

## THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF KANT'S VIEW OF HUMAN FREEDOM

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**Abstract.** Freedom in general may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realization of our motives and desires and as self-determination, self-control, or we can say that freedom is self-direction and self-regulation. It is important to grasp what Kant means by metaphysics of morals and freedom. He says that the metaphysics of morals is concerned especially with the use of freedom of the human will, according to rules of law. The positive evidence of freedom of will, Kant contends, is a postulate of moral judgement. In moral judgement, there is a sense of oughtness, or moral obligation; this moral obligation implies freedom of will. Duty and responsibility, morality, justice, merit and demerit, virtue and vice would be quite meaningless if there were no freedom of will. Kant says that the practical concept of freedom is based on transcendental idea of freedom and it cannot stand without it. Kant's ethics, far from being deduced from the idea of freedom, is itself the ground on which the idea of freedom is based. Hence, Kant's ethics is independent of his metaphysics and has a claim to our acceptance, or at least to our consideration, no matter what has been our attitude towards his metaphysics.

Freedom in general may be defined, as the absence of obstacles to the realization of our motives and desires. Freedom

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may mean the absence of all sorts of checks and balances; moral and legal. On the positive side, freedom means the right to choose for oneself and acting on one's own initiative. The choice can be controlled cleverly by the use of pressure or persuasion. Some moralists take the view that the absence of coercion is the necessary and sufficient condition for defining freedom; so long as a man acts on his own volition and is not coerced in what he does, he is free.

In the history of philosophical and social thought, "freedom" has a specific use as a moral and a social concept — to refer either to circumstances, which arise in the relations of man to man, or to specific conditions of social life. Even when so restricted, important differences of usage are possible, and most of the political or philosophical argument the meaning or the nature of freedom is concerned with the legitimacy or convenience of particular applications of the term.<sup>1</sup>

The libertarians argue that if a person's act is caused by his desires or by his character, and if these are caused by past events, then the true origin of his acts is not in himself but in an infinitely remote past.<sup>2</sup> The special feature of "free will" according to libertarians is that willing is a very special sort of activity. It differs from other capacities in that these vary in degree, while the capacity of will cannot vary, if it is to serve as universal condition of responsibility. The capacity, which is required for responsible action, must be present equally in all persons.

However, the libertarians want to say that the mature and sensible adult is, by virtue of this perfectly general condition, responsible for his moral choices. He may not be responsible for what he feels and thinks at a given moment, but he is responsible for what he attempts to do — or for what he "wills" to do. Hence, this power of free will by which he makes these attempts must be a universal human endowment.<sup>3</sup>

The positive notion of freedom can be easily understood as the right of a person to choose from among alternative courses of action or goals without being restricted by authority, or as a right of a person not to be interfered with in possession of what he

wills. Therefore, the question of “freedom of will” has raised many controversies amongst the philosophers of different ages. In its simplest meaning freedom refers to the absence of compulsion or restraint or constraint from an external power. The slave is not free because the other constrains him. In the discussion of free will, however, the word “freedom” has slightly different meaning.

According to Kant, the Philosophic and even scientific knowledge from rational concepts either has to do with the form of thinking, *viz.* logic, as the formal part of philosophy, or relates to objects themselves, and the laws under which they stand; the latter constitutes the material part of philosophy, whose objects must reduce *absolutely to nature* and *freedom* and their laws, and is thus divisible into:

- (a) The philosophy of natural laws, or physics;
- (b) The philosophy of moral laws.<sup>4</sup>

Both are based on pure or rational concept, and hence not only the underlying laws of nature here, but also the moral laws, are founded on *principia a priori*; whence the two topics constitute that part of philosophy we call metaphysics.<sup>5</sup>

According to Kant, “metaphysics properly means *omne, quod trans physicam est*; the *oppositum* of physics can therefore be concerned only with truths that are founded on *principia a priori*, or on supersensible principles, whose supersensible Idea is that of right and duty;”<sup>6</sup> He further says that the metaphysics of morals is concerned especially with the use of the freedom of the human will, according to rules of law, which are:

