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KANT ON HUMAN FREEDOM

PRESENTED TO C. MICHAEL GELVEN, Ph.D.

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PATRICK CAMPBELL

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Introduction

The 20th century existentialist writer, Miguel de Unamuno once wrote describing the progression of Kant's philosophy between his first and second critiques,

> In the philosophy of this man Kant, a man of heart and head – that is to say, a man – there is a significant somersault, as Kierkegaard…would have said, the somersault from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He reconstructs in the latter what he destroyed in the former, in spite of what those may say who do not see the man himself. After having examined and pulverized with his analysis the traditional proofs of the existence of God, of the Aristotelian God, …the abstract God, the unmoved prime mover; he reconstructs God anew; but the God of the conscience, the Author of the moral order…Kant reconstructed with the heart that which with the head he had overthrown.[1]

Implicit in Unamuno's characterization of Kant's philosophy are two potential objections regarding the transition he makes from the purely *critical* methodology which dominates the early sections of the *Critique* to the more constructive forms of argumentation employed in the Dialectic to vindicate the interests of morality and religion. While Unamuno's characterization portrays this 'methodological somersault' in a more or less positive light, many others have found the strategies employed here more problematic. Kant's theory of freedom, for instance, has seemed to many immediately objectionable on account of the metaphysical commitment it demands: "philosophically

[1] Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, translated by J.E. Crawford Flitch, (New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing, Inc., 2006), 3.

defensible belief in freedom, Kant seems to be saying, involves forming concepts of the noumenal, and fixing the noumenal in reference to the phenomenal, in a way not required elsewhere in the *Critique*."[2] Such a move, critics have noted, would seem to involve a transition from the merely *logical* to the *real* possibility of freedom - a transition which Kant explicitly rejects in other portions of the *Critique*.

It is such difficulties as mentioned above, taken in light of certain underlying assumptions concerning Kant's motivation in providing such defenses, which have led many to denounce these arguments defending the interests of morality and religion as ad hoc. After all, critics point out, the very thesis of the *Critique,* i.e. that the only legitimate metaphysics is a *critical* metaphysics,[3] seems to preclude the possibility of a metaphysics of morals the groundwork of which is being prepared here. Any metaphysical theory established upon the ideas of reason, in other words, as entities beyond the scope of possible experience, must implicitly involve the employment of our faculties beyond their proper scope.

These two objections can be condensed as follows: (1) A philosophically defensible belief in freedom requires an illicit inference from the *logical* possibility of its object to its *real* possibility; and (2) Kant's defense of the interests of practical reason is motivated by goals inconsistent with his critical metaphysic and employs ad hoc arguments to accommodate them. In this paper I will address these objections within the general context of Kant's third antinomy concerning human freedom. Specifically, I will explore the metaphysical commitments of a philosophically defensible belief in freedom

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[2] Sebastian Gardner, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to: Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 263.

[3] i.e., to provide a systematic critique of the proper employment of the faculties.

and determine whether or not these conflict with those supporting other portions of Kant's *Critique*. I will support these arguments and objections with an abbreviated restructuring of Kant's theory of freedom, devoting special attention to the clarification of those particular features from which these objections arise.

Handling the Objections

The first point of consideration is whether Kant's theory of freedom depends upon an illicit inference from the *logical* possibility of its concept to the *actual* possibility of its object. Such a transition Kant has already rejected in his argument against the familiar ontological argument for the existence of God. Here he writes,

> A concept is always possible if it is not self-contradictory. This is the logical criterion of possibility, and by it the object of the concept is distinguishable from the *nihil negativum*.[4] But it may none the less be an empty concept, unless the objective reality of the synthesis through which the concept is generated has been specifically proved; and such proof…rests on principles of possible experience, and not on the principle of analysis (the law of contradiction). This is a warning against arguing from the logical possibility of concepts to the real possibility of things.[5]

The particular transition, then, that Kant's system forbids is that which infers from the logical possibility of *concepts* to the real possibility of *things*. For a logically non-contradictory concept may nonetheless be an *empty* one, i.e. one to which no corresponding phenomenal object may be found (*ens rationis*). One may still wonder, however, whether Kant's system might allow for a similar transition between the faculties of reason and the understanding.

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[4] "The object of a concept which contradicts itself is nothing, because the concept is nothing, is the impossible, e.g. a two-sided rectangular figure (*nihil negativum*)" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 295).

[5] Ibid, 503.

