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### Free Will in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he discusses the paradox between free will and natural causation as part of his section *Antinomy of Pure Reason*. While some philosophical theories are more decisive on debates on free will, determinism, and compatibility of the two, Kant's reliance on transcendental idealism complicates his own positions. As he asserts a distinction between a noumenal realm of how things are in themselves and a phenomenal realm of our empirical reality, he has both a transcendental and practical conception of freedom as well. In this paper, I will explore Kant's discussion of freedom, mostly in *The Third Antinomy*, and show how and why it cannot be cleanly contextualized within debates on free will. First, I discuss the role of *The Third Antinomy* in Kant's system. I then will discuss how his discussion in *The Antinomy* on transcendental freedom reveals an unclear position on the existence of free will and on compatibilism. I follow this with discussion of Kant's description on practical freedom, after contrasting it from transcendental freedom, and end with a brief mention of how this type of freedom fits into debates.

In the chapter before explicitly articulating his theory of transcendental idealism, Kant discusses three conflicts in *The Antinomy of Pure Reason*. These conflicts act as paradoxes illustrating the failures of human reason and problems that arise when we erroneously use reason beyond its limit. Kant describes these contradictions as "an antithetic for the discovery of which no one needs to ponder or artfully lay snares, but into which reason falls on its own and,

moreover, inevitably” to capture how *The Antinomy* traps and provides a problem for pure reason that pure reason itself creates (A407). In this chapter, Kant outlines proofs for two sides of different conflicts, not to actually persuade a reader to adopt one side or another, but instead to highlight how our reason shows a failure to reconcile dogmatism with empiricism. He mentions the three contradictions before delving into details of transcendental idealism so that a reader is primed with common contradictions that have opposing feasible sides and can begin to question why these contradictions exist. I will start with summarizing the thesis and antithesis of the third contradiction and then analyze what the purpose of *The Antinomy* says about Kant’s position on free will.

Kant’s subsection *Third Conflict of Transcendental Ideas* begins with the thesis that natural causality is not the only one from which all appearances of the world can be derived. In other words, Kant asserts that transcendental freedom, which he describes as an absolute spontaneity, can be another way of achieving states of appearances of the world. This spontaneity is the start of a chain of events that then includes natural causes to continue this chain. He constructs a proof for this thesis starting with an assumption of its contradiction: that “there is no other causality than the one according to laws of nature” (A444). Since the causal laws of nature rely on a previous state achieved by another causal law which was itself reliant on a previous state and so on, there is no way to account for a start to this causal chain of events with exclusively natural causes (i.e. without spontaneity). Kant concludes “hence the proposition, in its unlimited universality, whereby any causality is possible only according to natural laws contradicts itself; and hence this causality cannot be assumed as being the only one” (A446).

The complementary antithesis is that there is no spontaneity or transcendental freedom, and all appearances of the world can be attributed to causal laws of nature. He constructs a proof

for this antithesis by again assuming the contradiction: that “there is... a *freedom* as a special kind of causality according to which the events of the world could happen” (A445). This spontaneous causality would be the beginning of a causal chain of consequences. Assuming this, the spontaneous beginning “presupposes a state of the not yet acting cause” in that it in no way connects to any preceding state (A447). By this point in the *Critique*, Kant has stated his law of causality which explains that every appearance of temporal succession involves a cause relating to a previous appearance (B233). Thus, a spontaneous beginning from nothing is inconsistent with this law, and he concludes that “We have, therefore, nothing but *nature* as the place wherein we must seek the coherence and order of events in the world” (A447).

In introducing *The Antinomy*, Kant acknowledges the fact that neither side “may hope to be confirmed in experience, nor need they fear being refuted in it” and that “the counterproposition has on its side equally valid and necessary bases for its assertion” (A421). With the specific example of *The Third Antinomy*, like the rest, Kant does not want to take a position for the thesis or antithesis. The thesis illustrates the position of dogmatism of reason, specifically that one consequence of the absolute application of reason to the world is assumption of the existence of transcendental freedom. The antithesis, conversely, is the position of empiricism, to show a consequence of exclusive focus on the relations between appearance and consistency with the law of causality, whereas natural causes are the only causes. In showing his theory of transcendental idealism, Kant intends to, in a way, reconcile this thesis/antithesis pair to show how they can both fit into the world.

