had been at every time, then its consequence could not have just arisen [...]. [4] Thus the causality of the cause through which something happens is always *something that has happened*, which according to the law of nature presupposes once again a previous state and its causality [and so on] [...]. [5] If, therefore everything happens according to mere laws of nature, then at every time there is only a subordinate but never a first beginning, and thus no completeness of the series of the series on the side of the causes descending one from another. [6] But now the law of nature consists just in this, that nothing happens without a cause sufficiently determined *a priori*. [7] Thus the proposition that all causality is possible only in accordance with laws of nature, when taken in its unlimited universality, contradicts itself, and [8] therefore this causality cannot be assumed to be the only one.

The key premises, and those most discussed in the literature on the argument, are premises 5 and 7. Premise 5 asserts that natural causality alone cannot yield completeness in the series since for every natural cause of some effect, a further cause is required which is in turn only ever a subordinate and not a first cause. This incompleteness of the natural causal series is subsequently used to generate a contradiction in premise 7 which contends that a contradiction results when natural causality is presumed to be the *only* kind of causality since then no cause will be “sufficiently determined *a priori*.”

Whether there is a contradiction depends, of course, on what Kant means by the phrase “a cause sufficiently determined *a priori*,” and on this there is considerable disagreement. Schopenhauer and Kemp Smith, for instance, interpret this phrase rather weakly as amounting to the claim that any event requires a sufficient, or whole cause, as opposed to a merely partial one, though both proceed to note that taken as such no contradiction results since a cause can be sufficient to bring about an effect even if the series of conditions that determine that cause itself is incomplete.[[1]](#footnote-1) It would seem, then, that on this reading the contradiction is only generated insofar as Kant conflates a ‘sufficient cause’ with the demand for “the completeness of the series of causes by which that state itself was brought to actuality.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Bennett acknowledges that this would constitute a conflation, but contends that Schopenhauer’s and Kemp Smith’s interpretation of the initial claim finds little textual support anyway inasmuch as Kant’s claim is not that for every event there must be a *sufficient cause* but rather that the *cause* must be sufficiently determined *a priori*, or in advance of its activity. Among the alternative interpretations of this phrase that Bennett canvasses, one initially proposed by A. C. Ewing is that it intends rather strongly *both* that every event has a cause *and* that every event must permit of an “ultimate explanation” in the sense that there would be nothing left requiring further explanation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bennett however dismisses this combination of claims into a single position as “an obvious strawman,” though recently commentators have pushed against this. So, Allison contends that there is at least a prominent historical example of such an alleged strawman in Leibniz, who took the principle of sufficient reason to involve precisely these two commitments (particularly in the Clarke correspondence),[[4]](#footnote-4) and Watkins likewise denies that it is a strawman, since the additional demand for an ultimate explanation is motivated by the transcendental realist’s insistence that “we consider the world *as a totality*”[[5]](#footnote-5) which is precisely what we cannot do given the incompletability of the series of natural causes.

According to this latter reading, then, the contradiction generated in the Thesis argument is taken to result from the tension between the demand for completeness in the series of causes and the inability of natural causality on its own to deliver this.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such a reading, however, faces a problem of its own, namely, that it conflates the *completability* of a series with the consideration of that series as an (*absolute*) *totality*. So, it is only on account of the *incompleteness* in the series of natural causes, taken together with the Antithesis’ insistence on natural causality as the sole form of causality, that it cannot fulfill the demand for an “ultimate explanation,” but this is to presuppose that only a *complete* series of causes could fulfill that demand. This assumption is problematic, however, because, first, the proponent of the Antithesis would not and need not concede this, and second and more importantly, because Kant himself appears to deny it. Assuming that the demand for an “ultimate explanation” for a given event requires that the series be comprehensible as an absolute totality, as only this will satisfy reason’s demand, then Kant would deny that a completable series is the only way in which an absolute totality can be achieved. This is because at the outset of the Antinomy chapter he claims that there are two different but equally legitimate ways of conceiving of a series as an absolute totality of conditions, namely:

either as subsisting merely in the whole series, in which thus every member without exception is conditioned, and only their whole is absolutely unconditioned, or else the absolutely unconditioned is only a part of the series, to which the remaining members of the series are subordinated but that itself stands under no other condition (A417/B445)[[7]](#footnote-7)