- (a) *Freedom of the will as such* is accountability, or mode of human action that can be imputed to the agent, and *morals* is the name for the use of freedom according to the laws of reason.
- (b) The principle of freedom is independent of all experience, because reason imposes on man the laws of obligation.
- (c) He therefore neither can nor should look for them in experience, nor should he test the extent to which they

correspond with experience. So conflict with experience does not abolish the law of reason, nor does experience, on the other hand, make right what is actually observed and brought about in consequence of it. And hence too,

- (d) The concept of what is right, or the rational idea of obligation, on which the metaphysics of morals must be erected, is founded on reality; for since reason enjoins it unconditionally, it must be possible in itself.<sup>7</sup>

The positive evidence of freedom of will, Kant contends, is a postulate of moral judgement. In moral judgement, there is a sense of oughtness, or moral obligations; this moral obligation implies freedom of will; Duty and responsibility, morality, justice, merit and demerit, virtue and vice would be quite meaningless if there were no freedom of will. Kant believes that the degree of responsibility depends on the degree of freedom. Freedom involves capacity to act, and in addition, cognizance of the impulsive ground and objective character of the action. These are the subjective conditions of freedom, and in their absence, responsibility cannot be imputed.<sup>8</sup> According to Kant:

The concept of freedom is a pure rational concept, which for this very reason is transcendent for theoretical philosophy, that is, it is a concept such that no instance corresponding to it can be given in any possible experience, and of an object of which we cannot obtain any theoretical cognition; the concept of freedom cannot hold as a constitutive but solely as a regulative and, indeed, merely negative principle of speculative reason. But in reason's practical use the concept of freedom proves its reality by practical principles, which are laws of causality of pure reason for determining choice independently of any empirical conditions (of sensibility generally) and prove a pure will in us, in which moral concepts and laws have their source.<sup>9</sup>

Kant says that the practical concept of freedom is based on transcendental idea of freedom and it cannot stand without it.<sup>10</sup> Freedom in the other practical sense is the independence of will from coercion through sensuous impulses. In man, there is a

power of self-determination, which is independent of nature. Everything that we might will, will be due indirectly, to sensuous impulse, the impulse and all phenomenon under the law of nature cannot give rise to the concept of "ought" which entails a concept of free causation or moral causation and not natural causation. The thought of "ought" implies the thought of free "can".<sup>11</sup>

Kant insists on the necessity of transcendental freedom if practical freedom is to be real. While other freedom is empirical freedom, which Kant calls as "comparative", which is opposite of the former. Empirical freedom is found in some of our acts, that which we perform, that is, self-control, determining causes are internal, and there is no compulsion from outside. While, Kant says that freedom in this concept does not violate the laws of nature, yet it is a basis for moral accusation.<sup>12</sup>

Next, Kant draws a distinction between the noumenal or transcendental subject, and the empirical self. He claims that, the former is free, while, the latter is under laws of nature. The empirical ego is opposite to the transcendental ego. The empirical ego, which Kant defines as the active individual self in its process and contents as perceived by immediate introspection and which qualitatively distinguishes one person from another. Therefore, it can be experienced and is like *a posteriori* knowledge. While on the other hand, the transcendental ego, which he sometimes calls as pure ego, is that which is non-empirical, invisible, and intangible. Further it can be defined as, it is non material, unchanging, and unverifiable spirit, that which is underlying cause of all mental functions and whose existence cannot be known directly by introspective analysis, but it must be inferred from the contents of our introspection.

In Kantian sense the transcendental ego must be presupposed without empirical evidence in order to explain the unity of consciousness as, "the independence of mechanism of nature is freedom in the "strictest sense" or transcendental freedom whose logical possibility was established in first *Critique*."<sup>13</sup> Therefore we can say that the freedom of the empirical character is at first to be understood only negatively, as not being necessitated by things in nature. While the freedom of the former is positive, for it

originates a series of events in the world, which would not have happened, had the intelligible character been different.

