

TIMOTHY PAWL

A REPLY TO “THE ANTINOMY  
OF FUTURE CONTINGENT EVENTS”

1. INTRODUCTION

I thank *Annals of Philosophy* for the opportunity to participate in this Special Issue on the work of Fr. Marcin Tkaczyk. I found Fr. Tkaczyk’s article, “The Antinomy of Future Contingents,” to be clear, thorough, and logically perspicuous. His presentation of the antinomy, definition of terms, attention to logical detail, and discussion of the extant replies to the antinomy are first-rate. I learned a great deal.

In what follows, I will raise some questions concerning the content of the article in question. Since the article summarizes the main points of his book, *Futura Contingentia*, and since I have unfortunately not been able to read that book, I have some fear that the points I raise will have already been dealt with by Fr. Tkaczyk. In fact, given his philosophical prowess on display in the article, I think it is likely that he already has answers in print to the questions that I raise. If this is so, I apologize in advance, and offer my hopes that the following points will still be useful to the readers of this journal who do not read Polish, but are nevertheless rightly interested in Fr. Tkaczyk’s work on future contingents, which is itself an instance of the excellent philosophical and theological work emanating from Poland.

Tkaczyk provides the antimony of future contingents in the following form (6):<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All page number references without a year of publication or author are to Tkaczyk’s article for this special issue.

1. Every past state of affairs is determined.
2. At least some future states of affairs are contingent.
3. Every state of affairs can be represented at any time.

The terms in these propositions are discussed carefully in Tkaczyk's article, to which I point the reader interested in their definitions. I will raise two points, summarized as follows. First, I will discuss the requirements for representation as understood in 3. Second, I will discuss Tkaczyk's preferred response to the antinomy: weakening 1.

## 2. THE REPRESENTATION ASSUMPTION

In this section I will focus on proposition 3, which Tkaczyk calls the representation assumption (6). In particular, I will focus on two aspects of that assumption: one causal, the other modal.

Consider the causal aspect. According to Tkaczyk, a representation of a state of affairs is itself a state of affairs (or event), one which "reflects" the represented state of affairs. The representation must both be *similar to* that which is represented, at least in some particular aspect, and be an *effect of* that which is represented (8). Tkaczyk puts the second point, the *effect of* point, slightly differently in the text that follows, where he says that "one could say that the state of affairs  $x$  [the represented state] is the cause of the similarity between states of affairs  $x$  and  $y$  [the representing state]" (8). Call this *effect of* point the Causal Claim. For simplicity's sake, Tkaczyk formalizes premise 3 (his (9) on p. 9) without the Causal Claim. Nevertheless, the causal claim is important to his preferred view of foreknowledge (35), and we can ask whether there's reason to be skeptical of the Causal Claim.

For my part, I have a difficult time seeing why we should accept the Causal Claim, in either of its formulations. My thought, "Pawl is typing," is an effect of the state of affairs of my typing, or, put the second way, my typing is the cause of the similarity between my typing and my thought. But what of cases where the thought of state of affairs doesn't now exist to do the causal work? For instance, my thought, "at least one dog hunted between 1700 and 1800." Did one dog or all the dogs do this causal work? Is it different causal work if we slightly change the dates, say, from 1700 to 1802? Or what of thoughts about things that we typically think lack causal powers? For instance, my thought, "Tkaczyk's accident of wisdom is itself in the genus of quality," or my thought, "Modus Ponens is a valid argument form."

Does Modus Ponens have to have causal powers for my thought to be representative of reality? Similar worries arise from representations of privations or absences. My thought, "it is false that there are leprechauns" is true, but what's the state of affairs that does the causal work? The state of the whole world? These types of examples make me hesitant to accept the Causal Claim.

Consider the modal aspect. Tkaczyk writes:

In the context of the problem of future contingents a representative has to be similar to the original in terms of modality. If a state of affairs  $x$  is a representative of a state of affairs  $y$ , then, for any state of affairs  $z$ ,  $x$  is necessary, impossible, or contingent with reference to the event  $z$  if and only if  $y$  is, respectively, necessary, [im]possible or contingent with reference to  $z$  (8).

