Freedom in German Idealism

I Freedom without Arbitrariness

If there is a single fundamental concept underlying German Idealism then it is, beyond question, the concept of freedom. Fichte describes his philosophy as one long investigation into the concept of freedom;[1] Schelling writes that the concept of freedom is "the Alpha and Omega of philosophy;"[2] the author of the Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism identifies the concept of freedom as the first Idea in his metaphysical system;[3] while it is freedom that, according to Hegel, gives *Geist* its nature and purpose.[4]

So what is the idealist concept of freedom? Is there a single concept common to its practitioners? And, if so, is it a concept that can unite the different domains – metaphysics, ethics, history and politics – within which we find the concept of freedom applied across the vast and diverse corpus of Idealist writing? These are, of course, enormously complex as well as overwhelmingly interesting and important questions and I cannot hope to do full justice to them here. My argument is that there is, indeed, a central strand to the German Idealist concept of freedom, running from Kant through to Hegel. To appreciate it, we should see the German Idealist concept of freedom as responding to two problems. One problem is familiar to contemporary philosophy but the other – in consequence of the processes of secularisation which have more and more come to detach philosophy from questions of religion – may now

[1] Letter to Reinhold, 8 January 1800
[2] Letter to Hegel, 8 February 1795
[3] "The first Idea is of course the representation of my self as an absolutely free being," "Das 'älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus'", in *Mythologie der Vernunft*, ed. by C. Jamme and H. Schneider (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1984), pp. 11-14, p.11 ["die erste Idee ist natürlich die Vorstellung von mir selbst, als einem absolut freien Wesen."]
[4] "Philosophy teaches that all the qualities of *Geist* exist only through freedom; that all are but means for attaining freedom; that all seek and produce this and this alone." *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, *Werke*, XII, p. 30.['… (D)ie Philosophie aber lehrt uns, daß alle Eigenschaften des Geistes nur durch die Freiheit bestehen, alle nur Mittel für die Freiheit sind, alle nur diese suchen und hervorbringen…']

seem remote to us. The Idealists, however, found both problems pressing and the German Idealist concept of freedom, I shall claim, offers a common solution to both. The key idea is that freedom must be freedom without arbitrariness. The English word arbitrary comes, of course, from the Latin *arbitrium*, one of the two Latin words for "will" (the other is *voluntas*). To say that something was "arbitrary" meant at one time only that it was at the will of an individual (thus an arbitrator is such an individual). But there is another, more modern sense, which emerged, some time between the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It seems to have been then that the idea of something being arbitrary (in the sense of something at the choice of an individual) came to mean in English that it was also something capricious or random. (Perhaps the modern ideas of necessity and probability were required for the emergence of this modern idea of randomness.)

To introduce the problem posed by the idea of arbitrariness let us look at a simple argument that is often raised in relation to libertarianism (the doctrine of free will)[5]. This is the argument that:

(1) if actions are free in the way that libertarians suppose then they are undetermined,

(2) but, if they are undetermined, then they are arbitrary,

(3) hence they are random and unintelligible.

This argument is supposed to show that, even if libertarianism is true, it fails to provide us with, as Daniel Dennett puts it, a form of free will worth wanting.[6] It is my claim that it is precisely because the German Idealists endorse this argument that their concept of freedom takes the form it does: freedom, for the Idealists, must be freedom without arbitrariness. Indeed we can go further. Not only do the German Idealists believe that the objection to arbitrariness rules out certain familiar conceptions of free will but they see that similar considerations can be brought to bear against determinism.

[5] A version of this argument is to be found in A.J. Ayer's "Freedom and Necessity."

This may seem surprising, but consider the following argument.

(1) What if determinism is true? In that case, all our actions as human beings are determined by the conjunction of a set of laws and by the initial conditions under which those laws first applied.

(2) But those laws just happen to be the particular ones that they are; those initial conditions just happened to be the ones that they were at the outset of the causal story.

(3) So, although the explanation of actions lies almost inconceivably further back in time, the situation of the agent in a deterministic universe is the same as in the case of the objectionable forms of libertarianism: the explanation of actions lies in something that is ultimately arbitrary.

The need to provide a conception of action that escapes arbitrariness thus motivates the Idealist conception of freedom at the level of the individual in two ways: it requires both the rejection of determinism and of certain sorts of libertarianism.