Kant further says that freedom is an assumption or a postulate, which cannot be proved. Whenever we try to prove it, contradictions arise. He said that the world consists of two realms: a phenomenal under one set of the laws and a noumenal under another. We can say that, by noumena, Kant means that reality which transcends experience and all rational knowledge, while phenomenon is the object of perception, which appears to our consciousness as it is contrasted with noumenon. In addition, he says, “were we not necessitated to view man from two sides, namely as phenomenon, *i.e.* as an appearance through the inner sense, and as noumenon, *i.e.* as he knows himself, in himself, through moral laws.”<sup>14</sup>

The concept of ‘noumenon’ in the negative sense is an indeterminate concept: it gives us no knowledge, unless a manifold can be supplied for it. The concept of ‘noumenon’ in the positive sense professes to be a determinate concept; but in the absence of an intellectual intuition it must fail to make good its claim.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, it looks that in noumena, there is an assumption and a notion of freedom, while in phenomenon there is determinism, where the concept of freedom disappears. Therefore, Kant distinguishes the noumenal reality, or a thing-in-itself, which transcends sense-experience and scientific understanding,<sup>16</sup> from the phenomena, or world of appearances, which we experience and understand; and he applied this distinction to the self, and especially to the self as willing. His first intention here seems to have been to show how, contrary to appearances and to the law of universal causation as understood in science, our action might be free in the ordinary sense, that is, might result from an undetermined choice between following our desires and doing our duty. What he in fact concludes is that phenomenally, as they appear to the observer or scientific theorist, our actions are all determined by sensuous desires; but that in reality they are all determined by reason or the moral law, and therefore are “free” in the sense of being determined, though not in time, by what is

most truly ourselves, by the laws, which we rationally impose upon ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while man as phenomenon is determined, as noumenon he is free while man as both, phenomenon and noumena is under obligation. As in noumenon he freely legislates for himself, but as in phenomenon he is bound by chains of sense and desire, and obligation is the tension which is thus set up between these two sides of his nature. Therefore, the noumena are not fictions pure and simple, but have a basic fact. The existence of manifold of sense-experience is not due to mind, although the nature of that manifold is derived from our particular kind of sense organs, our spatial and temporal forms of perception, and the categories in which we think. Hence, the mind, recognizing the external origin of experience, tends to think that experience itself must exist independently of our sense perceptions.

Assuming that freedom, if it characterizes anything, it must characterize a new definition of "will" as the power of rational being, to act in accordance with its conception of law that is in accordance with principles. Will is a kind of causality, which belongs to living beings so far as they are rational; will is regarded as the power of rational beings to produce effects in the phenomenal world, and primarily in the physical world. The power to act would be known as power to produce effects.<sup>18</sup> So according to Kant, "as a rational being and thus as belonging to the intelligible world, man cannot think of causality of his own will except under the idea of freedom, for independence from the determining causes of the world of senses (an independence which reason must always ascribe to itself) is freedom."<sup>19</sup>

It means that freedom is a kind of causality in which the cause of an action is not another phenomenal event. We can understand cause-effect relations only because both members of the nexus are in one spatio-temporal series. Freedom is a quality belonging to a special kind of causality. Perhaps it would be simpler to say that it characterizes a special kind of causality. It is opposed to natural necessity, a quality characterizing all causal action in nature.

Later on, Kant attempts in the third antinomy to show that if there is any reason to assert the existence of free causality, this does not involve any contradiction with natural mechanism. Therefore, the third antinomy has to do with causation. On the one side, it is impossible to conceive of any first link in the chain of causation, since the category of causation forces the mind to think to every event as preceded and explained by another event. On the other hand, we must conceive the chain as having a first link, for, if no first cause exists. There is no sufficient reason for the causal series, which left without any ground for occurring as it does.

