

Immanuel Kant's Conception of Freedom: Re-examining its Transcendental Ground and Moral Autonomy

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Abstract: This paper re-examines Kant's conception of Freedom and synthesizes and accommodates determinism with moral responsibility by tracing analytically through the Critiques and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Thereupon, prospecting the answer to why Kant's concept of Freedom, with a preference for its practical use, manifests in that which can only exist speculatively and, at that, as to why our understanding of morality has Freedom as its presupposition. With the synthesis of the idea of Freedom as Normative Self-Authorship, it reconstitutes the relation between Freedom and the moral law not as one requiring sequential proof but reciprocal constitution, and finds the indispensable place of Freedom in the pragmatic structure assumed by rational agency.

Keywords: Freedom, Autonomy, Morality, Goodwill, Categorical Imperative, Reason, Causality, Transcendental Freedom, Reciprocity Thesis.

I. Introduction: What Is Freedom?

The English word "freedom" is Anglo-Saxon in origin, a combination of two words: free and doom.¹ The meaning of Freedom is context-sensitive and depends on a juridical, political, economic, and sociological context, and each exposes a different aspect of this same concept. On a naïve reading, Freedom is simply making one's choice; on a more astute reading, it is a sociological concept meaning nothing apart from the structures in place (legal, communal, and institutional) within which any choice is exercised. At an individual level, it can also be one of the preconditions for man's spiritual and moral growth.

Irrespective of the acceptance of its existence, the concept of Freedom occupies an important role in a society. In *The Republic*, Plato explores the concept of freedom, but from a different angle; taking on the view propagated by Socrates that a man is free and adding to it that a man is truly free when he fulfils his work to the best of his ability, that the meaning one attaches to it depends on a context being formed as well as an entity where it is located. In Aristotle, Freedom was not an explicit concept; Eleutheria (a word that has been variously translated as liberty or freedom) and its cognates have been construed in their moral and political

¹ The word 'free' has etymological associations with not having a halter, with friend, peace, love, dear, and noble, while the word 'doom' means law and personal judgment or opinion.

context, not in a metaphysical context.² It has been held that a truly free man is a man capable of directing all his choices and decisions in accordance with reason

The problem of freedom is relocated by Kant's contribution in philosophy. While Plato and Aristotle saw freedom as fundamentally practical, involving one's ability to direct one's choices as well as role or function. Instead, Kant questions whether a rational man, by choice, can be the initial cause of its actions and the effect that could result from it? To this, there is a need to analyze and understand the architectonic structure of Freedom as conceived by Kant.

II. Kant's Architectonic of Freedom

In the corpus of the works by Immanuel Kant, freedom is one of the recurring central topics to be found addressed within diverse related registers in the work by the philosopher: as a transcendental idea (Critique of Pure Reason), as speculative and practical freedom (Critique of Practical Reason), and as the presupposition of the moral law (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals). Freedom works for all these categories as an element rather than a correlate. This notion of Freedom is quite problematic in a technical sense because Kant makes it very clear that we cannot be certain about the existence of Freedom, Immortality, God, and Infinity, (these complete what Kant calls the transcendental Ideas of pure reason) because, in trying to claim their truth, we could be only lying to ourselves essentially. The dilemma is resolved in Kant's re-grounding of freedom in two senses- negatively in the Third Antimony and positively, ironically, as the law of morality.

Kant operated within the milieu of the Enlightenment; a time when Reason was supposed to blow away the darkness of superstition and dogmatic misunderstanding. And the roots of his philosophy lay as securely in analysis of the logical structure of physics as in that of ethics or logic. Kant's work, with the release in 1781 of the Critique of Pure Reason ³gained popular recognition, leading Kant's reputation as an influential philosopher to be guaranteed. Like Copernicus' model, which replaced the previously accepted Ptolemaic astronomical system.⁴ Kant, by taking this Copernican model, proposed that the human mind is an interactive agent in the determination of knowledge— that our understanding creates experience: it does not passively receive it. He believed that traditional notions of appearance and reality held, paradoxically in spite of their many disagreements, by both the Empiricists from Great Britain and the Continental Rationalists, made an identical and wrong-headed assumption that there was an independent reality which could be accessed by pure

² Aristotle considered tyranny and slavery, rather than metaphysical determinism, to be the principal obstacles to self-direction, than treating bare spontaneity as the relevant contrary.

³ Revised in 1787.