So far, I have identified the motivation behind the German Idealist conception of freedom at the level of the human individual, but it is connected, too, to the freedom of an agent of a different kind: God, the Creator of the Universe. The individual German Idealists had very different conceptions of God and it is in many cases extremely difficult to establish what that conception is – to the extent that it is controversial whether in every case we can properly speak of "God" – but all of them were the inheritors of one of the classic problems of Christian theology: to what extent can God be said to have created the universe *freely*? This problem divides into two: first, there is the question whether God created the universe freely in the sense that he was free in creating it; second, the question whether the character of what God created was in some way antecedently fixed or not.

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[6] See D. Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1984)

Now it is clear why this second question should be problematic: the dilemma it embodies is essentially the one to be found in Plato's *Euthyphro*. If God is really God, then he is omnipotent, not subject to some higher power. So he must, surely, be free. Yet if the character of what God creates is free in the sense that it is constrained only by his arbitrary fiat, then an important link between man and God is broken: there is no possibility of insight into the goodness of God's creation by mere human reason, for what makes this particular creation good is not something which reason can discover; the goodness of creation is secondary to its emergence from the inscrutable divine will. So the German Idealist conception of freedom aims to resolve two problems: by showing how human beings can act freely without acting arbitrarily, we can defend the idea that our actions are both free and intelligible; by showing how God creates freely but not arbitrarily, we can defend the idea that the goodness of the divine creation is accessible to human understanding. Freedom, for the German Idealists, must sustain the intelligibility of actions on both levels.

The idea behind the German Idealist solution to the problem of freedom is encapsulated in a single sentence in Rousseau's *Social Contract*: "the impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to a law that one has prescribed to oneself is freedom."[7] If we are to be free, then whatever determinations there are in relation to the self – whatever laws it is subject to – must come from the self itself. The difficulty is to grasp how this is anything more than a paradox. For if we impose a law upon ourselves then, surely, such a law then holds us within its power. Perhaps we *were* at one time free to adopt the law or not, but, once we have committed ourselves to the law, then we are no longer free. How can such a law be said not to be a limitation on freedom – be said, to the contrary, to be precisely a fulfilment of freedom? At this point, Rousseau's initially simple idea becomes exceptionally deep and

[7] J.-J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 56 ["... car l'impulsion du seul appétit est esclavage, et l'obéissance à la loi qu'on s'est prescrite est liberté."]

difficult. It requires us to hold together two thoughts. First, it seems as though any law is a limitation of freedom for, to the extent that that law is binding upon us, we could not do otherwise than conform to it. If freedom requires the ability to do otherwise, then the existence of law excludes freedom. But this apparent argument is not, if we follow the German Idealists, convincing. For let us note the metaphor I have used – the law is, I said, *binding* on us. And that, so the Idealists believe, refers to a law of a certain kind: one that derives its force from the compulsion it exercises. Yet there is also – or so they argue – law of a different kind: law that derives its force from its ability to elicit our assent, not by command, force or constraint, but by insight. If the self-given law that realises our freedom is *our* law, then it is ours not because we have chosen it by an act of arbitrary will: it is a law into which we have insight. It is the fact that our insight may coincide with our will that makes this law a law of freedom.

From this point of view, we can see the common character of the Idealist solution to the problem of human freedom and the problem of divine freedom. As far as human beings are concerned, we must find a law into which we can have insight and, inasmuch as we act according to such a law, we may be said to be free without that freedom being condemned as arbitrary. For the divine will the solution is the same. If God creates according to a law that is truly rational, then he is not constrained, for there is no sense in which he is *compelled* to create as he does in fact create. The idea of freedom as self-given law provides the common thread that connects the conceptions of freedom – different as they are in individual cases – that run through German Idealism from Kant to Hegel.

II Kantian Freedom

The Kantian conception of freedom as self-determination according to a binding law is familiar to all Kant's readers – it is impossible to read even the *Groundwork to the*

Metaphysic of Morals and ignore its presence. However, it has very often been – and still continues to be – quite badly misunderstood. This misunderstanding comes largely from reading Kant in terms of what is today perhaps the dominant view among philosophers who write about freedom, so-called compatibilism. To read Kant as a compatibilist is to place all the weight of Kant's theory of freedom on the idea of self-determination according to a binding law. For the compatibilist, the fact that all of our actions are determined by causal laws does not undermine the claim that our actions are free so long as those actions can be seen to be the products of a rational will – that is, of a will under rational laws. The existence of a will under rational laws is a *sufficient* condition for freedom. Here is not the place to establish in detail the case against the compatibilist reading of Kant – the issues are complex and the texts are not always clear. I wish, however, to draw attention to one central problem and Kant's proposed solution to it.

