

**Immanuel Kant:  
Free Will and Scientific Determinism**

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When we do philosophy one of the most fundamental concerns in every inquiry (whether we do epistemology, metaphysics, and especially ethics) is to safeguard human value. Human worth remains a primary concern. Max Frisch, a German-speaking Swiss author said it well: "Die Wuerde des Menschen liegt in seiner Wahl." (Man's dignity rests in his choice). The quality of human life, human authenticity, human dignity is severely threatened by one particular conundrum. Perhaps the most intractable problem in all of philosophy is the apparent conflict between free will and determinism. This problem is confronted most acutely when we do ethics. Do human beings have genuine freedom of choice or are they causally determined by forces beyond their control? Are we fated, predetermined to act in certain ways? Ethics is the domain which must uphold one absolute foundation: FREEDOM OF CHOICE.

Let's unpack the dilemma that exists between freedom and determinism, and see whether it has a solution.

We all have two common-sense assumptions that we hold tacitly; we usually don't second-guess them. To make my point, let me see tonight in this audience whether the first of these two beliefs holds.

May I have a show of hands:

*How many of you believe you were free tonight in opting to come to this event at the Goethe-Institut? ....* At least most of you hold the first common-sense belief: You are free to make decisions without interference from external or internal forces. Before getting to the second common-sense belief, let's find out what we mean when we say we are free in our choices:

1. We mean we have a real choice; the action is up to us; we decide, not anyone else.
2. We could have chosen otherwise. Suppose you had wanted to stay at home to watch Jim Lehrer Newshour you could have done so.
3. It means, thirdly, your choice was not determined in advance, it was not pre-determined.

Let me give you an example what it means to be UNFREE in these 3 senses.

Emperor Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher committed to a fatalistic atomistic theory. He had a slave, Epictetus, also a famous Stoic. One day Epictetus broke an expensive vase and the Emperor began beating him. Epictetus turned to his master: "why do you beat me", he asked, "by the philosophy we both believe in it was predetermined from all time that I should break this vase?" Marcus Aurelius is said to have replied: "By that same philosophy, it was predetermined from the beginning of all time that I should beat you" and continued beating him.

As modern enlightened individuals we do reject fatalism of this sort. We believe our actions are not predetermined. And because we believe we are free, we also accept the second common-sense belief,

namely that *we can be held morally responsible for our actions.*

Freedom of choice is the prerequisite of moral responsibility. Without freedom it makes no sense to blame people for bad actions, nor praise them for good ones.

Example: You are sitting by the lake enjoying a summer afternoon (hopefully soon a familiar scene). Suddenly there are cries for help out on the lake, someone is drowning. Later the body is recovered and people are questioned why they didn't help. In your own case: *How can you be exonerated from moral blame for not having come to the aid of the drowning person? ....* You were constrained in your freedom: you had a broken leg, you can't swim, you had your earphones on. You were not free. There were physical factors that prevented your free action and thus you can't be held morally responsible.

Most all of us hold these two assumptions: we are free agents, free in our choices, and therefore we can be held morally responsible.

Can these assumptions be challenged? Well, yes, they have been called into question, not just by philosophers but by non-philosophers: by social and behavioral scientists, by Freudians, Skinnerians, etc. and by science in general. The starting point of this doubt is the DOCTRINE OF DETERMINISM. It comes in several versions:

As indicated, fatalism is deterministic. Greek mythology is permeated by fatalism. The four fates determine the details of our lives: Moroi gives life, Clotho spins life, Lachesis measures life and Atropos cuts it off. The Oedipus trilogy is deterministic. Oedipus knows his fate in advance. The Delphic Oracle predicted he would sleep with his mother and kill his father, but all his sagacity and cunning to avoid its predictions failed and he committed these crimes

in painful detail as foretold. Also some religious beliefs are deterministic: viz. predestination holds God has foreknowledge of human actions.

At this point you might object: OK, this is fatalism in mythology and religion. We are of a scientific mindset rejecting such ideas. ... So let's probe deeper. What about science? What does classical physics teach us? Is it deterministic?