The third antinomy concerns the question whether there is or is not freedom, *i.e.* are there or are there not uncaused causes? It is resolved by showing that the thesis – that all phenomena are subject to ‘causality according to laws of nature’ — is compatible with the antithesis that a different kind of causality, allowing of uncaused causes, exists for noumena or things in themselves. The latter kind of causality is, of course, only an idea — the idea of freedom — which according to Kant is necessary to account for the experience of moral obligation.<sup>20</sup>

Again, since a first cause of this sort would be causeless, it would be an inexplicable event, undetermined by another event to exist. To have the nature it has, and to produce the effects it does. It will just occur spontaneously and act freely. But how can an event that is absolutely unaccountable and inexplicable in itself be invoked with any consistency to account for other things? Any inexplicable explanation is no explanation. It follows that we cannot conceive a causeless or first cause standing at the beginning of the series of cause and effect. It is, then, as logically impossible as it is logically necessary to assert its existence. Shortly, he asserts that the effect of free causality would be in phenomenal series and thus in order of natural mechanism. Every appearance under the causal law of nature and is predictable with certainty. But in its relation to that which is not appearance, that is, the noumena, and not a member of temporal series, it is an effect of freely acting cause, where freedom is defined as the

power of being a cause without being an effect. Hence, in principle, every event in the world is a product of both natural and free causation. We do not understand it in its latter relation; all our knowledge is knowledge of the connections of phenomenon among themselves. We cannot apply the category of causation to things in themselves, so as to have knowledge of them; but we can apply the category by analogy to the relation of noumena to phenomena and think of the former as free of the latter without violating the principle of mechanical causation as our knowledge is concerned.<sup>21</sup>

In the solution of third Antinomy, Kant believes an important bearing upon the problem of human free will. Man has not only an empirical character he is also a thing-in-itself. In so far as he is a member of phenomenal order, his acts, like natural events, are also freely determined by his nature as a thing-in-itself, or as Kant calls it, by his intelligible character.

Kant, further argues, that if God is the cause of men's action through original creation of man's substance, then only determinism exists and morality is impossible. Hence, it can be said that morality depends upon the freedom of will. Kant rejects the view that morality is based on religion. However, he is far from being rejecting the view that there is logical connexion between the two things; but he considers that religion is based on morality. This view, as he works out in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in the section headed "The existence of God as a postulate of pure practical reason." But though Kant is willing to grant the premise of creation of noumena; he denies that the inference is valid. As it is invalid because syllogism contains four terms "causation" and "creation" not being equivalent. It would be valid if things in themselves were temporal.<sup>22</sup>

So far, freedom is freedom to act in accordance with the principles of autonomy. However, as Kant supposes, man is to be free when he acts badly. If there were not, so man would not be responsible for his bad action; nor could he regard the moral law as an imperative if it were not possible for him to obey the moral law. Man as Kant says, is not responsible for his desires; but he is

responsible for his indulgence with which he allows his desires to influence his maxims to the detriment of the moral law.

He further says that, if we are free in acting badly, then we must be free, not only in so far as we act according to objective principles of reason, but also in so far as we act on subjective principles or maxims, even when they are opposed to the moral law. He holds that no desire and interest can influence our action unless it is taken up into our maxim by an act of free choice.<sup>23</sup>

Kant's ethics, far from being deduced from the idea of freedom, is itself the ground on which the idea of freedom is based. Hence Kant's ethics is independent of his metaphysics and has a claim to our acceptance, or at least to our consideration, no matter what has been our attitude towards his metaphysics. However, as he is surely right in maintaining that there can be no morality, as it is understood, it is not clear by ordinary men without the presupposition of freedom.<sup>24</sup>

We will to sum up. Man being free from a practical point of view, while there are difficulties in the way of believing in freedom, if we take account of what the existence of duty implies, we must believe in freedom. It should be noted that Kant does not say, "All laws which are inseparably connected with freedom have the same force as if man's will had been free in itself, but "as if his will had been shown to be free in itself by proof theoretically conclusive". By this Kant means that he is unable to prove the existence of freedom except by an argument drawn from the existence of duty. Kant's position is that, though it is very difficult to understand how freedom of will can be real, it must be real if duty is real. Lastly, Kant's best-known arguments for freedom in which he says that a being that cannot act except under the idea of freedom is really free in a practical respect and is obligated by the laws which follow from that idea, regardless of whether we can prove theoretically whether he is free or not.<sup>25</sup>

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