As has been noticed from the time of the publication of the *Groundwork*, if freedom consists in acting in conformity with the dictates of reason, then it is hard to see how a Kantian can accommodate the idea that we are responsible for our bad deeds. For if responsibility requires freedom, and if freedom consists in rational action, and if rational action requires adherence to the moral law, then actions which deviate from the moral law are not free and, hence, we are not responsible for them. Kant's solution to this problem involves a distinction between two levels of willing, the *Willkür* and the *Wille*.[8] The translation of these terms represents a particular difficulty for English, since both seem best rendered by "will". While the sense of *willkürlich* is equivalent to the English "arbitrary", in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at least, the nominal form, *Willkür*, carried the sense of the power of choice but left it open whether that power of choice is arbitrary or not. (Thus

[8] The best account of the distinction remains J.R. Silber's "The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*", in I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. lxxxix - cxxvi

in Schlegel's famous slogan "Die Willkür des Dichters darf kein Gesetz über sich erleiden" it is an open question whether the poet's will is to be understood as arbitrary in the modern English sense.) Add to this problem of translation the fact that Kant certainly did not make the distinction between the two clearly enough in his early writings on freedom and morality[9], and it is understandable that it has often been overlooked, particularly by Anglo-American readers of Kant. However, the distinction, once grasped, is clear and of great importance. The *Willkür* is the power of choice, the *Wille* what it is that gives the power of choice its principle. As Kant says in the *Metaphysics of Morals* "From *Wille* there arise laws; from *Willkür* maxims."[10] The distinction between *Willkür* and *Wille* is part of a two-stage theory of freedom. On the one hand, human beings are free – sufficiently free to be held responsible for their actions – so long as they exercise *Willkür*, the power of choice, without causal constraint. But we are only fully free – "spontaneous" – if our power of choice is determined by a principle that is itself the product of the *Wille*, a law of reason, namely, the categorical imperative:

> Freedom of *Willkür* is this independence from being *determined* by sensuous impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be itself practical. But this is not possible except by the subjection of the maxim of every action to the condition of its qualifying as universal law.[11]

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[9] In those writings, as Lewis White Beck points out, Kant never says *Willkür* when he means *Wille* although he often says *Wille* when he means *Willkür*. "Kant's Two Conceptions of the Will in Their Political Context", in *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965)

[10] *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Ak. VI, 226 ["Von dem Willen gehen die Gesetze aus; von der Willkür die Maximen."]

[11] *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Ak. VI, 213-14 ["Die Freiheit der Willkür ist jene Unabhängigkeit ihrer Bestimmung durch sinnliche Antriebe; dies ist der negative Begriff derselben. Der positive ist: das Vermögen der reinen Vernunft für sich selbst praktisch zu sein. Dieses ist aber nicht anders möglich, als durch die Unterwerfung der Maxime einer jeden Handlung unter die Bedingung der Tauglichkeit der erstern zum allgemeinen Gesetze."]

Negative freedom – freedom at the level of the *Willkür* alone – is sufficient for responsibility, Kant argues. For such freedom it must be true that the *Willkür* is capable of determining us to action without itself being determined by causal conditions – a set of laws and initial conditions that are, so far as we are concerned, arbitrary. But even if our *Willkür* is free in that negative way, that is not sufficient for us to be fully free. Unless the *Willkür* is determined by a principle that is intrinsically rational, whatever motive happens to determine the will – even if it is uncaused – will again be arbitrary. Responsibility embodies one part of the concept of freedom, we might say – the idea that to be free we must be capable (other things being equal and in the right circumstances) of doing otherwise – but lacks the other part: that what we do is not arbitrary.