Lucretius, a classical atomist of the 1st C. said "everything that happens is simply the result of moving atoms along predetermined paths." Over a century and a half later classical physics finetunes atomism transforming it into a thoroughly mechanistic theory. Pierre Laplace, the 19th C. mathematical physicist, articulated the classical statement of determinism, applying Newtonian mechanics to planetary motion: "All events, even those which on account of their insignificance do not seem to follow the great laws of nature, are a result of it just as necessarily as the revolutions of the sun." The success of Newton's physics offered convincing evidence that all natural phenomena could be explained by the law of mechanics. (See Handout for Determinism argument). What is meant by "All events are causally determined"? It means:

**a)** a thing cannot occur without a cause producing it (there is an efficient-causation in everything that happens); **b)** the event is subject to laws of nature and those laws are such that someone who knows those laws can *predict the event* (LaPlace demon!) and **c)** the event had to occur, it could not have happened otherwise (eclipses of moon

and sun are all c.d. because scientists who know the laws of nature can predict their occurrence).

AT THIS POINT, you again might object: "What about *human consciousness*? Couldn't we distinguish between the predictable laws of physical nature and mental nature? Are human conscious life and our psychological states and actions deterministic? Couldn't we argue that deterministic laws of nature cannot be applied to human consciousness?"

There is a school of thought that challenges this argument too. It denies that we can escape the determinism dilemma by adopting dualism. This school asserts that scientific determinism governs human thought just as much as it does physical nature.

For example, Darwin's epoch-making *Origin of the Species* , which gave us the theory of evolution, contributed immensely to upholding a general determinism: ALL life including mental life springs from natural causes. Sigmund Freud picked up on these ideas and offered a Theory of the Unconscious which is strictly deterministic: All mental occurrences, even seemingly trivial ones (slips of the tongue and pen, dreams) are as surely causally determined by sub- and unconscious mechanisms, factors which are not under our control but determined by heredity and environment. Freudians, Skinnerians, behavioral scientists in general affirm that everything a person is and does, is a product of genetic and environmental factors. If you know a person's genetic makeup and

add to that environmental causes and feed these data into a powerful computer ("LaPlace's demon") we can know and predict all human behavior and actions.

LET'S ASSUME THIS IS TRUE and see what happens to our idea of freedom. I am in a situation where I have to make a decision-- Do I want to go to college or enter the workforce, or marry Billy?. If the choice I make and the action I take is truly MY choice, MY action, it means it should have to be a reflection of the kind of person I am. But according to behaviorists, the kind of person I am is completely determined by heredity and environment, over which I have no control. I cannot choose my parents, nor the community I am raised in. But all these factors have contributed to who I am. So the decision I make is determined by factors over which I have no control. I don't have real choices. This is the picture we get from behaviorists.

We now come to the devastating conclusion that the assumption we are free agents is false. There are powerful inner constraints, psychological factors that determine who we are: We are causally determined and not free agents. And if this is true, then demanding moral responsibility from unfree persons is irrational. (See Handout of conclusion of Determinism Argument).

Think for a moment how widespread the ACCEPTANCE of DETERMINISM is in modern thinking. Implicitly or even explicitly modern society on the whole has accepted determinism in some

important ways. We excuse all manner of unacceptable behavior on its basis. Think of our court system: the insanity defense plea has been widely invoked to override blameworthy behavior. Mental health specialists come in to testify as expert witnesses to a person's lack of autonomy in a crime, the inability of an individual to control behavior due to chemical imbalances in the brain, or genetic-environmental factors. If I commit a crime it is not I but some part of my brain or body that has committed it, over which I have no control and therefore I ought to be exonerated from punishment. The idea of determinism is pervasive in society albeit implicit.

HOWEVER, for all the persuasiveness of the Doctrine of Determinism from a scientific point of view it cannot be adopted for a moment. It destroys human value and worth, to say nothing of undermining the moral and social fabric of society which is based on demanding moral behavior from its citizens. Only when we are free can we be blamed for bad actions and praised for good ones.

This means we now have to look for answers to overcome the determinism argument. There have been a number of strategies in philosophy to do just that. I will only name one before getting to Kant.

The first attempt is to claim INDETERMINISM, a scientific theory that simply denies Premise #1 of the determinism argument. It says: "Not all events are causally determined." Quantum physics seems to give us a way out by strong empirical evidence perfected in

the early 20th century by modern physics to point to (in laymen's terms) "natural atoms which sometimes swerve ever so slightly from their predetermined paths." Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle is based on this notion. It presents us with a prima facie answer for freedom. Or so it seems at first. If natural atoms swerve from their course sometimes, couldn't we apply such swerves to human actions, when we swerve from our natural temperaments and perform free will acts? (Handout "Simple" Indeterminism argument).