⁴ Where the sun and the heavenly bodies were viewed as orbiting the earth, the new model instead has the planets, including the earth, orbiting the sun.

reason alone or by reliance upon our sense impressions alone.⁵ He found a remedy to the Rationalist, Empiricist, and Sceptic debate that borrowed from each respective argument and was innovative and offered a path through a problem that he considered was permeating across the philosophical board.

III. The Third Antinomy and the Metaphysics of Causality

The transcendental Dialectic of the Critique of Pure Reason is where the seeds of his theory of Freedom begin to be sown; it is here (the third Dialectic) that he discusses the conflict between the thesis- antithesis on whether there is any Freedom in the world. On the one hand, with the first, Kant asserts there is only causal laws that dictate everything that happens; on the other hand, there must be a 'causality of Freedom capable of starting off on its own' to account for every event that occurs so that a causal chain continues without any interruptions. Kant argues indirectly by stating how both could work without any apparent contradiction if we assume two perspectives: (1) to consider this event as occurring in experience, which thereby falls into the realm of things that obey causality, then (2) to consider it as a thing in reality and not affected by the forms of appearances or subjectivity. To work then in its two facets, Freedom acts 'in and through things as they appear under the forms/conditions under which we perceive objects' and 'through things outside/divorced from objectivity, allowing them to remain the original cause independent and prior to the effect that may appear'. This view of two facets is strengthened by Allison's discussion and reconstruction of his system. According to this view, there are no two populations of objects at the same time: appearances on the one hand and things in reality or *noumena* on the other hand. They have two "aspects", that is to say there are two ways of considering the same object: (1) what it is like for us; how it would appear or object in experience as it conforms to the conditions through space and time (that is subjectivity), then (2) how it would appear from a more 'abstract' perspective of its forms (Allison, 1990). This can only come from a system by him of how causality must be if it is not a metaphysical and thus necessary law that applies to things not as they are (that is in reality), otherwise known as a condition an absolute necessitating 'law' affecting things that occur for us under his theory of experience, such considerations is the basis of Eric Watkins (Watkins, 2005); reconstruction and further strengthening of this interpretation. Hence, allowing for both the determination by causality and Freedom to function accordingly. Of course, we are not to assume such a system would prove the existence of Freedom, which he allows practical reason, in its study of The Moral law through ethics, to accomplish -- this is what Kant proceeds to discuss along the lines of ethics

⁵ The rationalists were, on Kant's view, correct about the nature of an independent reality, which he came to call 'things in themselves'; the empiricists were correct about things as they appear to us through the senses

IV. Freedom as Respecting Individuals and Being Accountable to Reason

Is one accountable for one's freedom? The question is among the most pressed one by the idea that freedom underlies the moral law. Freedom as the will to self-responsibility in Nietzsche's sense of Twilight of Idols and mastery of one's own instincts upon over others. A free man is envisioned as something of a warrior. (Nietzsche, 1997)

On this account by Nietzsche, the idea of freedom as accountability is misleading, so that strictly nobody can be made accountable for their actions. Unlike Nietzsche, Kant asserts Freedom to all rational beings simultaneously with the moral responsibility of resulting actions, as the moral law principle is rooted in Reason and Pure Ethics in the sphere of determination of law. On this view, Goodwill exists resulting from the faculty of Reason, which itself lies in the origin of the moral law. Goodwill results in the act for the sake of duty, a call of Reason itself. Reverence for the law as an existing principle is the connection between law with its character of being objective to its status of subjective, a maxim.

It must be through a moral philosophy of its kind-a common idea of duty and of moral law recognized by rational beings to recognize and respect each other as ends in themselves. Such law Kant names Categorical Imperative. As compared to a hypothetical imperative (only conditional upon an end), the Categorical Imperative refers to nothing but itself and treats the law as its end. The law commands us to act only according to one maxim which could at the same time will that it be a universal law.

Kant's idea of law has received wide criticism (too abstract to be useful in a world of dispirited disparity between us, so that impossible to carry out its morality). Hegel (one criticism) holds that without reference to knowledge about the society of an agent, one might not be fully aware of which action will be contradictory for an agent to perform it universally (on this account, it overemphasizes the constitutive role of social institutions in developing the moral belief). For example, killing out of fear (for self-protection), the legal institutions may not find him completely responsible (reduce the charge or punishment under the circumstances). Killing on this ground for self-protection, however, will be deemed wrong if one is not killed; thus, according to Kant, if the wrongness (of the end) of the action remains the same, though not being charged, an individual would in his subjective mind feel guilt though no formal charge against him. While demanding an assumption that one does the job out of Goodwill only, though several human deeds are swayed by wants and wishes; and that an agent needs some motivation to get things done, which weakens and dilutes the purity and sanctity of the Kantian conception of Goodwill. Allen Wood's attempt to reconstruct a Kantian ethics which will accommodate Hegel's worries is to understand that individual freedom does not negate the individual being socially embedded, but that society being the sphere for recognition of two rational beings as ends only, so respect for people and deference to context in fact do not clash (Wood, 1999).