III The Disappearing Agent

But is Kant's two-stage theory coherent? Recall that Kant makes two claims. First, that, to the extent that an agent acts under the influence of something that is arbitrary, he or she is not free. Second, that an agent whose *Willkür* is free is, for that reason, sufficiently free to be held to be responsible for his or her actions. But, on reflection, it becomes apparent that these two claims are in conflict with one another. If the first claim really holds – and, as we have seen, it is fundamental to Kant's position – then surely it undermines the force of the claim that actions performed according to the *Willkür* are sufficiently free to justify holding the agent responsible for them. The argument against causal determinism was that actions which merely emerged from the disposition of the universe – its laws and its initial conditions – were not free because such actions were rooted in contingency. But the *Willkür* is also (when it follows its inclinations, not the moral law) rooted in contingency. So why should the actions of the *Willkür* be counted as free – free, of course, not in the full, positive sense but

nevertheless free enough to allow judgements of responsibility – when causally determined actions are not?

If we leave Kant behind for a moment, it seems as though an obvious answer presents itself. Actions performed on inclination – even if they are not good actions – are, provided that they are not the outcome of a prior causal process, nevertheless *mine*. Since they are part of me then, however contingent they may be, I should take responsibility for them in a way that I should not be expected to take responsibility for what are merely the consequences of inevitable causal processes outside me. But the logic of the Kantian approach removes the possibility of just this argument. It is true, of course, that the inclinations on which I act form part of my procedure of practical reasoning; that the actions which they lead to are performed by my body. But are they, for that reason, in a full and emphatic sense *mine*? From the point of view of true freedom, they are simply contingent features of reality: it is as contingent in relation to my agency that I should have an overwhelming desire to steal diamonds, as it is that I have a passion for surfing, adore eating lobster, was born a man or that I am 179 cms tall. These are all, in one sense, features of me, but, from the Kantian point of view, are they truly part of my self? The answer – or so it seems – is that they are simply features of the environment within which willing takes place – some of the many facts which I must take into account as I decide how to act. But, in that case, what is part of my self – except my pure moral agency? The agent has apparently disappeared, or shrunk into a mere nodal point with no individual characteristics whatsoever. If Kant has given us an account of freedom, it is not clear that it is an account of the freedom of the concrete human individual. Because freedom is opposed to arbitrariness, all of the individual human being's contingent characteristics lie outside that transcendental kernel in which his or her freedom consists.

IV Divine Freedom

But what of a being who has no such contingent characteristics; a being who is wholly good? Such a being would act in a way that was not arbitrary, to be sure, but would it be free in the common sense that it would be capable of doing otherwise? This, apparently, is the dilemma posed by the idealist conception of freedom in relation to God. Yet Kant does not take the problem to be a serious one:

> To reconcile the concept of freedom with the idea of God as a *necessary* being raises no difficulty at all: for freedom consists not in the contingency of the act (that it is determined by no grounds whatever) i.e. not in indeterminism (that God must be equally capable of doing good or evil if his actions are to be called free) but rather in absolute spontaneity. Such spontaneity is endangered only by predeterminism, where the determining ground of the act is *in antecedent time*, with the result that, the act being no longer in *my* power but in the hands of nature, I am irresistibly determined; but since in God no temporal sequence is thinkable, this difficulty vanishes.[12]

At first sight, the argument that Kant presents in this passage appears to be a very bad one. Spontaneity, he claims, is endangered only "where the determining ground of the act is in antecedent time." But this seems to be the exact opposite of what most of us would think about freedom. Consider the prisoner in her cell. What matters to her is not that she was once locked into that cell, but that she cannot now leave it as she wishes to. In other words, the temporally antecedent event (the locking of the door) explains why the state that conflicts with her freedom (the inability to leave her cell) obtains at just this time. Now what Kant is

[12] *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 45n. ["Den Begriff der Freiheit mit der Idee von Gott, als einem notwendigen Wesen, zu vereinigen, hat gar keine Schwierigkeit: weil die Freiheit nicht in der Zufälligkeit der Handlung (dass sie gar nicht durch Gründe determiniert sei), d.i. nicht im Indeterminism (dass Gutes oder Böses zu thun Gott gleich möglich sein müsse, wenn man seine Handlung frei nennen sollte), sondern in der absoluten Spontaneität besteht, welche allein beim Prädeterminism Gefahr läuft, wo der Bestimmungsgrund der Handlung in der vorigen Zeit ist, mithin so dass jetzt die Handlung nicht mehr in meiner Gewalt, sondern

here supposing is that an agent – God – is subject to law without that law being the result of an antecedent event. But the fact that there is no antecedent event is irrelevant, it seems, to the question whether the law limits freedom.