Accordingly, whether the series of conditions is completable (as contended by the Thesis) or incompletable is irrelevant to whether that series fulfills reason’s demand for an absolute totality of conditions. Putting this in the above terms, this is to say that the Antithesis position, no less than the Thesis position, can claim to have provided an “ultimate explanation” of a given event when they claim that the incomplete, and incompletable, series of causes is itself not conditioned by anything further.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Taking this point seriously means that the Thesis cannot be interpreted as drawing on an already narrow view of what would constitute an “ultimate explanation” of a given event in order to generate the contradiction latent in the Antithesis position. Instead, or so I will argue, the Thesis position must be taken to proceed on the assumption that such an (ultimate) explanation can be incomplete in this way, but seeks to show that assuming this for *every* conceivable coming-to-be yields a contradiction. As I see it, the key to understanding the Thesis argument along these lines comes in the Remark on the Thesis, where Kant clarifies that “[w]e have really only established this necessity of a first beginning of a series of appearances from freedom *only to the extent that this is required to make comprehensible an origin of the world* [*Ursprung der Welt*], since one can take all the subsequent states to be a result of mere natural laws” (A448/B476—emphasis mine). The suggestion here is not that the Antithesis position cannot offer an ultimate explanation for *any* occurrence, but rather that it can offer such an explanation for all occurrences *other than the origin of the world*, as attempting to do so generates a contradiction (as we will soon see).

That the question of the origin of the world should play this central role in the Thesis argument may seem peculiar as not only does Kant make no mention of it in the Proof of the Thesis itself, but foregrounding it in this way may risk making the Thesis of the Third Antinomy indistinguishable from that of the First Antinomy. By way of underlining their differences, Kant distinguishes between the questions of whether the world has a *temporal beginning* and of whether it has an *origin*: where the former involves “an absolute beginning [...] as far as time is concerned,” the latter concerns one “as far as causality is concerned” (A450/B478). Kant elsewhere distinguishes the concept of a temporal beginning of the world from that of its causal origin in terms of the beginning of the world being itself always a part of the series and so would be preceded by an empty time, whereas the putative causal origin of the world would not be a part of the series (cf. HN 5365, AA 18:162 and ML1 AA 28:198). This is to say then that taking the world to have a causal origin does not determine anything with respect to whether the world has a beginning in time—the world can have an origin and also a beginning in time (insofar as it is created *in* time), or it can have an origin but lack a beginning in time, or lack a first moment preceded by empty time (insofar as it is created *with* time, or is even co-eternal with God).

Returning to the presentation of the Thesis argument, the foregoing would suggest that what follows the opening assumption of the Antithesis position in premises 2–6 is intended simply as a capsule account of the model of explanation that that position is committed to, without Kant attempting to diagnose any inconsistency or inadequacy lying within it. That is, the Antithesis position views a cause of some event as in turn an event that comes to be at a determinate time, yielding an incompletable series of causes for any given effect. Yet, in accordance with the foregoing, this incomplete series must be taken as entirely consistent with that (initial) cause being “sufficiently determined *a priori*,” since the givenness of that incompletable series suffices to account for the activity of the cause when it occurs. What premise 6 adds to this is the claim that the Antithesis position admits *no* coming-to-be that does not conform to this model, which is to say that *any* conceivable coming-to-be must be understood as requiring a cause that is in turn an event.

The desired contradiction in the Antithesis’ position, then, only comes about when this model is applied to the specific question of the origin of the world. Given that the Antithesis admits no other way of accounting for any coming-to-be than that of natural causation, it follows [6a] that the coming-to-be of the world itself must be understood according to the laws of nature.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since *nothing* happens without a cause, this would be to say [6b] that the world also comes to be as a result of a cause, but [6c] given the Antithesis’ account, the causality of the cause of the world would itself be *something that happened* and this presupposes some further cause. Yet [6d], this further cause would have to be some other[[10]](#footnote-10) thing, that is, some other appearance, which was not enumerated among the things in the world, since otherwise it could not serve as its cause. By definition, however, the world is the *sum-total* of all appearances, leaving none out, so [6e] the posit of some appearance *outside* of the world that serves as its cause would be contradictory. Accordingly, the initial assumption of the universality of natural causality can be rejected, since at least “in order to make comprehensible an origin of the world” we have to presume a different kind of causality than the natural.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Among the advantages of reading the Thesis argument in this way is that it rests on a highly charitable account of the Antithesis position, and only presumes an uncontroversial, as far as the Antinomy is concerned, definition of ‘world’ as a sum-total of all appearances. Given these minimal presuppositions, the position the Thesis attacks can hardly be dismissed as a strawman, though rather than targeting Leibniz (who allows that the world has an origin but denies that it has a beginning in time), the Thesis instead targets those like the Epicureans (classical and latter-day) who Kant expressly mentions at A450/B478, and who Kant later characterizes as holding that there is “*no other way* of generating occurrences than their determination through unalterable natural laws” (A471n/B499n—emphasis mine). There are, however, a variety of textual and philosophical obstacles to this reading, and here I will seek to address (what I regard as) the principal ones.