Regarding the freedom of the will, Kantian ethical philosophy has been often criticised for its dependence on an untenable conception of the Freedom of the will. To be free is not to be affected by outside forces. Yet in

the phenomenal world everything appears to be determined by cause and effect, where no cause is left without an effect. So how then is freedom supposed to exist, if its exercise still needs to comply with moral law? What if freedom is assumed without knowing the content of the law that it follows without effort? Several commentators have argued that Kant conflates two senses of the term, namely that Kant seems not properly to distinguish between a 'moral' sort of freedom, which one only needs to exercise to choose between good and evil and therefore constitutes a neutral kind of freedom, from a 'good' type of (actual) freedom, exercised only in so far one does act morally correct, unenslaved by the chains of passion and desire (Sidgwick, 1888/1981). This charge is made by Henry Sidgwick in the appendix to his *The Methods of Ethics*. The charge, however, can be judged to be a weak one, since in *The Critique of Practical Reason* he carefully explains the distinction between positive and negative freedom which he himself makes in relation to will. According to Kant, his argument can also be described as a deduction of the moral law, thereby forging a link between freedom and reason, as reason herself acts spontaneously (by virtue of the fact that it produces ideas). Therefore, belonging to the intelligible world, reason shows that within we are free. We observe the events of the world and therefrom the capacity of two reason ourselves starts growing, stretching itself up speculatively. And so, about our noumenal side we appear to be free as well, even though we do not appear free being so much connected to the physical, to the world determined by the laws of cause and effect. With this first chain, freedom with morality, Kant felt to be sure enough.

V. Transcendental Freedom and Practical Freedom

Critique of Practical Reason sees Kant derive Freedom from the consciousness of the moral law. We as incarnate knowers have only grasped the phenomenal world of appearance, where knowledge does not hail from a transcendent sphere to us, but in which it comes into existence via experience at the empirical level. Beneath appearance, he could only presume a transcendent ground, of which appearance comes forth, named the noumenon by Kant; it is free, as it does not fall under the category of cause and effect. By employing practical reason, Kant explains the universal law through experience, but, since we cannot extrapolate from disparate experiences to disparate events of the universal law, Kant instead counters with a pure practical reason. Pure practical law is a law that prescribes to a maxim merely in form without regard to an object. Practical reason assures reality to a super-sensible object that exists as a noumena of the category of Causality vis-à-vis Freedom.

To iterate, in our world of experience we abide by the law of cause and effect but are free on the noumenal side. Resultingly, we embody a capacity for freedom that manifests itself. Without the application of a priori principle which is reason devoid of any experience, we cannot extract any kind of universal law from the practical side of reason alone. Thus, reason serves as a bridge between the sensible world and the unknowable world.

Therefore, Transcendental Freedom consists in the power of agents to produce actions without being causally determined by antecedent conditions and that practical Freedom presupposes a power to act independently of the moral causes that determine our actions

VI. Freedom is Normative Self-Authorship

What emerges from the interpretive survey set forth, there appear to be two distinct sets of pressure to which Kant's Freedom is subject, both frequently misunderstood as a single problem. The first is metaphysical: does transcendental Freedom name a genuine, if modestly construed, fact about rational agents (Allison) or only a practically necessary way of representing ourselves that need carry no independent ontological weight (Ameriks, Guyer). The second is argumentative: do Freedom and the moral law stand to be established independently of each other, and can it then be shown that they imply one another as the classical reciprocity thesis contends (Wood) or should the moral law be seen as somehow primary? The pressing pressures are relieved once relation between Freedom and the moral law is taken as not a proof running in one direction or the other but one of reciprocal constitution: far from being two facts established through different means but happening to work to the same conclusion or a conclusion drawn simply from its premise, Freedom and the moral law are two names of a single capacity -- the capacity of a rational person to stand back from any given incentive and ask whether acting on it could be willed as universal law, thus authoring their own maxim than just undergoing it. Call this capacity, after the reflective distance at play in Korsgaard's account of agency (but not under this formulation), normative self-authorship. To reconstruct, transcendental Freedom should thus not be seen as a further metaphysical fact over and above this fact of reflectivity that is being posited for proof; so too, by the same token, should the moral law not be seen as external to and superimposed on a will which was already free. It and the existence of this will are two original expressions of the same fact, such that the threat of circularity which Kant feared (In the Groundwork of metaphysics of moral) should therefore not be seen as a fault: it is the hallmark of two aspects of a single description, then two separate (albeit inter-dependent) facts themselves, as the case seems otherwise to be.