In developing a more sympathetic account of Kant's position we are brought, I think, to the heart of the Idealist concept of freedom. To make sense of Kant's view we must see that what threatens spontaneity is not the mere fact that the "determining ground" of an action is antecedent in time but rather what Kant presents as the consequence of that fact: namely, that the determining ground is not "in my power." But trying to make sense of this is extremely difficult. First, how are we to conceive of something being in one's power (or not) if there is neither an exercise of arbitrary will – which, by assumption, is not the case for God[13] – or a temporal sequence of events within which that "power" is exercised? The answer, explicitly for the later German Idealists and implicitly (or so it seems to me) for Kant, is that we must distinguish between two kinds of necessity, two kinds of "determination". On the one hand, there is an "external", constraining kind of necessity. This is the kind of necessity associated with mechanical, causal processes: a set of laws to which the sequence of events is subject. On the other hand, there is an "internal" necessity in which the connection between what necessitates and what is necessitated is not extrinsic but intrinsic.

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in der Hand der Natur ist, mich unwiderstehlich bestimmt; da dann, weil in Gott keine Zeitfolge zu denken ist, diese Schwierigkeit wegfällt.] Ak. VI, 50n

[13] In this context, we may note that Kant presents God as a "law-giver" (*Gesetzgeber*) but *not* as the author (*Urheber*) of the moral law: "A law that binds us a priori and unconditionally by our own reason can also be expressed as proceeding from the will of a supreme lawgiver, that is, one who has only rights and no duties (hence from the divine will); but this signifies only the idea of a moral being whose will is a law for everyone, without his being thought as the author of the law)" ["Das Gesetz, was uns *a priori* und unbedingt durch unsere eigene Vernunft verbindet, kann auch als aus dem Willen eines höchsten Gesetzgebers, d.i. eines solchen, der lauter Rechte und keine Pflichten hat, (mithin dem göttlichen Willen) hervorgehend ausgedrückt werden, welches aber nur die Idee von einem moralischen Wesen bedeutet, dessen Wille für alle Gesetz ist, ohne ihn doch als Urheber desselben zu denken."]

Inasmuch as there can ever be such a thing as "common sense" in metaphysics, it suggests that there are – at most – two kinds of necessity: the logical necessity that is exemplified in deductive reasoning – that allows us to infer from the proposition "all bachelors are unmarried" that William, being a bachelor, is unmarried – and the natural necessity that connects causes with effects. Now Kant, it might be thought, departs from that received view to the extent that he, famously, denies that we can have knowledge of any kind of external causal necessity and claims that even causal necessity is to be understood subjectively, in terms of the rule-governed character of the succession of the manifold of perception (A144, B183). So for Kant, causal necessity, like deductive necessity, becomes a matter of moving from general rules to particular instances thereof. How is such a reduced conception of necessity to serve as a basis for understanding the kind of necessity at stake in free agency?

Presented like this, the problem seems to be insoluble – and so, from this angle, it is. The question was: what understanding of necessity do we have that is familiar to us that will enable us to understand the kind of necessity at stake in a context that is as remote from human experience as one could imagine anything to be – the relationship between an omnibenevolent divine creator and the universe it creates? For the later German Idealists when they turned to Kant, however, the situation was in some ways just the reverse. By drawing our attention to the existence of the distinctive kind of necessity that connects the free agent with his or her (moral) action, Kant had identified a metaphysical fact of the greatest possible significance. This fact is, in a sense, basic or primitive: it is not to be explained on the basis of phenomena of another kind. The essential point about the necessity of free moral action is that it is unlike any other possible kind of necessity.

Metaphysik der Sitten, Ak VI, 227. I owe this reference to an unpublished paper by T.H. Irwin.

