Paul Guyer's Interpretation of Kant's Second Analogy, *from Kant's Theory of Knowledge: An Analytical Introduction*

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The question that Kant is raising in the Second Analogy could be put this way: how can I know by observation that an event E is occurring? If we think of an event, as Kant does, as a transition from a state A to a state B, then this question can also be put as follows: how can I know by observation that a state A is followed by a state B in time? Now, Kant's key point, that one's perceptions are successive or serial regardless of whether one is perceiving an event or an enduring state of affairs, means that I cannot know that A is followed by B in time just by knowing that my perception of A is followed by my perception of B because perceptions of coexisting states of an enduring object would also occur successively, as occurs when one views the different sides of a house. According to the irreversibility argument, the way in which I am supposed to be able to tell that A is followed by B in time is by knowing that my perceptions of A and B are irreversible, that is, could not have occurred in the order B, A rather than A, B. However, as Guyer (p.171) rightly notes, I *cannot* really tell that A is followed by B in time by knowing that my perceptions of A and B are irreversible, for I can know that they are irreversible only if I *already* know that A and B are occurring in the order A, B.[19] This point is obvious in itself, but a Kantian reason can be given for it: that the irreversibility of A and B consists in the *impossibility* that they might have occurred in the opposite order from that in which they actually occurred or (which is the same thing) in the *necessity* that they occurred in the order they actually occurred in; it is a *modal* fact about them. However, as Guyer says:

But . . . such a modal fact about the sequence of perceptions is *not* given to consciousness by apprehension alone. This is . . . a consequence of Kant's . . . fundamental assumption that experience "to be sure tells us what is, but not that it must necessarily be so and not otherwise" (A 1). No necessities of any kind, whether in the objective realm or even in the subjective arena of representations themselves, are ever given by uninterpreted apprehension.[20]

In any case, the point that I can know that A and B are irreversible only if I *already* know that A and B are occurring in the order A, B seems to me to be Guyer's key insight.[21] First, it goes directly against the "irreversibility" reading of Kant's argument by showing that reversibility/irreversibility could not really be the criterion we use for determining perceptually whether we are observing an event or an enduring state of affairs. But second, and even more important, Guyer's point seems to be just what Kant needs to make his argument work. For if I cannot know that I am perceiving that A is followed by B either by knowing that my perceptions of A and B are successive or by knowing that they are irreversible, then how can I know this? I cannot know it by knowing that A precedes B by reference to absolute time since time itself cannot be perceived (A 200/B 245). I cannot know it by knowing that my perceptions are of successive states of things-in-themselves because things-in-themselves (things as they are apart from the ways in which we must perceive and conceptualize them) are unknowable. So, it would seem that the only way I can know by observation that a transition from a state A to a state B is occurring is by knowing that state B follows state A according to a rule, that is, that the event constituted by the transition from A to B has some cause. Note also that the irreversibility of my

perceptions of A and B is a *consequence* of the fact that B follows A according to a rule, rather than a criterion for deciding whether A was followed by B in time.

It may be useful to summarize this reasoning in a problem-solution format, as follows:

Problem:

How can I *know* by observation that an event E is occurring, that is, that a state A is followed by a state B in the objective time-order (where E = the transition from A to B, the coming-to-be of B after A)?

- Not by knowing that my perception of A is followed by my perception of B because perceptions of coexisting states of an enduring thing can also occur in succession (e.g., the house)
- Not by knowing that my perceptions of A and B are irreversible (as in the ship case) because I can know that these perceptions are irreversible only if I *already* know that A and B are occurring in the order A, B

  (p.172)

- Not by knowing that A precedes B by reference to absolute time because time itself cannot be perceived
- Not by knowing that my perceptions are of successive states of things-in-themselves since things-in-themselves are unknowable

Solution:

So, the only way I can know by observation that an event E is occurring, that is, that a state A is followed by a state B in the objective time-order, is by knowing that state B follows state A according to a rule, that is, that event E has a cause.

To convey better the power of Guyer's interpretation, let me also quote two passages: first the passage from Kant that seems best to support it, and then a fairly long passage from Guyer that contains the core of his interpretation. The passage from Kant is this:

Let us suppose that there is nothing antecedent to an event, upon which it must follow according to a rule. All succession of perception would then be only in the apprehension, that is, would be merely subjective, and would never enable us to determine objectively which perceptions are those that really precede and which are those that follow. We should then have only a play of representations, relating to no object. . . . I could not then assert that the two states follow upon one another in the field of appearance [by "field of appearance," Kant here means the objects perceived, such as the moving ship or the house], but only that one apprehension follows upon the other. . . .

If, then, we experience that something happens, we in so doing always presuppose that something precedes it, on which it follows according to a rule. Otherwise I should not say of the

object that it follows. For mere succession in my apprehension, if there be no rule determining the succession in relation to something that precedes, does not justify me in assuming any succession in the object. I render my subjective synthesis of apprehension objective only by reference to a rule in accordance with which the appearances [again, "appearances" here means the objects or events perceived], in their succession, that is, as they happen, are determined by the preceding state. The experience of an event (i.e. of anything as *happening*) is . . . possible only on this assumption. (A 194–195/B 239–240)

The passage from Guyer begins this way:

…the present problem is only that of distinguishing between an event occurring among represented states of affairs from the event of a change in representations [i.e., perceptions] themselves.

