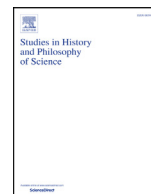


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

# Studies in History and Philosophy of Science

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsa](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsa)

## Kant on causal laws and powers



Tobias Henschen

Philosophy Department, University of Konstanz, Universitätsstraße 10, 78464 Konstanz, Germany

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 8 April 2014

Received in revised form

29 August 2014

Available online 7 October 2014

#### Keywords:

Immanuel Kant;

Causality;

Causal laws;

Powers

### ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is threefold. Its first aim is to defend Eric Watkins's claim that for Kant, a cause is not an event but a causal power: a power that is borne by a substance, and that, when active, brings about its effect, i.e. a change of the states of another substance, by generating a continuous flow of intermediate states of that substance. The second aim of the paper is to argue against Watkins that the Kantian concept of causal power is not the pre-critical concept of real ground but the category of causality, and that Kant holds with Hume that causal laws cannot be inferred non-inductively (that he accordingly has no intention to show in the Second analogy or elsewhere that events fall under causal laws). The third aim of the paper is to compare the Kantian position on causality with central tenets of contemporary powers ontology: it argues that unlike the variants endorsed by contemporary powers theorists, the Kantian variants of these tenets are resistant to objections that neo-Humeans raise to these tenets.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

### 1. Introduction

Toward the end of section 7 of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume famously defines an objective cause as an event that is followed by another event such that all events similar to the first are followed by events similar to the second. This definition derives from an ontology that posits events as ontologically primitive in the sense of indivisible spatio-temporal units. Hume believes that as indivisible spatio-temporal units, events are entirely loose and separate. If they are entirely loose and separate, then a strictly empiricist understanding of causality cannot rely on the notions of power or necessary connection. And if this understanding cannot rely on the notion of necessary connection, then causal laws have to be seen as nothing but inductively inferred from observations of instances of these laws.

Most commentators dealing with Kant's notion of causality hold that Kant agrees with Hume on his characterization of causes as events, and that he disagrees with him on the question of whether causal relations are necessary and universal: of whether we can know if there is a necessary connection between cause and effect,

and of whether we can infer in a non-inductive manner that there are causal laws. These commentators are divided over the question of where and how Kant argues for the necessity and universality of causal relations, and over the question of whether his argument is successful: while some (most notably Friedman and Guyer) believe that Kant's argument in favor of the second analogy of experience is meant to demonstrate both the necessity and universality of causal relations, others (most notably Allison and Strawson) maintain that this argument is supposed to demonstrate only the necessity of causal relations; and while some (most notably Strawson and Melnick) believe that Kant fails to demonstrate the necessity or universality of causal relations, others (most notably Allison, Friedman and Guyer) suggest that he succeeds. But virtually all commentators agree that what Kant has in mind when using the term 'cause' is an event.

Eric Watkins's work on Kant's notion of causality represents an important exception to this agreement. [Watkins \(2005, pp. 251–252, 255–256\)](#) points to a neglected passage in the second analogy of experience which indicates that what Kant means by 'cause' is not an event but a causal power: a power or disposition that is borne by a substance, and that, when active, brings about its effect, i.e. a change of the states of another substance, by generating a continuous flow of intermediate states of that substance. Watkins

E-mail address: [tobias.henschen@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:tobias.henschen@uni-konstanz.de).

concedes that for Kant, an effect is an event. But he also argues at length (Watkins, 2005, pp. 232–237) that Hume and Kant favor different ontologies: that for Hume, events are instantaneous states of affairs at particular moments in time, while for Kant they are objective successions of the states or determinations of a thing.

Watkins has to be credited with pointing out in a particularly clear and thorough fashion that for Kant, events are not the same as for Hume, and that what Kant means by ‘cause’ cannot be an event (in either the Humean or Kantian sense). Watkins’s analysis of Kant’s understanding of causes as powers comes with a number of highly interesting claims of which at least three stand out as particularly noteworthy. These three claims state that

- (1) Kant’s “main” argument in favor of the second analogy is supposed to show that a causal power is an ontological or metaphysical condition of the possibility of knowledge of an objective succession of the determinations of a substance (cf. Watkins, 2005, pp. 200, 209–210).
- (2) a causal power is the ground of the determinations of a thing; that as ground of the determinations of a thing, a causal power cannot change; that as unchanging ground, a causal power must bring about the same effects; and that a causal power that brings about the same effects gives rise to causal laws (Watkins, 2005, pp. 287–291).
- (3) “Hume’s and Kant’s ontologies are radically different,” and that “the lack of a shared vocabulary makes it impossible for one [...] to find a refutation of Hume’s position in Kant’s explicit arguments” (Watkins, 2005, p. 17).

