

Does Kant succeed in preserving freedom of the will?

Kant has a problem. Having proved that there is a moral law, he believes that freedom *must* exist or otherwise the moral law would be impossible. Moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* (evidence for knowing the existence) of freedom (CPR 5.4, footnote). But he also accepts the general 18th century belief that everything in the world is governed by cause and effect; if our actions are determined by what went before, they cannot be free. He is insistent that our actions are determined *even if* the “determining grounds” lie “within the subject” (i.e. psychological). Such grounds are themselves caused by “antecedent states”, which are in turn caused by even more antecedent states, which are “necessitating conditions of past time”. We may want to apply the term “psychological freedom” to this “internal chain of representations in the soul”, but it is still “natural necessity” (CPR 5.96). How does he resolve this dilemma between the need for genuine freedom and the apparent absence of it?

In the definition he gives at the start of Section 3 of *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (4.446), Kant draws a parallel between *natural necessity* – the causality of non-rational things whereby they are determined by alien causes – and the *will* that rational beings have, which is also a kind of causality. *Freedom* of the will consists in its acting independently of any alien causes of the natural necessity kind. These alien (heteronomous) causes include all our inclinations, in fact everything except our reason. Having described this definition as “negative”, Kant turns it into a “richer and more fruitful” positive concept in a later passage (GMM 4.451-2). A rational being can be seen both as having an existence in time, in the phenomenal world of appearances, and as being a “thing in itself” in the timeless intelligible world. The causality of natural necessity applies to him in the phenomenal world, whereas we “ascribe freedom to the same being as a thing in itself” (CPR 5.95), who regards himself as belonging to the intelligible and transcendent world (GMM 4.452). That is why freedom is *transcendental*.

Problems

1. It is not entirely certain that Kant regards this view of freedom of the will as *true*. It may be, as Scruton suggests, that Kant sometimes sees freedom as a mere

perspective on the world, equivalent to the perspective that sees it as bound by natural necessity. What matters is that I must *think* of myself as free; that is “a presupposition of all action in the world – and hence of all rational decisions” (Scruton p 59). It is certainly true that Kant proposes the idea of freedom as something that “we must presuppose . . . if we want to think of a being as rational” (GMM 4.449); and he wants to remove the contradiction between freedom and natural necessity “even though we shall never be able to comprehend how freedom is possible” (GMM 4.456). And, ingenious though it may be as a ploy to reconcile freedom and natural necessity, the idea that I am in general part of the world of appearances, but as a reasoning creature part of the world of things in themselves, is difficult to accept as a ‘fact’ about the world, especially as Kant admits that we are unable to comprehend it. So it is possible that Kant may, on occasion, see freedom as a necessary illusion, a useful fiction, rather than as something real. But let us assume from here on that he does indeed take it as real, and look at two other problems that arise from the way he describes it.

2. Freedom, as Kant defines it, is not quite what it seems. Since causality implies *laws* that govern cause and effect, freedom, being “a causality”, is “in accordance with immutable laws, but of a special kind” – i.e. not the normal laws of physics, psychology, etc, but a law that the will is to itself, which turns out to be the principle of morality, the Categorical Imperative (GMM 4.446-7). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, too, Kant talks of the moral law, represented by the reason, as the “determining ground of the will” (CPR 5.28), and the will’s *independence* from natural laws is what constitutes its “freedom in the strictest, that is in the transcendental, sense” (CPR 5.29). The moral law, as understood by the reason, *necessitates* or *determines* the choice that is made in accordance with it (CPR 5.32-3). So freedom is not the same thing as choice; it is the will’s being subject to the inexorable causal laws of reason rather than to those of natural necessity. That might be seen as stretching the meaning of the word ‘freedom’.

3. What exactly does this ‘freedom’ (or, at least, independence) consist of in practical terms? Suppose, for example, I know I can get away with not buying a ticket for a train journey. My decision – to buy or not to buy – may of course be dictated entirely

by heteronomous factors, such as greed, laziness, hatred/love of the rail company. But let us suppose that (a) my reason tells me that my duty in this instance is to buy a ticket, and (b) I obey it. Why do I obey it? Kant seems to assume that I am bound to obey it *if I can*; he speculates (GMM 4.454) that absolutely everyone would love to be freed from their other inclinations in order to follow the dictates of reason. So the determining factor in this case is that I am *able* to follow my reason because it trumps my inclinations. Why? It is hard to see beyond some psychological reason, such as long practice, natural rationality, or a lack of strong feelings – which, at the time of decision, are already facts outside my control, or “antecedent states”. So my obeying the moral law *in this instance* appears simply to be part of the causality that governs the phenomenal world. It may be that the moral law, the fact that in those circumstances I ought to buy a ticket, even my existence as a rational being, are all part of the intelligible world outside time; but not only does my *exercise* of reason on this or that occasion take place at a particular time in the phenomenal world, but *whether* I exercise it depends on the causality of that world.

Conclusion

I conclude that Kant’s ‘Freedom of the Will’, as he defines it, is both a rather limited concept and, in the end, not a convincing one. (a) Insofar as it is freedom TO, it is not the freedom to do a number of options, but the freedom to do just one (the rational). (b) It is more a freedom FROM: in order for the will to be able to follow the dictates of reason and obey the moral law, it must be capable of being free *from* the pressures of extraneous inclinations. So far, I think Kant might agree. But (c) the “positive” aspect – the rational will’s being seen to exist as part of the intelligible world, free from the constraints of the phenomenal world – may have some plausibility, but it cannot apply to the actual *exercise* of reason, which takes place firmly in the temporal, phenomenal world and is *enabled* by the causality of that world. So the will is never, in practice, free from the natural necessity that constrains it.

I find Kant’s distinction between our reason and our other inclinations interesting in many ways, not only in the area of ethics; but I feel more enlightened, rather than freer, for having read his work.

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References

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