Guyer is here recognizing that we *always* have the latter ("a change in representations themselves"), even when we are *not* perceiving an event. (If such a change occurred only when we are perceiving an event, there would be no problem.) So how do we distinguish between cases in which we have *only* the change in representations and cases in which we have an event? We cannot do so on the basis of irreversibility, for, as Guyer continues (in a passage from which we have already had occasion to quote):

[T]he significance of the irreversibility of a sequence of representations . . . is only that such a fact would be a *consequence* of the occurrence of an event in what is being perceived, which *could* be used as a *symptom* of the occurrence of an event (p.173) *if* it were directly given to consciousness. But . . . such a modal fact about the sequence of perceptions is *not* given to consciousness by apprehension alone. This is . . . a consequence of Kant's . . . fundamental assumption that experience "to be sure tells us what is, but not that it must necessarily be so and not otherwise" (A 1). No necessities of any kind, whether in the objective realm or even in the subjective arena of representations themselves, are ever given by uninterpreted apprehension.

Thus, Guyer concludes:

So Kant's idea is that no alternative remains but that the occurrence of an event be inferred by *adding* to the omnipresent succession of mere representations a *rule* from which it can be inferred that in the circumstances at hand *one state of affairs* could *only* succeed the other, and *therefore* also that one *representation* could only succeed the other. . . . Only from a rule which says that one of the represented states *must* succeed the other can it be inferred that it *does* succeed the other. For . . . though their succession *could* be inferred from the *necessary* sequence or irreversibility of the representations of them if such irreversibility *were* [directly given to consciousness]—since the irreversibility of their representations would be a genuine consequence of the represented states of affairs—the necessity of the sequence of representations is . . . *not* directly given to consciousness. So nothing remains but to invoke a rule from which it follows that one objective state can only succeed and not coexist with the other, from which it *also* follows . . . that the *representation* of the one state not only does but also only could succeed the representation of the other. . . . And a rule which dictates that in a given situation one state of affairs must succeed another is just what Kant means by a causal law. Thus, judgments that

events occur are possible only if the states of affairs which comprise them are linked by causal laws.[22]

The argument that Guyer has found in Kant's text may be summarized this way:

(1) We cannot know by observation that an event—that is, a transition from a state A to a state B—is occurring by knowing that the perceptions of A and B occur in the order A, B; by knowing that the perceptions of A and B are irreversible; by knowing that A precedes B by reference to absolute time; or by knowing that these perceptions are of successive states of things-in-themselves.[23]

(2) If (1), then the only way we can know by perception that an event—that is, a transition from a state A to a state B—is occurring is by knowing that B follows A according to a rule, that is, that the event has a cause.

(3) If the only way we can know by perception that an event—that is, a transition from a state A to a state B—is occurring is by knowing that B follows A according to a rule, that is, that the event has a cause, then any event such that we can know of its occurrence by perception must have a cause.∴

∴ (4) Any event such that we can know of its occurrence by perception must have a cause.

Before concluding this section, I want to offer a brief clarification of the notion of A's following B according to a rule, as it relates to Guyer's interpretation of Kant's argument. What does it mean to say that B follows A according to a rule, given that A is the first stage of an event and B is the second stage of that event? (p.174) For example, suppose that A = the existence of an intact egg and that B = the existence of a broken egg: then what does it mean to say that B follows A "according to a rule"? There are two things that it does not mean: it does not mean that A is the cause of B (obviously, the intactness of an egg does not cause its brokenness), nor does it mean that whenever A exists, B exists. Rather, it must mean this:

- Rule 1: Whenever A exists and C occurs (where C is, e.g., dropping an intact egg), B follows A.

For another example, a bit closer to Kant's own example, suppose that A = the presence of a sailboat north of Alcatraz and B = the presence of a sailboat south of Alcatraz. Then, again, it is obvious that A does not cause B, nor is it the case that whenever a sailboat is north of Alcatraz, it winds up south of Alcatraz. Rather, to say that B follows A according to a rule must mean this:

- Rule 2: Whenever A obtains and C occurs (where C is, e.g., a northerly wind's picking up), B follows A.

Finally, consider another example close to one given by Kant (A 203/B 248): Suppose that A = the existence of a plumped pillow and B = the existence of a pillow with a hollow in it. Then the plumped state of the pillow does not cause its subsequent hollow state, nor do plumped pillows always become hollow. So the statement that B follows A according to a rule must mean this:

- Rule 3: Whenever A exists and C occurs (where C is, e.g., the placing of a bowling ball on the pillow), B follows.

As Guyer points out, this last example shows that Kant's Second Analogy is perfectly compatible with cases where the cause and its effect are simultaneous because, although the plumped state of the pillow precedes its hollow state, the placing of the bowling ball and the hollowing of the pillow are simultaneous.[24] To return to the main point: Kant's thesis is that in all such cases, we could not know by observation that A is followed by B, as opposed to A's co-existing with B, unless the transition from A to B were governed by a rule like Rules 1–3.