



## **A Defense of Human Freedom Immanuel Kant**

### **The Idea of Freedom as the Key to the Autonomy of the Will**

The will is the causality of living beings in so far as they are rational. Freedom is that causality in so far as it can be regarded as efficient without being determined to activity by any cause other than itself. Natural necessity is the property of all non-rational beings to be determined to activity by some cause external to themselves.

The definition of freedom just given is negative, and therefore it does not tell us what freedom is in itself; but it prepares the way for a positive conception of a more specific and more fruitful character. The conception of causality carries with it the conception of determination by law (Gesetz), for the effect is conceived as determined (gesetzt) by the cause. Hence freedom must not be regarded as lawless (gesetzlos), but simply as independent of laws of nature. A free cause does conform to unchangeable laws, but these laws are peculiar to itself; and, indeed, apart from law a free will has no meaning whatever. A necessary law of nature, as we have seen, implies the heteronomy of efficient causes; for no effect is possible at all, unless its cause is itself determined to activity by something else. What, therefore, can freedom possibly be but autonomy, that is, the property of the will to be a law to itself? Now, to say that the will in all its actions is a law to itself, is simply to say that its principle is, to act from no other maxim than that the object of which is itself as a universal law. But this is just the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Hence a free will is the same thing as a will that conforms to moral laws.

If, then, we start from the presupposition of freedom of the will, we can derive morality and the principle of morality simply from an analysis of the conception of freedom. Yet the principle of morality, namely, that an absolutely good will is a will the maxim of which can always be taken as itself a universal law, is a synthetic proposition. For by no possibility can we derive this property of the maxim from an analysis of the conception of an absolutely good will. The transition from the conception of freedom to the conception of morality can be made only if there is a third proposition which connects the other two in a synthetic unity. The positive conception of freedom yields this third proposition, and not the conception of nature, in which a thing is related causally only to something else. What this third proposition is to which freedom points, and of which we have an a priori idea, can be made clear only after some preliminary investigation.

### **Freedom is a property of all Rational Beings**

It cannot in any way be proved that the will of man is free, unless it can be shown that the will of all rational beings is free. For morality is a law for us only in so far as we are rational beings, and therefore it must apply to all rational beings. But morality is possible only for a free being, and hence it must be proved that freedom also belongs to the will of all rational

beings. Now I say, that a being -who cannot act except under the idea of freedom, must for that very reason be regarded as free so far as his actions are concerned. In other words, even if it cannot be proved by speculative reason that his will is free, all the laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom must be viewed by him as laws of his will. And I say, further, that we must necessarily attribute to every rational being that has a will the idea of freedom, because every such being always acts under that idea. A rational being we must conceive as having a reason that is practical, that is, a reason that has causality with regard to its objects. Now, it is impossible to conceive of a reason which should be consciously biased in its judgments by some influence from without, for the subject would in that case regard its judgments as determined, not by reason, but by a natural impulse. Reason must therefore regard itself as the author of its principles of action, and as independent of all external influences. Hence, as practical reason, or as the will of a rational being, it must be regarded by itself as free. The will of a rational being, in other words, can be his own will only if he acts under the idea of freedom, and therefore this idea must in the practical sphere be ascribed to all rational being.

### **The Interest Connected with Moral Ideas**

We have at last succeeded in reducing the true conception of morality to the idea of freedom. This, however, does not prove that man actually is free, but only that, without presupposing freedom, we cannot conceive of ourselves as rational beings, who are conscious of causality with respect to our actions, that is, as endowed with will. We have also found that on the same ground all beings endowed with reason and will must determine themselves to action under the idea of their freedom.

From the presupposition of the idea of freedom there also followed the consciousness of a law of action, the law that our subjective principles of action, or maxims, must always be of such a character that they have the validity of objective or universal principles, and can be taken as universal laws imposed upon our will by ourselves. But why, it may be asked, should I subject myself to this principle simply as a rational being, and why, therefore, should all other beings who are endowed with reason come under the same principle? Admitting that I am not forced to do so by interest — which indeed would make a categorical imperative impossible — yet I must take an interest in that principle and see how I come to subject myself to it.

It looks as if we had, strictly speaking, shown merely that in the idea of freedom the moral law must be presupposed in order to explain the principle of the autonomy of the will, without being able to prove the reality and objectivity of the moral law itself.

It must be frankly admitted, that there is here a sort of circle from which it seems impossible to escape. We assume that as efficient causes we are free, in order to explain how in the kingdom of ends we can be under moral laws; and then we think of ourselves as subject to moral laws, because we have ascribed to ourselves freedom of will. Freedom of will and self-legislation of will are both autonomy, and, therefore, they are conceptions which imply each other; but, for that very reason, the one cannot be employed to explain or to account for the other.