Kant uses a metaphor of each thesis/antithesis pair as combating as opponents in an arena, and uses this to describe his ultimate goal by saying “perhaps, after having more exhausted than harmed each other, they will become aware on their own of the nullity of their

contents, and will part as good friends” (A423). This means that Kant does not intend to even have either side be more correct or accurate with regards to experience, but to discuss equally feasible cosmological ideas and diagnose the root of their contradictions as illusions of theoretical reason. In the section *Interest of Reason in This Conflict* Kant accounts for why people might take one side over another; some might believe in free will for its practical use or support purely natural causes out of sensitivity to empiricism, showing again that Kant does not want confirm the absolute truth of either free will or natural determinism.

To make the thesis and antithesis “good friends,” the system of transcendental idealism (as in the system relying on a distinction between a phenomenal and noumenal realm) accounts for the conflict between them. Kant explains “Now what is at issue here is merely a thing as object of possible experience and not as a thing in itself” (A479). Applied to the *Third Antinomy*, the reason there is no clean solution to the common debate between free will and natural determinism is that we try to apply both to our understanding of the world as it is, while it is, according to Kant, actually more complicated than that. If we recognize the difference between the phenomenal and noumenal realm and understand our capacity for reason is limited by these, we can accept that it is impossible for us to know the truth about either side. He says “the dogmatic solution...is by no means uncertain, but impossible” while “the critical solution,... which can be completely certain, considers the question not objectively at all, but in terms of the foundation of cognition on which the question is based” (A484). In this case the dogmatic solution is that we have transcendental freedom, so Kant asserts that it is not uncertain, since we might not be able to prove it one way or another, but it may be impossible to reconcile it with an empirical world that follows from laws of experience.

On the other hand, the “critical solution,” which states natural causation is the only causation, might be completely certain since as far as Kant’s system goes, he has already proven the law of causality (that every appearance is causally related). However, this side “considers the question not objectively at all” since it fails to recognize the dichotomy of a noumenal and phenomenal realm in applying causation, which exists “merely in your brain and cannot be given outside it at all” (A484). The reason that dogmatic versus empirical arguments innately rise in contradiction, according to Kant, is because reason attempts to apply a dogmatism to our entire empirical world, while we must instead recognize that natural causes could impact empirical appearances of the world while pursuits of speculative pure reason are impossible to confirm. They are both plausible because it might be sometimes useful to assume a free will (like for practical freedom, which I will discuss later) while sometimes it makes more empirical sense to explain the entire world as following natural causes. Kant explains in more detail the benefits of choosing a side in the debate for mere interest or preference in his section *On the Interest of Reason in This Its Conflict*, but I will not discuss more specific details from this section in this paper (A462).

To reiterate, Kant’s purpose in adding *The Antinomy of Pure Reason* is to provide intuitive evidence for transcendental idealism by showing problems that inevitably arise from reason. He uses the fact that many are already familiar with the debate between free will and determinism, so he intends to give us this common paradox and argue that his system is correct since it accounts for this problem (among others) without picking a side of the debate.

I will now relate Kant’s discussion of free will in *The Critique* to common debates about free will, where most theories can be categorized as either compatibilist or incompatibilist. Compatibilism is defined as the view that determinism is compatible with free will and it is

possible that outcomes are predetermined by external causes while humans also have some sense of free will. Incompatibilists believe that these two ideas are incompatible: it is impossible that outcomes are predetermined while humans also have free will.

From a quick read of Kant's *Antinomy of Pure Reason*, it may seem that the thesis and antithesis fall easily on sides of this debate. Perhaps the thesis is an argument for compatibilism since it accounts for a presence of spontaneity within a chain of natural causes while the antithesis demonstrates incompatibilism because it asserts that natural law can be the only cause. Some quotes from this section support this such as in his proof for the antithesis Kant says "nature and freedom differ as do law-governedness and lawlessness" (A447).

However, in *The Third Antinomy*, Kant is only talking about transcendental freedom, while much of the debate on free will and determinism involves free will more generally. Since Kant's transcendental idealism involves a separation of the noumenal and phenomenal realms along with a distinction between transcendental and practical freedom, his position on compatibilism for freedom as a whole is complicated. Even though it does seem that *The Third Antinomy* is a debate between compatibilism and incompatibilism, it is not illuminating of Kant's personal position on this debate or on free will. As Allen Wood notes, Kant's position on the free will issue, like his views on many issues, does "not fit neatly into the customary pigeonholes" (239).

