

### Incompatibilism updated: Rachels; Idealism: Kant

**EVIDENCE FOR INCOMPATIBILISM.** Clarence Darrow made an intuitive case for the absence of freedom. If your choices are fixed by your character, and if your character traits are fixed by your past history, what is left of the *free* choice? 95

This kind of argument was made already by d'Holbach (notice too the naturalist argument also advanced by d'Holbach). But we need to say something more concrete. 98

Rachels distinguishes between immediate and ultimate causes. Immediate causes are events in the brain. Physiological research shows that our choices, even those that appear *to us* as free choices, may be manipulated by stimulating the brain. A very telling detail is that we produce explanations of our choices *after* they have been made. 99

Psychology supplies evidence how more remote causes (I think they are not the 'ultimate' causes that Rachels has in mind) may alter our behaviour. Thus if you are placed in a particular social environment you will behave in accordance with the expectations of your peers, demands of your superiors, or even random, intuitively insignificant factors. But if no such environment was ever created, your behaviour and your choices would have been completely different. This is meant to show that the putative free choices are at least strongly influenced by external factor, even if it seems to the agents that they are completely free.

**GENETIC INFLUENCES.** What of the ultimate causes that stretch further back into our past history? Here Rachels uses the more recent research in behavioural genetics to show the influence of our genetic makeup. These studies are still in their infancy, but some phenomena have been extensively explored. For example, ASPD, intelligence, and shyness are highly heritable. 105ff

But can we use these facts to dismiss the reality of free will? As Rachels admits, genetic influences aren't determinism, but something 'close to it'. We have 'deep-seated desires' that we can resist with difficulty. Well, that's too close to the traditional Greek outlook that self-control (later to be associated with free will) can dominate desires, but often with difficulty. Even if our 'personalities' can affect behaviour, and even if these personalities are genetically influenced, mightn't free will be *another* factor in our choices? 108 106

There are two different problems with Rachels' invocation of genetic research. On one hand, he should be criticised for not going one step further. Behavioural genetics acknowledges non-genetic sources of our choices and actions, but attributes them to random environmental factors over which neither the subjects, nor the people around them like educators, have any control.

On the other hand, behavioural genetics has nothing to say specifically about individual agents. Its reasoning is statistical at the level of groups. It would be inconsistent with the methodology of this approach to take one individual and say, '*You* have no free control over your actions, because the factors determining your choices are *X, Y, Z.*' I think a more careful argument is needed to apply the statistics of twin studies, for example, to the question of individual choice.

As it stands, Rachels' discussion of behavioural genetics is effective in buttressing Darrow's claim of reduced responsibility. I can't be held at least fully responsible for what I did, if genetic or other factors had a strong influence on me. On the face of it, this doesn't touch on the reality of free will, however diminished its role may be in practical decisions.

**TRANSCENDENTAL FREEDOM.** Here, we don't mean to give a historically accurate picture of Kant's complex views. We want to understand his main ideas and the plain sense of his claims. We also want to put his claims in a non-Kantspeak, so far as possible.

Kant begins by identifying the ways of our *thinking* about causality. On one hand, we think of everything as having a cause. This is the familiar causal determinism. It grounds the possibility of our experience of the external world. On the other hand, reason demands that there is an absolute beginning. For otherwise the causal series is never completed, and we simply can't think of the world as extending indefinitely along the causal chain (no 'sum total of nature' obtains without this assumption). Hence reason postulates the source of absolute spontaneity. B560 B561

Kant immediately notes that this transcendental idea (not borrowed from experience) of freedom grounds the practical idea of freedom—that is, the freedom involved in human action. For also when we think of human agents, when they act practically, we think of them as self-movers, as initiators of their actions. We think that there is in human beings a certain power that determines itself ‘entirely from itself’ independently of all empirical (sensible) causes.

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We get the initial shape of Kant’s approach:

- (i) Everything in the sensible world (‘world of appearances’) is causally determined.
- (ii) But, to be able to *think* of the world, reason must believe in a prime cause.
- (iii) We similarly have to believe in free will to be able to think of people, and of ourselves, as practical *agents*.

**MAIN DILEMMA.** Kant elaborates by presenting this dilemma. If empirical objects is the reality itself, then freedom is lost. If, however, they are mere appearances that obey the law of causality, then there must be something of which they are *appearances*. This is the ‘intelligible cause’ of these appearances. It is itself not the subject the law of causality which only governs appearances. (It may be asked whether we can describe it as a ‘cause’. Kant would answer that it acts in a way analogous to empirical causes.)

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So the effects of that intelligible cause *are* causally determined, but it itself is not. In this way, ‘freedom and nature would both be found in the same actions’. Of course we can’t say anything specific about that intelligible cause’s mode of operations. In particular, we can’t say *how* it ‘causes’ its empirical effects in the sensible world. That’s because all we can properly theorise about must be subject to the law of causality.

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**HUMAN FREEDOM.** Kant applies the speculation about the intelligible cause to human action. Let’s suppose that humans have an ability that is purely intelligible and not subject to natural causes, such that its effects always agree with the law of causality (i.e. that they are connected in a lawlike manner). This is a logically possible supposition.

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Now we observe that humans have the capacity of reason which fits the profile of an intelligible cause. That’s because reason can tell us what ought to be, and not only what is. But what ought to be can’t be derived from experience which only informs us about what is. Certainly, I may be empirically motivated to do what I ought to do, but none of these motives can make me understand that this is what ought to be.

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Reason is the ground of freedom, since, unlike empirical motives, it is itself unconditioned. One ‘can’t say’ that some state preceded the rational choice and determined it, since reason is not among the phenomena given to us, there is no ‘before or after’ where reason is concerned.

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**THE LIE EXAMPLE.** Kant seeks to drive home his point about the role of reason with the malicious (i.e. deliberate) lie example. He is very much alive to the explanations that our bad (also good!) actions are influenced by environment and innate dispositions (‘natural temper’). But he insists that even when we are aware of all these explanations, we are still happy to *blame* the agent. Why? Precisely because we attribute to the agent the rational choice itself not grounded in those causally determined factors.

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On the face of it we have a giant paradox. We *do* believe that actions are empirically determined, but we also believe that rational choice that can determine morally significant actions is not itself empirically determined (nor does it obey the law of causality). This is not resolved by Kant’s hurried insistence that we are not trying to establish the reality, or even possibility of freedom. We *are* trying to reconcile freedom and determinism (=‘nature’), but it’s not clear how they can be reconciled.

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Two possible interpretations: First, we might say that in reasoning about human action we can suspend our empirical commitment and regard these actions *as if* freely chosen. But is this not question-begging? Suspend we can, but would this be right?

A second, much popular interpretation, is to insist on the priority of blame and other moral attitudes. We can’t give them up, so far as we inhabit the world of humans, and not mere organisms. But the reality of these attitudes demands the assumption of freedom.

Both these interpretations shed much of the metaphysical story that Kant is spinning in these pages—though, admittedly, his own official line too is that it is *not* metaphysical!