### **How is a Categorical Imperative Possible?**

As an intelligence, a rational being views himself as a member of the intelligible world, and it is only as an efficient cause belonging to this world that he speaks of his own causality as

will. On the other hand, he is conscious of himself as also a part of the world of sense, and in this connection his actions appear as mere phenomena which that causality underlies. Yet he cannot trace back his actions as phenomena to the causality of his will, because of that causality he has no knowledge; and he is thus forced to view them as if they were determined merely by other phenomena, that is, by natural desires and inclinations. Were a man a member only of the intelligible world, all his actions would be in perfect agreement with the autonomy of the will; were he merely a part of the world of sense, they would have to be regarded as completely subject to the natural law of desire and inclination, and to the heteronomy of nature. The former would rest upon the supreme principle of morality, the latter upon that of happiness. But it must be observed that the intelligible world is the condition of the world of sense, and, therefore, of the laws of that world. And as the will belongs altogether to the intelligible world, it is the intelligible world that prescribes the laws which the will directly obeys. As an intelligence, I am therefore subject to the law of the intelligible world, that is, to reason, notwithstanding the fact that I belong on the other side of my nature to the world of sense. Now, as subject to reason, which in the idea of freedom contains the law of the intelligible world, I am conscious of being subject to the autonomy of the will. The laws of the intelligible world I must therefore regard as imperatives, and the actions conformable to this principle as duties.

The explanation of the possibility of categorical imperatives, then, is, that the idea of freedom makes me a member of the intelligible world. Were I a member of no other world, all my actions would as a matter of fact always conform to the autonomy of the will. But as I perceive myself to be also a member of the world of sense, I can say only, that my actions ought to conform to the autonomy of the will. The categorical ought is thus an a priori synthetic proposition. To my will as affected by sensuous desires, there is added synthetically the idea of my will as belonging to the intelligible world, and therefore as pure and self-determining. The will as rational is therefore the supreme condition of the will as sensuous. The method of explanation here employed is similar to that by which the categories were deduced. For the a priori synthetic propositions, which make all knowledge of nature possible, depend, as we have seen, upon the addition to perceptions of sense of the pure conceptions of understanding, which, in themselves, are nothing but the form of law in general.

### **Limits of Practical Philosophy**

Freedom is only an idea of reason, and therefore its objective reality is doubtful. Thus there arises a dialectic of practical reason. The freedom ascribed to the will seems to stand in contradiction with the necessity of nature. It is, therefore, incumbent upon speculative philosophy at least to show that we think of man in one sense and relation when we call him free, and in another sense and relation when we view him as a part of nature, and as subject to its laws. But this duty is incumbent upon speculative philosophy only in so far as it has to clear the way for practical philosophy.

In thinking itself into the intelligible world, practical reason does not transcend its proper limits, as it would do if it tried to know itself directly by means of perception. In so thinking itself, reason merely conceives of itself negatively as not belonging to the world of sense, without giving any laws to itself in determination of the will. There is but a single point in which it is positive, namely, in the thought that freedom, though it

is a negative determination, is yet bound up with a positive faculty, and, indeed, with a causality of reason which is called will. In other words, will is the faculty of so acting that the principle of action should conform to the essential nature of a rational motive, that is, to the condition that the maxim of action should have the universal validity of a law. Were reason, however, to derive an object of will, that is, a motive, from the intelligible world, it would transcend its proper limits, and would make a pretence of knowing something of which it knew nothing. The conception of an intelligible world is therefore merely a point of view beyond the world of sense, at which reason sees itself compelled to take its stand in order to think itself as practical. This conception would not be possible at all if the sensuous desires were sufficient to determine the action of man. It is necessary, because otherwise man would not be conscious of himself as an intelligence, and, therefore, not as a rational cause acting through reason or operating freely. This thought undoubtedly involves the idea of an order and a system of laws other than the order and laws of nature, which concern only the world of sense. Hence it makes necessary the conception of an intelligible world, a world which comprehends the totality of rational beings as things in themselves. Yet it in no way entitles us to think of that world otherwise than in its formal condition, that is, to conceive of the maxims of the will as conformable to universal laws.

Reason would, therefore, completely transcend its proper limits, if it should undertake to explain how pure reason can be practical, or, what is the same thing, to explain how freedom is possible.

We can explain nothing but that which we can reduce to laws, the object of which can be presented in a possible experience. Freedom, however, is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be presented in accordance with laws of nature, and, therefore, not in any possible experience. It has merely the necessity of a presupposition of reason, made by a being who believes himself to be conscious of a will, that is, of a faculty distinct from mere desire. The most that we can do is to defend freedom by removing the objections of those who claim to have a deeper insight into the nature of things than we can pretend to have, and who therefore, declare that freedom is impossible. It would no doubt be a contradiction to say that in its causality the will is entirely separated from all the laws of the sensible world. But the contradiction disappears, if we say, that behind phenomena there are things in themselves, which, though they are hidden from us, are the condition of phenomena; and that the laws of action of things in themselves naturally are not the same as the laws under which their phenomenal manifestations stand.

While, therefore, it is true that we cannot comprehend the practical unconditioned necessity of the moral imperative, it is also true that we can comprehend its incomprehensibility; and this is all that can fairly be demanded of a philosophy which seeks to reach the principles which determine the limits of human reason.

---

Immanuel Kant. From "The Metaphysics of Morals." *Readings in Philosophy*. Ed. Albert Edwin Avey. Columbus, OH: R.G. Adams and Company, 1921.

© SophiaOmni, 2014. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.