Lucretius had hoped that this indeterminacy in nature might "snap the chains of fate" in human behavior and save freedom of choice (cf. Lucretius: *On the Nature of the Universe*, Bk.ii). BUT only a brief reflection on modern scientific insights will disabuse us of this conclusion. Swerving atoms that cannot be explained give us a picture of randomness. It cannot serve as a model for human freedom. Randomness, the fact that an electron's position can only be explained when it is being observed on the quantum level, does not explain human freedom in the slightest, and thus also rules out moral responsibility. [Handout "Enlightened" Indeterminism Argument]

There have been various other philosophical attempts to rescue freedom. For example, Walter Stace, a contemporary philosopher, argues for "soft" determinism, a theory that wants to have its cake and eat it too. But for our purposes, we now want to hear a little bit about KANT'S ANSWER.

To grasp Kant at all we begin by making a few remarks about his transcendental philosophy. He upholds the notion of a two-tiered universe -- the phenomenal world and the noumenal world -- both fundamentally distinct, yet existing side by side. It is the noumenal world, a supersensible, unseen world, which serves as the underlying foundational reality for the phenomenal world, which is the world of appearance, the everyday external world that presents itself to our senses.

Kant's belief in these two distinct realms has given rise to knots and riddles in Kantian scholarship, discussed in countless articles and papers. For our purposes it suffices to grasp, on one hand, that Kant was an ardent believer in the Newtonian worldview (in the *Critique of Pure Reason* he wants to save the world for Newtonian physics which is, as indicated, thoroughly deterministic). Thus Kant does embrace determinism, the law of cause and effect, in the phenomenal world.

On the other hand Kant insists on a noumenal domain, a supersensible realm to which the moral law belongs. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* he says famously: "Two things have filled me with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within." This refers to the two domains: the world that governs the scientific world and the laws of planetary motion in Newtonian physics AND the inner world of consciousness to

which belongs the moral law of which he is equally in awe. Are these two world's reconcilable? Kant says yes.

The human mind is able to resolve what he calls "antinomies of reason" without contradiction. An antinomy is when you have two contradictory propositions both of which admit of proof. "There is no freedom" is true: "everything in the world takes place solely in accordance with laws of nature". This refers to the processes of the phenomenal world. "There is freedom" is also true. Freedom refers to another type of causality, what Kant calls "transcendental freedom" which is initiated in the a priori will of every sentient being (CPuR, A444, B472ff). Without going into the details of how Kant resolves these antinomies (to do so will surely freeze your brain in abstract ice!), let me talk ever so briefly about his moral philosophy, how freedom is saved and thus moral responsibility.

Kant endorses an ethical theory based on "practical reason." Just like "pure reason" focus of the First Critique, practical reason is uncontaminated by the senses. Practical reason resides in the human faculty of the will. It is in our will that we find the a priori principle of freedom. Kant believes freedom must be an absolutely necessary principle of practical reason (as indicated, "freedom" is nowhere to be found in phenomenal nature but resides in our inner noumenal nature).

How does Kant describe this inner world of our will in which freedom is a necessary feature and guarantees human autonomy?

How does Kant see freedom of the will as needed for ethics?

In *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* Kant has a hypothetical teacher discuss this issue with a student. In this discussion the teacher has the final word and, in my view, it represents Kant's moral theory and freedom of the will in a nutshell. Thus: "That something in you which strains after happiness is inclination. But that which restricts your inclination, on condition that you first be worthy of happiness, is your reason, and your being able, by means of your reason to restrain and subdue your inclination, is the freedom of your will."

Kant distinguishes here in a subtle way between *Glückseligkeit* and *Glückswürdigkeit*. The first is simply happiness (which most of us desire and want; it is happiness based on our inclinations), a kind of feel-good *eudaemonism*, that has nothing to do with responsibility. Against that Kant argues for a worthiness to be happy (*Glückswürdigkeit*).

Let me illustrate this distinction: Suppose you get away with an immoral action, no one finds out, no one gets hurt. What happens inside of us? Kant believes there is a voice of reason in us that says "I ought not to be happy unless I deserve it." To be immoral and get

away with it is not deserving of happiness. Kant believes this is a voice of reason in all of us.

