

Kant's Ethics AN 4200

Week 5: A Critique of Kant's notion of freedom

1. The timelessness of the noumenal cause

The structure of the *Wille* (in the broad sense):

- *Wille* (in the narrow sense): the legislative part
- *Willkür*: the executive part

The positive aspect of the *Willkür*: a capacity to act on pure *Wille*. R19: 'freedom of the willkür is of a wholly unique nature in that an incentive can determine the willkür to an action only so far as the individual has incorporated it into his maxim (has made it the general rule in accordance with which he will conduct himself)'. Through what Allison calls the Act of Incorporation. This is *spontaneous* - it takes place outside time.

Autonomy is freedom of the *Wille* in the broad sense: both self-legislating and willing to act according to what you self-legislate. The *Wille* (in the narrow sense) can give rise to a feeling (a rational feeling) in the *Willkür*, and this is a feeling of respect for the moral law. The incentive is respect for the moral law.

But this capacity of the *Willkür* - freedom - can involve heteronomy as well as autonomy. E.g willing to act on your strongest desires is heteronomy.

Question: How can an incentive of the sort which Kant takes the moral law to be play a causal role in our deliberation?

Answer: timeless decisions in the noumenal realm (which themselves have no causal antecedent) cause temporal sequences in the phenomenal world.

Questions: Is this coherent? Does it fly in the face of Kant's doctrine that the two realms cannot interact? Does it capture our ordinary notion of freedom when we decide?

2. *Gessinnung*, Moral Responsibility and Radical Evil

A single act taking place in time is in one sense fully determined and in another sense free and outside time. We can be imputed with the action and punished if it is contrary to the moral law. NB: Kant's idea of punishment is purely retributive: see e.g. MM 331.

Does this capture our ordinary notion of moral responsibility? See C Pr R 100.

The enduring part of the *Willkür* which is the enduring character or disposition of the agent: *Gesinnung*. How can this be free if it is a disposition? And if it is a disposition, how can we be responsible for it?

Gesinnung as the strategic *Willkür*, making fundamental maxims or ‘meta-maxims’. And these maxims can be chosen at any time, and the agent is free to do this. See G 405, and R, passim.

Radical Evil: ‘Man is *evil*, can mean only, He is conscious of the moral law but has nevertheless adopted into his maxim the (occasional) deviation therefrom. He is evil *by nature*, means but this, that evil can be predicated of man as a species. ... Hence we can call this a natural propensity to evil, and as we must, after all, ever hold man himself responsible for it, we can further call it a *radical* innate *evil* in human nature (yet none the less brought upon us by ourselves)’. R 27-8.

Question: How can *Gesinnung* and Radical Evil be reconciled with the idea that we are free?

Answer: Kant’s idea that this is *chosen*. The disposition is one which we freely adopt, and we can at any moment have a ‘change of heart’ R 43: ‘a *revolution* in the man’s disposition (a going over to the holiness of the disposition). He can become a new man only by the kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation, and a change of heart’. This is ‘an intellectual determination’ R 68.

Kant’s *rigorism*: what incentive is incorporated into your maxim is either the moral law or it is not; if not you are evil: ‘his disposition in respect to the moral law is never indifferent, never neither good nor evil’; ‘this disposition itself must have been adopted by free choice (*Willkür*) for otherwise it could not be imputed’ R 20.

3. Is Kant’s account of our notion of freedom and of the moral law a fundamental misconception of the nature of practical deliberation?

(A) Reflective detachment contrasted with Kantian impartiality.

- Simon Blackburn’s ‘Kantian Captain’ in his *Ruling Passions*.
- What is ‘surveyed’ in deliberation: the world, not our own psychological states (our own inclinations as such).

(B) An alternative naturalistic account of conscience (not recognition of the moral law as a fact of reason).

Freud’s *the Ego and the Id*, and *Civilisation and its Discontents*. Cf. Scheffler’s *Human Morality*.

(C) A Nietzschean ‘genealogy’. See for example: *Twilight of the Idols*: "The Four Great Errors"; *Beyond Good and Evil*, §§9-23. *Gay Science*, §345, §347. *Human, All Too Human*, §§18, 39, 70, 99, 105-107, 133-135. *Daybreak*, §§115-131. *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, §13.

Peter Goldie

KCL February 2001