One reason to suppose that the precedent established in this former context might not carry over to the *ideas* of practical reason is that these latter 'objects' are definitively non-phenomenal. Hence, the so-called 'principles of possible experience,' which serve in this former instance to regulate against the unrestricted hypostatization of every non-contradictory concept, do not even enter into the equation when the ideas of practical reason are concerned. As Kant reminds us, "As categories are the only concepts which refer to objects in general, the distinguishing of an object, whether it is something or nothing, will proceed according to the order and under the guidance of the categories."[6] Reason's proper object, however, being a mere *idea*, corresponds not to *sensibility* but to the *understanding*.[7] There is therefore no explicit rule to forbid Kant from inferring the actual possibility of transcendental freedom (i.e., as an *idea*) directly from its logical compatibility with an empirical counterpart. And this is precisely what he does:

> Is it a truly disjunctive proposition to say that every effect in the world must arise either from nature or from freedom; or must we not rather say that in one and the same event, in different relations, both can be found?...[If] appearances are things in themselves, freedom cannot be upheld…[But] the effect may be regarded as free in its intelligible cause, and at the same time in respect of appearance as resulting from them according to the necessity of nature.[8]

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[6] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 294-95.

[7] "The understanding is an object for reason, just as the sensibility is for the understanding" (Ibid, 546). "[To] allow that we posit a thing, a something, a real being, corresponding to the idea, is not to say that we profess to extend our knowledge of things by means of transcendental concepts. For this being is posited only in the idea and not in itself; and therefore only as expressing the systematic unity which is to serve as a rule for the empirical employment of reason." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 552-52) "[The object,] as thus entertain by reason (*ens rationis ratiocinatae*), is a mere idea; it is not assumed as a something that is real absolutely and *in itself*, but is postulated only problematically (since we cannot reach it through any of the concepts of the understanding) in order that we may view all connection of the things of the world of sense *as if* they had their ground in such a being" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 556).

[8] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 466.

Largely motivating the above argument is the introduction of the term *intelligible* to characterize human freedom considered in its transcendental aspect, and to distinguish it from merely empirical causality (that is, an event within the series of appearances).[9] Kant formally defines this term as 'that in an object of the senses which is not itself appearance,'[10] and its introduction marks the first stages of the transition from the realm of speculative to that of practical reason. In identifying human freedom with the intelligible world, Kant forever removes all possibility of its coming to serve as an object of our knowledge. But we may nonetheless *think* it; and this basic intelligibility of reason's ideas, Kant later argues, will provide a means by which we may vindicate their practical employment that is entirely compatible with our standing metaphysical commitments.[11] This point is better developed in light of the Antinomies, so we will examine these briefly before moving on.

The Antinomies

Some who have defended Kant in regard to these present objections have noted that, "If we knew it to be a foregone conclusion that the transition Kant anticipates making from the logical to the real possibility of freedom cannot be made, then his theory of intelligible causality would lose any attraction – the consigning of the ground of

[9] "A human action is, on the one hand, the free, empirically unconditioned effect of the self *qua* thing in itself (intelligible or noumenal self), and so a product of intelligible causality or causality of reason, manifesting intelligible character. And, on the other hand, it is the effect of the self *qua* appearance (empirical or phenomenal self), whereby it is conditioned and determined empirically, and manifests empirical character. (Gardner, *Routledge Guide*, 260)"

[10] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 467.

[11] Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, 259-60.

freedom to an unknowable realm would be pointless…What transcendental idealism entails we cannot comprehend regarding freedom is precisely what proves intractable in it. Kant's doctrine provides an explanation for why this should be the case, as if it had been designed with human freedom especially in view."[12]

Indeed, the objection that Kant's arguments defending the interests of morality and religion are ad hoc would seem better justified had Kant not gone to such efforts to prepare his reader well in advance for this precise development. As early as his introduction to the *Critique,* Kant makes known his ultimate intentions regarding the three ideas of practical reason when he writes,

> [The] *assumption* – as made on behalf of the necessary practical employment of my reason – of *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality* is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For in order to arrive at such insight it must make use of principles which, in fact, extend only to objects of possible experience, and which, if also applied to what cannot be an object of experience, always really change this into an appearance, thus rendering all *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*.[13]

The way in which Kant evades the objection that his practical metaphysic in any way contradicts the thesis which otherwise drives his *Critique* is by establishing an intractable boundary to separate the domains of speculative and practical reason. Kant demonstrates his commitment to his original thesis by first demolishing the pretense of speculative reason to claim objective validity for its conclusions via its traditional speculative methods (even when those conclusions happen to fall *in favor* of our practical

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[12] Gardner, *Routledge Guide*, 263-64.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, unabridged edition, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), 29.

interests). Not until after these *speculative* methods of proving or disproving the entities with which reason is concerned does Kant attempt to vindicate them by subsequent *practical* methods. We will now examine this transition between speculative and practical methodologies in the context of the Antinomies and thereby demonstrate their theoretical compatibility.