The reconstruction has three advantages. First, that reading empties Freedom of metaphysical weight worried Ameriks and Guyer against Ameriks' and Guyer's worry that a two-aspect reading empties Freedom of metaphysical weight. Normative self-authorship does not relocate the relevant 'weight' from noumena ontology to the practical structure of rational agency itself. Any one may ask 'what ought I to do' is capable of asking what ought I do have exercised capacity in itself; there is no need for further metaphysical certification. Second, where Wood's classical reciprocity thesis enters an impasse between the two positions, primacy-of-the-moral-law reading comes argumentatively first, at a point where the only requirement to tell which one, out of Freedom and the moral law, is argumentatively first. Reciprocal constitution breaks off the demand since both of them are the expression of the same capacity, none prior. Third, the reviewers argued a loophole in Korsgaard's argument from the impossibility of particularistic willing to the necessity of universal willing; normative self-authorship does not claim anything about particularistic willing being impossible. It

requires that particularistic willing fails to count as the exercise of self-authorship in the full sense where moral responsibility is a weaker and more defensible claim.

Moreover, it also answers the challenge that Nietzsche made, without requiring a certain level of understanding of noumenal causation. Kant's own doctrine of the primacy of practical reason already hints that morality's demand-character is responsible for the basis of morality and not some prior metaphysical proofs. The practice of moral address - blame, praise, respect, and rendering each other accountable - presumes treating authors as the masters of maxim. This pragmatic presumption exists independently, even before one gets the result of the debate over transcendental idealism having a verdict on the transcendental idealism. Those totally taken by the thoroughly natural determinism, but unwilling not to continue the practice of rendering account for another for anything, should at any cost consider themselves as such they practiced Authorship. Though small, the present reconstruction nevertheless helps to understand that 'this as if' may not remain a fiction forever but may be redeemed at a later date when there is a more substantial discussion on transcendental idealism from the theoretical side.

VII. Conclusion

For Kant, freedom is not one single, uniform concept but a set of related senses: Freedom in the transcendental Sense is resolved negatively in the 3rd Antinomy on the possibility of man as an uncaused cause through a spontaneous self-generation of the will. Freedom in the practical sense means inner self-constraint - to act morally. Freedom rests crucially on the Moral law—the unconditional authority of the will over itself - which is the necessary condition for it to bind itself to rational ends, which are its moral duties. The idea of moral law itself depends on a concept of freedom as a capacity to follow moral command independently from experience. Hence, freedom is the highest principle in Kant's ethical system. Although we cannot fully describe Freedom, in the freedom that it allows us (to act freely), we may not be free to violate the freedom (ability to experience the world as a whole) of another rational being. Indeed, our freedom (to act freely and choose our ends) becomes contingent through its dependence on the Moral law, which, paradoxically, secures our freedom (freedom to consider ourselves authors of moral duties) from falling merely within its mechanical operation since we would fail to be spontaneous. There lies a kind of reconciliation Kant offers- when we constrain our freedom and act morally, we do not become less authors of our action. We just act according to principles of rationality. Respect for and promotion of the other's basic rights and freedom works as a constrain on ones use of freedom and yet properly understood our respect for the other as an end and him selves bound up not countered to our freedom through which we are allowed to take ourselves as autonomous beings at all: morality provides us with hope: only through free-willed actions in which we treat each and every of our fellows human beings respectful do we ourselves gain confidence in our own freedom and hence gain hope for us and this the only possible future world available- an egalitarian one. Humans are necessarily bound within our capacity to experience a world which must obey physicalistic regularities: yet through engaging with themselves and questioning what their own choices mean in the face of what happens anyway

and the moral requirements Kant claims they ought to meet at the expense of giving up other pursuits, they may speculate- responsibly but practically about those things that cannot simply any and explanation the law like order of cause-and effect explains.

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