As we see here, equivalence of modal status is required for representations and things represented. We can call this claim Modal Equivalence. Is it true that a representation of something must have the same modal status as that thing it represents? We must distinguish between the *existence* of the representing state of affairs and the *truth-value* of the representing state of affairs.<sup>2</sup>

If Modal Equivalence claims that the represented state of affairs must have the same modal existence conditions as the states of affairs that represent it, then it seems to me that Modal Equivalence is false. My thought "that two plus two equals four" is a state of affairs that represents the state of affairs of two plus two equaling four. Let  $z$  be the event of the coronation of king Boleslaw the Brave. With reference to the coronation, my very existence is contingent. Thus, the states of affairs that I cause or that include me, including my thoughts, are contingent. With reference to the coronation, the state of affairs of two plus two equaling four is not contingent.<sup>3</sup> The point is this: necessarily existing states of affairs do not require the beliefs that represent them to be necessarily existent. Modal Equivalence, then, should not be read as saying that the representation and the represented thing each exists if and only if the other does.

Modal Equivalence might then be read to be saying that, with respect to any thing, a representation's truth value has the same modal status as the

<sup>2</sup> Tkaczyk writes of "Brutus killed Caesar" as being a state of affairs and claims to use "state of affairs" and "event" synonymously (6). I don't typically think of states of affairs or events as being able to be true or false, but I'm happy to speak that way for the purposes of this article.

<sup>3</sup> If the reader worries that there are no mathematical states of affairs, we can make the same point with respect to necessary truths about entities, such as the truth "that God exists."

thing it is representing and vice versa. The state of affairs of two plus two equaling four necessarily exists. So my thought that two plus two equals four must be necessarily true. But my thought itself need not necessarily exist.

### 3. REJECTING PREMISE 1

After a discussion of different forms the antinomy has taken (e.g., the theological form) and different varieties of answers given to the antinomy (e.g., rejecting divine foreknowledge), Tkaczyk offers his preferred response to the antinomy of future contingents. He argues that it ought to be weakened so that it says:

1'. Every past event which does not represent a contingent event is determined.

Tkaczyk shows that 1', when conjoined with 2 and 3, does not imply a contradiction. I think he is right about that. Moreover, on my view, I think he has settled on the correct proposition to target. I also find persuasive his reasoning as to why rejecting 2 or 3 is unsatisfactory. I particularly like his attention to the history of various religions, which evinces a deep knowledge of theology. In what follows, I will raise three points about his preferred method of resolving the antinomy.

First, it strikes me that this response of rejecting 1 was already motivated by Tkaczyk's Modal Equivalence requirement for representation. If a representation requires the same modal status as that which it represents, and if some events have contingent modal status relative to some other event, then all representations of such events are themselves contingent relative to that event. And this is true no matter when the representing were to occur, whenever they occur, including the past. I don't mean here to say merely that to accept two of the propositions of the antimony (here, 2 and 3) is to motivate rejecting the other proposition. Rather, I mean to suggest that the conceptualization of representation that Tkaczyk employs already had within it the seeds for this reply. In fact, I think it implies a stronger claim than 1'. Not only is 1' true, but so is:

1''. Every past event which represents a contingent event is contingent.

1'' follows from Modal Equivalence without the need of 2, since Tkaczyk understands 1 and 1' to be universally quantified in first order predicate logic, and such quantification (unlike some views of Aristotelian syllogisms)

implies that a universally quantified conditional without any instances of the universal is trivially true. That is, suppose that premise 2 isn't true. Then we don't have the claim that the future holds some contingent events. If there are still some contingent events, then the representations of them, by Modal Equivalence, are also contingent. If there are no contingent events, then the antecedent of 1'' has no instances, and so 1'' is vacuously true. Either way, with or without committing ourselves to contingent events, 1'' is true, given Modal Equivalence.