In this section of the *Critique*, Kant seeks to invalidate the conclusions of rational cosmology concerning its four primary subjects of interest: The origin of the world; the fundamental constitution of objects; the totality of the causal series; and the ground of nature.[14] He does this, in short, by revealing the intrinsically antinomic structure of reason regarding its handling of each of these respective subjects – i.e., that in proceeding on the assumption that reason is within its rights to claim the reality of its ideas (those which result from reason's attempt to think an empirically unconditioned object), reason contradicts itself. Therefore, "If pure reason in the hands of the rational cosmologist terminates in contradictions," Kant reasons, "then the only conclusion to be drawn is that there is something wrong with cosmological speculation."[15]

Another way in which commentators have characterized Kant's methodology in the Transcendental Dialectic (of which the Antinomies constitute an important part) is as an analysis of what happens when regulative ideas are applied constitutively. As Caygill writes,

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[14] Gardner, *Routledge Guide*, 232. The first two subjects (i.e., the totality of the world and the totality of a mereological whole) originate from reason's attempt to locate the unconditioned in a series of appearances. Insofar as these deal with magnitudes, the corresponding antinomies are termed *mathematical*. The second two subjects (i.e., the totality of casual series and the totality of existential conditions of nature) originate from reason's attempt to determine the existence of its object. The two antinomies which correspond to these ideas of practical reason (freedom and God, respectively) are termed *dynamical*.

[15] Ibid, 235-36.

> When ideas of reason such as God, the world and the soul are used constitutively 'as supplying concepts of certain objects, they are but pseudo rational, merely dialectical concepts' and are liable to come into conflict with themselves. When used constitutively, the ideas are given an illusory existence; however, when they are restricted to their proper, regulative use, they serve only to direct the understanding towards a certain goal upon which the routes marked out by all its rules converge, as upon their point of intersection…The regulative principles and ideas, in other words, contribute to the orientation of the understanding without claiming to constitute an object, nor to contribute directly to knowledge.[16]

This distinction between the constitutive and regulative applications of ideas parallels the speculative and practical employments of reason mentioned before, and Kant is emphatic about preserving the respective domains of each. For where Kant has proven speculative reason to be powerless in its attempts to determine the objective reality of reason's ideas, he is subsequently able to demonstrate through their efficacy in guiding practical affairs the validity of their regulative employment as maxims for the understanding. A failure to appreciate the centrality of this feature of Kant's philosophy in the overall execution of his argument is a failure to properly understand Kant's purpose in constructing it,[17] with the resultant effect that one may be inclined to take certain stages in its development as ad hoc. This is a false characterization, however, and I hope to have here aided in its dissolution.

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[16] Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 129-30.

[17] "So far, therefore, as our Critique limits speculative reason, it is indeed *negative*; but since it thereby removes an obstacle which stands in the way of the employment of practical reason, nay threatens to destroy it, it has in reality a positive and very important use. At least this is so, immediately we are convinced that there is an absolutely necessary *practical* employment of pure reason – the *moral* – in which it inevitably goes beyond the limits of sensibility. Though [practical] reason, in thus proceeding, requires no assistance from speculative reason, it must yet be assured against its opposition, that reason must not be brought into conflict with itself. To deny that the service which the Critique render is *positive* in character, would thus be like saying that the police are of no positive benefit, inasmuch as their main business is merely to prevent the violence which citizens stand in mutual fear, in order that each may pursue his vocation in peace and security" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 26-27).

Conclusion

It is no mystery that Kant intended by his *Critique* to vindicate the ideas which he believes to undergird men's practical interests (i.e. God, freedom, and the soul) from certain attempts by speculative philosophy to disprove them. But many of the objections we have considered seem to be fueled by a misapprehension of that precise manner, and that particular degree to which Kant claims to have accomplished this. Kant does not go so far as to claim possession of conclusive proofs of these important propositions;[18] nor does he even positively affirm their possibility as *objective* realities (and so contradict those principles used to support earlier sections of his *Critique*). Rather, he simply takes the more conservative position that, granting the logically distinct domains which they occupy,[19] there is no principle to defy our living *as if* the one world had its ground in the other. Indeed, when we do this and allow the maxims of reason to facilitate our interactions with the empirical world, we often find the justification we sought in its merely speculative employment. It is through the *practical* employment of reason, therefore, that the interests of religion and morality are vindicated, without its being assumed that their supporting ideas exist *except*, as Gardner puts it, *in the form of a task*: "The regulative role of reason, though a 'real' rather than merely logical use of the

[18] "Whenever I hear of a writer of real ability has demonstrated away that freedom of the human will, the hope of a future life, and the existence of God, I am eager to read the book, for I expect him by his talents to increase my insight into these matters. Already, before having opened it, I am perfectly certain that he has not justified any one of his specific claims; not because I believe that I am in possession of conclusive proofs of these important propositions, but because the transcendental critique, which has disclosed to me all the resources of our pure reason, has completely convinced me that, as reason is incompetent to arrive at affirmative assertions in this field, it is equally unable, indeed even less able, to establish any negative conclusion in regard to these questions" (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 602.).

[19] i.e., the empirical and intelligible realms (or, as they are also known, the phenomenal and noumenal realms, respectively).

faculty, is thus a far cry from metaphysical speculation. In regulative employment reason is given its due by being allowed to set up unconditioned totality as a target for the understanding: the formation of a system of empirical knowledge takes the place of cognition of transcendent objects, and the transcendental ideas are shown not to be inherently faulty."[20]

[20] Gardner, *Routledge Guide*, 223.

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