*The Third Antinomy* focuses entirely on transcendental freedom, while he discusses practical freedom much later in *The Critique* and in later works. Kant defines transcendental freedom as a freedom independent of all natural causes, where practical freedom is free from some external causes, but it is still determined "by what directly affects the senses" (A802). This

is the type of freedom associated with beginning a spontaneous chain of events as discussed in *The Third Antinomy*.

Kant says that “transcendental freedom seems to be contrary to the law of nature and hence to all possible experience, and therefore remains a problem” in *The Canon of Pure Reason*, where he then asserts that “sufficient discussion regarding [transcendental freedom] can already be found in the antinomy of pure reason” (A804). He does not give a definitive view on the existence of transcendental freedom in this section and turns the reader back to *The Antinomy* for sufficient discussion, which I have already explained does not give a definitive position either. He also states that “even if will is free, this fact still can concern only the intelligible cause of our willing” since “as regards the phenomena consisting of that will’s manifestations, i.e., the actions, we must always...explain them only as we explain all the remaining appearances of nature. Viz., according to the immutable laws of nature” (A799). This seems to suggest that a strict compatibilist or incompatibilist position with regards to transcendental freedom is not even valid. As Chris Naticchia notes, Kant might be acknowledging the conceptual possibility of transcendental freedom in *The Third Antinomy*, which is whether there is a contradiction of transcendental freedom and nature. This contrasts with the ontological possibility, which is whether such freedom actually exists (Naticchia 394). Again, there is evidence that *The Third Antinomy* is not intended to make a position on free will and while it might be engaging in a debate on compatibilism as Naticchia notes, Kant does not take a stance on either side of the debate.

The mention of the free will debate without taking a stance is consistent with how Kant treats the rest of the contradictions in *The Antinomy* and other objects of speculative reason, explaining that they are “are endeavors of our reason that are entirely futile and are even

extremely difficult into the bargain” (A800). Kant refrains from making an assertion on the existence of transcendental freedom, seemingly taking no position in the compatibilist debate (even though *The Third Antinomy* engages with this debate) in favor of claiming that the real important consequences of pure reason are with regards to the practical. Since, according to his system of transcendental idealism, we err when trying to use reason beyond its limits, it is not worthwhile or even possible to come to an absolute conclusion about the existence of transcendental freedom through pure reason.

Conversely, Kant does seem to take more of a position on the existence of practical freedom, which is also evident by his moral theories discussed outside of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. In *The Canon*, Kant defines practical freedom as “a causality of reason that is operative in the determination of the will” (A804). Allen Wood describes a difference between a “negative” and “positive” concept of practical freedom, where in the negative sense it is defined as resisting sensuous desires, distinguishing humans from nonhuman animals since animals cannot resist sensuous impulses. A positive definition of practical freedom highlights what it *can* do, which is to act from a completely nonsense motivation and “to conform our will to a moral law” (Wood 242). Practical freedom is more about morality than transcendental freedom is, which is why it is less present in the *Critique*.

Kant says that “practical freedom can be proved through experience,” so it seems evident that Kant does want to agree with the existence of practical freedom (A802). While his mention of achieving the “good” implies that there might not be absolute determinism and our practical freedom instead can determine outcome, he does not clearly articulate whether or not practical freedom is compatible with determinism. While transcendental freedom involves speculation



into a noumenal realm, practical freedom is directly related to the empirical, and therefore has a place in the phenomenal realm.

In conclusion, Kant's use of transcendental freedom does not give a standpoint on compatibilism, which makes perfect sense in accordance with Kant's purpose of *The Antinomy*. He uses *The Antinomy* to show problems with reason and a limit of human knowledge that is explained by, according to Kant, a system of transcendental idealism. Since we only have access to empirical sensibility in a phenomenal realm, transcendental questions like free will, along with the immortality of the soul and existence of God, are only speculative and while they are begged by pure reason, they have "no use admissible for objects of experience" (A800). These ideas have no way of being proven in our empirical world, so their only significance to us must be practical. Specifically, the practical version of freedom can be proven in experience and is related to our power of acting morally. Kant's definition of practical freedom is crucial is much of is moral philosophy including the *Groundwork*, but in just his *Critique of Pure Reason*, his instrumental discussion of freedom is almost entirely transcendental without definitively acknowledging its existence.

#### Works Cited

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