The main textual issue, of course, is the fact that the issue of the origin of the world never explicitly arises in the presentation of the Proof of the Thesis itself, though this absence is mitigated by the fact that the Remark is largely devoted to just this issue. Apart from this, another textual obstacle is that on this reading the difference between the opening assumption of the Thesis argument and the official statement of the Thesis would appear to be significant. So, the Thesis’ assumption, for the sake of *reductio*, that “there is no other causality than that in accordance with laws of nature” does not line-up with the actual statement of the Antithesis, namely that “[t]here is no freedom, but everything *in the world* happens solely in accordance with laws of nature” (A445/B473). That the Antithesis qualifies the applicability of natural laws to occurrences in the world (where no such qualification is made in the Thesis presentation) would mean that it avoids entirely the force of the Thesis argument which hinges on the applicability of the causal principle to the world itself. Concerning this, we might note, that in spite of the disparity, the Thesis argument is in any case unambiguous in targeting the unqualified version of the Antithesis, not only in its opening assumption but also in the reference (in premise 7) to the fact that the proposition “that all causality is possible only in accordance with laws of nature” is “taken in its *unlimited universality*” (A446/B474), which I take to mean that there is *nothing* in principle that is exempted from explanation in terms of natural causality. This latter, I think, constitutes the actual characterization of the Antithesis position, and I would submit that the disparity in the official formulation is the result of Kant writing it with an eye towards the eventual resolution of the dispute through transcendental idealism, according to which the Antithesis can be taken to be true inasmuch as the applicability of the causal principles is limited to appearances or events *in the world* (i.e., in space and time).

In addition to these textual difficulties, there are some important philosophical obstacles to this reading to be addressed. For instance, it is not immediately obvious that the proponent of the Antithesis is committed to conceiving of the ‘world’ as such, but rather needs only contend that there are causes without end without in some way taking these collectively. Further, even if the Antithesis were saddled with some conception of a world, it seems that they would reject any inquiry into its origin as pointless. Concerning the first, the Antithesis position is in fact committed to conceiving of the world as a whole: it is one thing to claim, as one can in accordance with the Second Analogy, that every event has some cause, and another to hold, as the Antithesis position does, that there is *no other* causality possible. Indeed this further claim involves what might be called a “totalizing step,” characteristic of reason’s activity, since it amounts to claiming that all events whatsoever constitute a closed dynamical whole inasmuch as they are (only) connected through natural causation.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Even admitting some conception of the world as a whole, however, the proponent of the Antithesis might be expected to deny that the question of whether the world has an origin is a legitimate one; after all, it is just their position, consistent with their preferred conception of an absolute totality, that the series that constitutes the world is *unconditioned*, which would seem to foreclose any consideration of its origin so that the dialectic of the Thesis is avoided from the outset. While there is no question that the Antithesis position denies that the world has an origin, inasmuch as the absolute totality of the series of causes is itself unconditioned, that the Antithesis should simply dogmatically assert this in the face of the Thesis argument would be to attribute a similarly uncharitable strategy to the Antithesis as we rejected above relating to the Thesis. Rather, a more charitable, and ultimately more effective strategy would be one where the Antithesis accepts that the question of the origin of the world is a legitimate one, but contends that, even allowing this, any causal origin must be construed as an occurrence in time and so would not be exempt from the causal principle. In fact, I take it that this is precisely how the Antithesis proceeds in its own contrasting Proof (which otherwise would seem only to insist on the evident non-natural character of transcendental freedom, or to illicitly introduce irrelevant concerns about the unity of experience). So, assuming for the sake of argument that the posit of transcendental freedom is required in order to account for the origin of the world, the Antithesis proceeds to show that the causality of the transcendentally free cause would nonetheless “presuppose a state of the not yet acting cause” which would in turn require a further cause to account for the beginning of action, thus contradicting the initial posit of a transcendentally free first act which “presupposes a state that has no causal connection at all with the cause of the previous one” (A445/B473).

A final, more general objection might be posed to this interpretation of the Thesis argument, namely, that foregrounding the question concerning the origin of the world makes it difficult to discern any connection between that transcendental freedom that must be invoked to account for its origin and the freedom of the specifically *human* will. As Kant notes in the Remark on the Thesis, the need to have recourse to transcendental freedom to account for the origin of the world is evidenced by the fact that all the ancient schools, excepting the Epicureans, invoked a first mover as the initiator of the series of causes in the world (A450/B478). However, this suggests that transcendental freedom is the prerogative of God (or some creator of the world) and in any case is only required to account for this *singular* event. While none of this can be doubted, it hardly implies that the need for a non-natural cause to account for the origin of the world is irrelevant to Kant’s overarching aim with the Thesis argument. Kant’s intention is to show that the posit of non-natural causality is not inconsistent, and that, given this, practical freedom, insofar as it is grounded on transcendental freedom, would likewise not be excluded by natural necessity, though Kant is clear that nothing concerning the reality or even real possibility of such freedom follows from this (cf. A557-8/B585-6). To this extent, then, the reconstruction of the Thesis argument in terms of the question of the origin of the world can fulfill Kant’s broader aims with the Third Antinomy.