Even though Kant's ethics is not based on the consequences of an action, but only concerned with the rightness of an action, he uses this example to describe human nature with its inclinations and desires to be happy. But Kant insists that nevertheless this yearning for happiness is capable of being constrained by reason.

Who is then "free" and ethical? For Kant it is not the person who does what he or she wants and desires, but it is the person who does what he/she *ought* to do. It is the latter which determines our freedom and determines the worthiness to be happy (*Glückswürdigkeit*). Kant would say: You're not free (and moral) if you do what you want (i.e. follow your inclinations) but you are truly free (and moral) if you do what you *should*. Admittedly, Kant's idea of freedom of choice within the moral framework is a tough one.

A trivial example: For Kant you are morally more worthy if you visit your cranky grandmother from a sense of duty than you are if you visit her because she is friendly and supportive and you enjoy visiting her. Kant would say it takes more freedom to act from a sense of duty against your natural inclinations than it is to act from duty but you also enjoy to perform it.

Concerning this WILL as a faculty of consciousness, Kant expands on this (in the *Foundation for a Metaphysics of Morals*) by

arguing that not only does it take an ordinary will to do one's duty, but it takes a GOOD Will without which we cannot do our duty in the highest sense. (As in our example, you need more than an ordinary will to visit your cranky grandmother, you need a GOOD will to act for duty's sake and against the aversion you have for her).

Kant says the following: "Nothing in the world -- indeed nothing even beyond the world -- can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a GOOD WILL. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and other talents of the mind, however they may be named (courage, resoluteness, perseverance) as qualities of temperament, are doubtless in many respects good and desirable. But they can become extremely bad and harmful if the will which is to make use of these gifts of nature is not good."

For Kant the good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes (it may not be able to achieve its purposes at all); but it is good only because of its willing. Even if this will should be totally lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, it would still "sparkle like a jewel all by itself, as something that had its full worth in itself." Thus this Good Will is nothing but practical reason in action, and it alone determines the worth of moral action. Kant's theory is not without reasonable objections.

For example, this will that can go against our feelings, passions and inclinations implies there is in us a kind of self-caused cause in

the inner Self. For science this is a strange metaphysical notion, a conception of causation nowhere else applied in nature. But that's precisely the "antinomy" Kant thinks is resolvable. We cannot totally rule out a causal determinism in the phenomenal world (our heredity, environment, emotions, feelings belong to the phenomenal world) but Kant argues for "agent-causation", a cause emanating from reason itself. Reason determines the will to act against antecedent causes that bubble up in our physiological nature. Practical reason instructs the will (where freedom reigns) to act in a moral situation according to duty.

Kant introduces his "Categorical Imperative", a formula by which reason can know what this duty is. That's another story, not up for discussion here. To conclude the Kant part of this talk: Agent-causation means human beings are self-legislating when it comes to morality based on a volitional, rational, inner cause that practical reason determines. It is the belief that we can rise above our natural state of character, act against desires and inclinations, to act morally. (Example: Ethel Waters' autobiography...).

Can science uphold such a Kantian notion of freedom?

Contemporary modern and post-modern thought has rejected generally the kind of foundationalism Kant promotes in his transcendental philosophy (sometimes referred to as "transcendental psychology"). However, in recent developments in philosophy of mind

and the cognitive sciences, one observes a move away from strictly materialist, neuro-physiological, and computational models of consciousness toward non-reductive, even dualistic explanations of how the mind works. This allows for the revisiting of idealist views of the mind similar to those Kant proposes. One may cautiously claim that some dualistic theories have made a modest comeback.

For example, Jerry Fodor (a frequent author on the philosophy of mind in the *New York Review of Books*) talks of the "modularity of mind" that he thinks must be postulated to explain human mental life, i.e. in terms of distinct mental functions displaying fundamentally different psychological mechanisms. This is not, I would argue, so far removed from Kant's transcendental psychology that keeps strictly apart the distinct functions of the mind (such as, for one, the Will), which however, cooperate and together make sense of the world.

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For this talk I relied on some of the articles listed below. Most of them appear in Joel Feinberg's anthology, *Reason and Responsibility* (Wadsworth Publishing).

Wesley Salmon, "Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Science"

Walter Stace, "The Problem of Free Will"

Richard Taylor, "Freedom and Determinism"

C.A. Campbell, "Has the Self Free Will?"