

## Idealist compatibilism: Kant

**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 plain words (and not in 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  
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Kant immediately notes that this transcendental (not borrowed from experience) idea of freedom grounds the practical idea of freedom—that is, the freedom involved in human action. For also when we think of human agents and their practical actions, we think of them as self-movers, as initiators of their actions—as 'authors of their actions', in Aristotle's word. We think that there is in human beings a certain power that determines itself 'entirely from itself' independently of all empirical (sensible) causes. B562

Hence 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 the following 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.) B565  
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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. To violate this stricture is to engage in metaphysical dogmatism. B569

**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. The effects of this ability always agree with the law of causality (i.e. that they are connected in a lawlike manner). This is a logically possible supposition. B573

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 actually is. Certainly, I may be empirically motivated, by fear or love, to do what I ought to do, but none of the empirical motives enable me to understand that this is what ought to be done. B574-75  
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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. B581

**THE LIE EXAMPLE.** Kant seeks to buttress his point about the role of reason with the malicious (i.e. deliberate) lie example. He is very much aware of 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. B582  
B583

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.

We may offer 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, more popular interpretation, is a form of a *transcendental argument*. We 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. Blame and accountability are conditions for our continuing interaction with humans (i.e. someone we regard as human). The difficulty here is this: the reality of those attitudes like blaming and holding accountable itself demands the assumption of freedom.

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

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