Assuming that these concerns have been (or can be) satisfactorily addressed, the Third Antinomy as a whole can be fruitfully reconstructed around the question of the origin of the world. However, it should be kept in mind that this question concerning the world’s origin is one that only the transcendental realist is constrained to answer and is, as a consequence, drawn into the antinomial conflict. Since the transcendental idealist, unlike the transcendental realist, is not required to take the world as actually given (since they takes such a series of to only be given as a problem), the question of the world’s origin ends up being dismissed as a pseudo-question. This is why the transcendental idealist’s case for the claim that natural necessity does not exclude the logical possibility of non-natural causality will rest, in the end, not on the opposing answers to whether the world requires a non-natural cause, but rather on that idealist’s signature distinction between appearances and things in themselves.

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1. Cf. Schopenhauer 1969, 497–8; Kemp Smith 2004, 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kemp Smith 2003, 493n, quoting Schopenhauer. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Bennett 2016, 187 (quoting Ewing 1938, 218). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Allison 2004, 380–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Watkins 2005, 307n. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Allison 2004, 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant sometimes writes as if he does not view the conception of the unconditioned in terms of the absolute totality of the series as a genuine conception of the unconditioned. He does this for instance specifically with reference to the Third Antinomy when he claims that, if every event occurs in accordance with the law of nature, then “in such a way no absolute totality of conditions in causal relations is forthcoming” (A533/B561; cf. also MMr AA 29:855: “Totalitaet und unendliche Zusammensetzung zugleich zu denken, ist ein Wiederspruch”). Yet, this cannot be his considered position since then the antinomial conflict (in all 4 cases) could be greatly simplified as the Antithesis in each case could simply be rejected as failing to fulfill reason’s demand for an absolute totality. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Of course, this might not be acceptable as an *explanation* as we would normally employ the term, though it must be kept in mind that the language of explanation was introduced by Ewing rather than Kant. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Even though “coming-to-be” might also be modelled as a *substantial* change (i.e., an absolute arising), this is ruled out by the claim on the part of the Antithesis position that *all* change is alteration. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This ignores the possibility that the world is *self-caused*, that is that its origin is a function of wholly immanent rather than transuent causation (as in the case of Spinoza’s substance); however, this possibility is presumably treated in the Fourth Antinomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For convenience’s sake, I have provided the full argument below:  
    [1] Assume that causality in accordance with the laws of nature was the only kind of causality.

    [2] “[T]hen everything that happens presupposes a previous state upon which it follows without exception in accordance with a rule.”

    [3] “But now the previous state must itself be something that has happened, since if it had been at every time, then its consequence could not have just arisen but would always have been.”

    [4] “Thus the causality of the cause through which something happens *is always something that has happened*, which according to the law of nature presupposes once again a previous state, and its causality...and so on.”

    [5] “If therefore *everything* happens in accordance with mere laws of nature, then at every time there is only a subordinate, but never a first, beginning, and thus no completeness of the series on the side of the causes descending one from another.”

    [6] “But now the law of nature consists just in this, that *nothing* happens without a cause sufficiently determined *a priori*.”

    [6a] The coming-to be of the world is something that happens

    [6b] Since according to [6] *nothing* happens without a cause, this would be to say that the world also comes-to-be as a result of a cause.

    [6c] Given [2–3], the causality of the cause of the world would itself be *something that has happened* and this presupposes some other cause that accounts for the beginning of its activity.

    [6d] This other cause would have to be another appearance *not* enumerated among those in the world.

    [6e] But by definition the world is the sum-total of all appearances, leaving none out, so this is contradictory

    [7] “Thus the proposition that all causality is possible only in accordance with laws of nature, when taken in its unlimited universality contradicts itself”.

    [8] Therefore, natural causality cannot explain the origin of the world, and so cannot be the only kind of causality. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A related objection is canvassed by Grier (cf. Grier 2004, 215) where the Thesis position might seem guilty of a “category mistake” in claiming that the proponent of the Antithesis, in holding all events that constitute the world to have cause, must also take the *set* of those events, the world itself, to also have a cause (a fallacy akin to saying that since all integers are odd or even, the *set* of all integers must likewise be odd or even). Yet, the point here is that Antithesis is antecedently committed to conceiving of events in space and time as a totality (i.e., as a world), and so the question as to the origin of the world would by their own lights be a legitimate one. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)