Second, Tkaczyk writes that his view of the partially open past requires backwards causation. He writes of "retroactive causal connections" (31–6), offers defeaters for arguments for the impossibility of retroactive causal connections, and provides justification for thinking that such connections might be possible and even actual. I wonder: do we *need* retroactive causal connections to make his solution work? Due to space constraints I'll consider just one type of case here, the case of foreknowledge. Suppose that God is atemporal and that God infuses exhaustive foreknowledge of your future actions into someone's mind two thousand years ago.<sup>4</sup> Suppose that God chooses what to infuse into that person's mind because of what you do. You choose and do it, and, in light of what God sees you do, he (atemporally) gives a free gift of knowledge to that previous seer. Now, in such a case, we have a later event explaining an earlier event. Your later reading this article explains why that earlier person believes that you are reading this article. But do we need retroactive causation? I don't see that we do.

In this case you do something at the present time. God sees what you do atemporally. God is not at any time, and so he and his actions are at no temporal distance from your activities. He and his actions, considered in themselves, bear no temporal relations to anything at all, and so they are not earlier than your actions. God's act of infusing knowledge into the seer is likewise not temporally related to your action or the seer's coming to know. In this scenario, there is no causal relation that goes backwards through time, and yet when your reading this article is open (say, ten minutes before you read it), the seer's knowing that you'd read it was also open, as Modal Equivalence requires. And so, at least in some versions of the antinomy of future contingents, we need not posit backward causation in order to weaken 1 to 1'.

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<sup>4</sup> Many in the Christian tradition have taught that the Trinity infuses into Christ's human intellect knowledge of all things past, present, and future. I discuss this type of scenario in more detail in Pawl (PAWL 2014a, 2014b, 2019, Chap 7, section V.e.)

What of other cases of the antinomy? What of the logical varieties, wherein it isn't somebody's knowing something prior to the free choice in question, but merely a proposition's being true? How might one understand those cases without backwards causation. Here I will merely gesture at two avenues for further inquiry. The first avenue maintains that God has some role, not only in infusing knowledge, but also in setting the truth-values of propositions. Perhaps God atemporally sees your future action, then flips the switch, so to speak, setting some propositions to "true" and others to "false"; e.g., he sets "you read this article now" to true and its negation to false. The second avenue could maintain that propositions themselves are atemporal entities. That propositions themselves are abstract, necessary, atemporal entities is itself a common-enough view in contemporary analytic philosophy. On such a view, your reading this article can be the explanation of why the proposition is true, but that doesn't require you to do anything that causally affects something in the past.

I don't mean to insinuate that either of these last two strategies *will* work. I merely mean to point out, in argumentative form similar to Tkaczyk's own reasoning in favor of the possibility of retroactive causal relations, that they haven't yet been shown to be impossible. If any such strategy could work, then we wouldn't need to affirm the actuality of retroactive causal relations in order to follow Tkaczyk's lead.

Third, I wonder what it looks like to have backward causation in situations of belief. Tkaczyk is not unaware of this issue. He writes about the issue of God's knowing the future, "Such a theory is non-contradictory even if its model is difficult to imagine (more difficult than that of other divine properties)" (35). Suppose someone (e.g., God; a seer) knew two thousand years ago that you'd be reading this article now. Now consider some event occurring yesterday at noon. Perhaps the event of your eating lunch. With respect to your eating lunch yesterday (state of affairs  $z$  in Modal Equivalence), your now reading this article is not determined. It is contingent. And so, by Modal Equivalence, any state of affairs that represents your reading this article is also contingent, that is, neither necessary nor impossible. So, the seer's belief state two thousand years ago, which represents your reading this article, is not necessary. It is contingent. It could go either way, given how the world is when you ate lunch yesterday.

Moreover, the future state of your reading retroactively causes, in an efficient manner, the seer's belief. As Tkaczyk writes,

A[n] agent  $x$  can possess the foreknowledge about a particular range of states of affairs if and only if  $x$  can efficiently act retroactively (elicit effects in the past) in this range. (35)

I'm perplexed by the requirement that  $x$  be able to affect the past efficiently. Suppose the seer knew two thousand years ago that you would be reading this article now. Why would *he* need to be able to affect the past? I would have expected the thing he knows about, *you*, to be the thing that can efficiently affect the past. Your being able to efficiently affect the past seems to me to be what's required by the Causal Claim in Tkaczyk's view of representation presented earlier, for the state of affairs of your reading this article now is that which causes either the seer's belief or the similarity between your reading and the seer's belief. In fact, it seems to me that, given what Tkaczyk says about retroactive causation, we ought to read the Causal Claim in the first sense, the sense of the represented state of affairs causing the representing state of affairs.