Watkins substantiates claim (1) by presenting textual evidence, and by emphasizing an alleged continuity between the second analogy and elements of Kant’s pre-critical philosophy. He argues for claim (2) by elaborating Kant’s understanding of causes as grounds. And he defends claim (3) by pointing out that even if Kant’s argument in the second analogy managed to show that a causal power is a necessary condition of the possibility of (knowledge of) an event, this argument wouldn’t amount to a refutation of Hume’s position since an event for Kant is not the same as for Hume. What Kant is attempting to do instead is “to develop a comprehensive philosophical account that represents a fundamentally new alternative to Hume’s position”, and that obviates “the very framework that Hume’s approach presupposes” (Watkins, 2005: 386).

Watkins’s analysis of Kant’s understanding of causes as powers and his defense of claims (1) – (3) amount to one of the finest pieces of Kant scholarship in recent decades. It’s important to see, however, that claims (1) – (3) are problematic. Claim (1) is problematic because textual evidence can also be presented for the claim that Kant’s main argument aims to establish the category of causality as a necessary condition of the possibility (or transcendental condition) of objective successions, and because architectonic considerations suggest that there are important discontinuities between the second analogy and elements of Kant’s pre-critical philosophy. Claim (2) is problematic because a substantial part of it, i.e. the claim that grounds don’t change, cannot be attributed to Kant. Watkins in fact neglects an important passage in which Kant endorses the opposite claim. In this passage (from the first part of the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, another passage that is relatively neglected in the literature), Kant remarks that the effects of causal powers are so diverse that one must assume as many powers as there are effects. In the same passage, Kant remarks that reason in its hypothetical (or inductive use) can combine various diverse causal powers to causal powers that are comparatively fundamental, or to one causal power that is absolutely fundamental: while the comparatively fundamental powers

give rise to causal laws, the absolutely fundamental power may also be considered transcendently as corresponding to the category of causality. But what this means is that while Kant may disagree with Hume on the nature of causes, he agrees with him on the inductive nature of inferences of causal laws. Finally, claim (3) is problematic because it conflicts with the many passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and related works (such as the *Prolegomena*)<sup>1</sup> in which Kant seems to suggest that what he aims at is a direct refutation of Hume’s position on causality. Claim (3) definitely deserves detailed treatment. A *prima facie* objection to this claim could state that while Hume’s and Kant’s ontologies of events are indeed radically different, Kant’s critical philosophy might nonetheless possess the conceptual resources needed to effectively criticize Hume’s ontology. Note, for instance, that Hume’s ontology of events seems to be expressed by the thesis of the second antinomy, and that Kant believes that he can show that this thesis is false.<sup>2</sup> But developing this objection in closer detail goes beyond the scope of this paper and has to be deferred to another occasion. The present paper will therefore confine itself to a criticism of claims (1) and (2).

It will proceed in four stages. The next section will exegetically analyze central passages of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to clarify what Kant believes causality essentially is. Watkins’s emphasis on a continuity between the second analogy and elements of Kant’s pre-critical philosophy leads him to shy away from conceiving of causal powers as corresponding to the category of causality. The next section, however, will argue that this is precisely what Kant has in mind: for Kant, the concept of a causal power is the pure and a priori concept of a power that is borne by a substance, and that, when active, brings about its effect, i.e. a change of the states of another substance, by generating a continuous flow of intermediate states of that substance. The third section will examine Kant’s main argument in favor of the second analogy and argue against claim (1) that this argument is meant to establish the category of causality as a transcendental condition of events. The fourth section will discuss the Kantian analysis of fundamental causal powers in the first part of the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic and argue against claim (2) that according to Kant (and Hume), we cannot infer in a non-inductive manner whether there are causal laws.

The fifth and final section will point out that interpreting the Kantian concept of causality in terms of powers locates the Kantian position on causality in close proximity to contemporary causal powers ontology. Four of the central tenets of this ontology state that (i) the necessity of the connection between powers or dispositions<sup>3</sup> and their manifestations is *de re*, rather than *de dicto*, that (ii) some properties are dispositional, that (iii) some properties have dispositional essences, and that a property *P* has a dispositional essence if and only if that essence is wholly constituted by a causal power and *P* invariably endows its instances with the same dispositions, and that (iv) causal laws are universal descriptions of dispositional essences, and that these descriptions are metaphysically necessary because their truth is guaranteed by the dispositional essences of properties in all possible worlds in which these properties exist. Kant can be said to endorse specific variants of tenets (i) and (ii): his endorsement of (i) follows from his

<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially Kant, 2004a [1783], § 27.

<sup>2</sup> In its *Prolegomena* formulation, the thesis of the second antinomy states that “[e]verything in the world is constituted out of the simple” (Kant, 2004a [1783], § 51). Kant holds that this thesis and its antithesis can be shown to be false (cf. Kant, 2004a [1783] § 52c). Also cf. A434–437/B462–465, A531/B559. Citations from Kant, 1998 [1781a/1787b] are located using the standardized A and B pagination which refers to the first (1781) and second (1787) edition, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The terms “power” and “disposition” will be used interchangeably in the remainder.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1160852>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1160852>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)