

# Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

## Handout 14

### Kant VII

**Identity thesis** Free will is a necessary and sufficient condition for autonomous action and a necessary and sufficient condition for moral action: Freedom  $\Leftrightarrow$  autonomy  $\Leftrightarrow$  morality.

**IN DEFENCE OF THE IDENTITY THESIS.** The main problem with the thesis is the apparent equivocation Kant allows in the meaning of freedom and causality (as explained in Handout 13). How can we deal with this problem?

Free agents are able to resist their impulses, yet they can still *act on* their impulses if they ‘process’ them to include in their maxims. This processing capability requires freedom—simply because the agent is not controlled by his impulses. Rather, it is he who controls them.

It is instructive to compare such a free agent to a hdeonist. The latter is able to resist certain impulses for short-term gains in order to achieve long-term gains. But a question will be asked why he frames his long-term gains in terms of pleasure satisfaction? No doubt he does it, because ultimately he succumbs to his impulses however cleverly arranged.

This leaves open the further question why autonomy is determined exclusively by the moral law expressed in the categorical imperative. That is, we ask why the principle adopted by a rational agent coincides (by necessity) with the categorical imperative. It is perhaps easy to see why the moral law would be a sufficient condition for such a principle. If my maxim is right for all rational agents, then it is right for me, too.

But why would the moral law be a necessary condition for the principles adopted by the rational agent? Presumably this would rule out many innocent principles of skills (i.e. maxims governed by hypothetical imperatives). Well, in the light of our earlier discussion and the idea of categorical imperatives as ‘tests’, we can now say that the *non-violation* of the moral law should be a necessary condition for the principles adopted by the rational agent.

**PROBLEMS.** There are two problems with Kant’s account worth mentioning. (1) Kant has identified non-moral actions and immoral ones with those determined by ‘alien causes’. If so, they cannot really be attributed (or ‘imputed’) to the agent, with the result that the agent should not be blamed for them. (2) Similarly, moral actions are identified with those determined by the free will. But the free will is, again, a kind of causality. So even moral actions cannot be attributed to the agent, with the result that the agents should not be praised for them.

**THE REALITY OF FREEDOM.** Here we are concentrating on Kant’s assertion that freedom should necessarily be ascribed to rational beings. The argument is very quick: it is easier to say what Kant does *not* claim than what he actually claims. A sketch of the argument is as follows:

1. We necessarily ascribe to rational creatures with a will the idea of freedom under which they act.
2. To act under the idea of freedom is to be free practically.
3. To be free practically is to be subject to the same laws as one would have been subject to if the will were shown to be free on theoretical grounds.
4. The free will is necessarily subject to the moral law (the identity thesis).
5. Since rational creatures have wills, they are subject to the moral law.