Now we return to the queries I had concerning the Causal Claim earlier in section 2. Suppose that you believe that Poland will have an even number of trees exactly 300 years from this moment, and that I believe that it will have an odd number at that time. Our beliefs represent a future contingent state of affairs. Say that your belief is the true belief. That tree state has the power to efficiently cause your belief? How would that work? Or another example: Suppose that I believe that the Antichrist will be born, based on God's revelation.<sup>5</sup> That belief represents a future state of affairs. That Antichrist state causes my belief? Why can't we say instead that my trusting what I take to be a reliable testifier (i.e., Holy Scripture) causes it? Here as in the second point of section 3 of this article, I think it better to allow for a thought to represent a state without that state having to efficiently retroactively cause the thought. If God delivers the knowledge to the seer about your reading this article, or to me about the Antichrist coming, then we get earlier representations dependent on later states of affairs without the later states having to cause the earlier states. This, though, requires a denial of the Causal Claim.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To reiterate what I said at the beginning of this article: there is much to praise in Fr. Tkaczyk's work on the antimony of future contingents. The terms are defined clearly, the argumentation is presented perspicuously, the discussion of the rival

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<sup>5</sup> This is an example of Aquinas's. See *QDV* q. 1 a. 5 *resp.* I discuss it in more detail in Pawl (2008, 102–8, 2016, 48–49)

views is charitable and decisive, and so on. Let nothing I've said about his understanding of representation or his method of denying proposition 1 of the antinomy be understood otherwise. In this brief article I've raised some concerns about Tkaczyk's understanding of representation, in particular, what I've called the Causal Claim and Modal Equivalence. I then raised three concerns about his preferred solution to the antinomy: first, that Modal Equivalence itself motivates a rejection of proposition 1 of the antinomy; second, that one needn't employ retroactive causal connections to weaken 1 as he does; and third, that it is difficult to make sense of the sort of backward efficient causation that Tkaczyk requires given his Causal Claim and his solution to the antinomy.

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#### A REPLY TO "THE ANTINOMY OF FUTURE CONTINGENT EVENTS"

##### Summary

In this brief reply I discuss Fr. Marcin Tkaczyk's excellent article, "The Antinomy of Future Contingent Events." I first raise some concerns about his understanding of representation. I then raise three concerns about his preferred solution to the antinomy: first, that a part of his theory of representation itself motivates a rejection of proposition 1 of the antinomy; second, that one needn't employ retroactive causal connections to weaken 1 as he does; and third, that it is difficult to make sense of the sort of backward efficient causation that Tkaczyk requires for his solution to work.

#### ODPOWIEDŹ NA ARTYKUŁ „THE ANTINOMY OF FUTURE CONTINGENT EVENTS"

##### Streszczenie

W mojej krótkiej odpowiedzi odnoszę się do wspomnianego tekstu o. Marcina Tkaczyka „The Antinomy of Future Contingent Events” („Antynomia przyszłych zdarzeń przygodnych”). Naj-



pierw wyrażam obawy wobec sposobu, w jaki rozumie on reprezentację. Następnie formułuję trzy zastrzeżenia odnośnie do preferowanego przez niego rozwiązania antynomii: po pierwsze, część jego teorii reprezentacji sama w sobie daje powód do odrzucenia pierwszego spośród zdań składających się na antynomię; po drugie, do osłabienia tego zdania w taki sposób, jak robi to Tkaczyk, nie są potrzebne wsteczne związki przyczynowe; po trzecie, nie jest łatwo zrozumieć, na czym polega typ skutecznego wstecznego przyczynowania, który jest wymagany, by rozwiązanie Tkaczyka działało.

**Key words:** antinomy; future contingents; representation; backward efficient causation.

**Słowa kluczowe:** antynomia; futura contingentia; reprezentacja; skuteczne wsteczne przyczynowanie.

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