Schelling gives an account of the distinctive necessity associated with freedom in his *On the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809)[14]. He starts with a definition of freedom that takes up the Rousseauian idea of freedom as self-determination in a way that cannot fail to remind us of Spinoza: "Only that is free which acts according to the laws of its own essence and is not determined by anything else either within or outside it".[15] This is no accident, of course, given the deep influence that Spinoza had on Schelling. Thus Spinoza (in a letter to Schuller) gives the following definition of freedom (but, of course, it is a freedom that can be ascribed to God alone):

> I say that that thing is free which exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature; but that that thing is under compulsion which is determined by something else to exist, and to act in a definite and determined manner. For example, God, although He exists necessarily, nevertheless exists freely, since He exists solely from the necessity of His own nature. So also God freely understands Himself and absolutely all things, since it follows solely from the necessity of His own nature that He should understand everything. You see, therefore, that I do not place Freedom in free decision, but in free necessity.[16]

The conception of freedom as acting according to the laws of one's own essence is as much opposed, according to Schelling, to the "inconsistency of the contingent"[17] as it is to that form of necessity that is "empirical and resting on compulsion"[18]. The latter, indeed, he says (making explicitly the point I made at the outset of this paper) is itself "only disguised

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[14] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenständen* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1977)

[15] *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, p. 77 [Frei ist, was nur den Gesetzen seines eigenen Wesens gemäss handelt, und von nichts anderem weder in noch ausser ihm bestimmt ist.]

[16] Letter to Schuller, October 1674, in *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, edited by A. Wolf (London: Frank Cass, 1966) pp. 274-75

[17] [die Ungereimtheit des Zufälligen] ibid.

contingency". How, then, should we understand this "inner necessity of the essence" and its connection with freedom? I cannot do better than quote Schelling himself, for his answer is, I think, as clear as one could wish:

> This is the point at which necessity and freedom must be united if they can be united at all. If this essence were a dead being and, with regard to man, a mere datum, then, since action would only follow from it with necessity, responsibility and all freedom would be removed. But just this inner necessity is itself freedom; man's being is essentially his own deed. Necessity and freedom interpenetrate as *one* being which only appears as one or the other when seen from different perspectives – in itself it is freedom but, formally regarded, it is necessity.[19]

V Freedom as Metaphysics

Once we have seen this, a very puzzling feature of German Idealism becomes more comprehensible. On the one hand there is what is often referred to as German Idealism's "primacy of the practical" – the idea that, as the author of the *Oldest System-Programme* puts it, "In the future, the whole of metaphysics falls within morality"[20]. On the other hand, we also have the remarkable reversal that appears to take place during the 1790s in the attitude taken by the Idealists towards metaphysics. In the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had described metaphysics as "a completely isolated

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[18] [der empirischen auf Zwang beruhenden] ibid.

[19] [Hier liegt der Punkt, bei welchem Notwendigkeit und Freiheit vereinigt werden müssen, wenn sie überhaupt vereinbar sind. Wäre jenes Wesen ein totes Sein und in Ansehung des Menschen ein ihm bloss gegebenes, so wäre, da die Handlung aus ihm nur mit Notwendigkeit folgen kann, die Zurechnungsfähigkeit und alle Freiheit aufgehoben. Aber eben jene inner Notwendigkeit ist selber die Freiheit, das Wesen des Menschen ist wesentlich *seine eigene Tat*; Notwendigkeit und Freiheit stehen ineinander, als *ein* Wesen, das nur von Verschiedenen Seiten betrachtet als das eine oder andere erscheint, an sich Freiheit, formell Notwendigkeit.] Ibid.

speculative science of reason, which soars far above the teachings of experience" (B xiv), a "battlefield peculiarly suited for those who desire to exercise themselves in mock combats" (B xv)[21]. Against this, Kant argues, it must be accepted that "all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of experience" (B xxvi)[22]. Yet by the turn of the century we find Hegel writing that "the task of philosophy is to construct the absolute for consciousness", that "reason produces [the absolute] by freeing consciousness from its limitations" and that its method aims at speculative knowledge of the Absolute: "For speculation everything determinate only has reality and truth in the cognition of its connection with the Absolute."[23] In other words, German Idealism – Kant's own strictures notwithstanding – seems to have reinstated speculative metaphysics as the central part of philosophy.

One school of interpretation reconciles these two tendencies by reading the "primacy of the practical" in pragmatist or Marxist terms. On this view, the Idealists bring together a Kantian refusal to claim to have knowledge of things in themselves with an orientation towards human beings' practical engagement with the world as the ultimate criterion of reality. However appealing this interpretation may be, it is at odds with many of German Idealism's fundamental texts. It is forced to detour around claims such as those quoted above

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[20] "Das 'älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus'", in *Mythologie der Vernunft*, ed. by C. Jamme and H. Schneider (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1984), pp. 11-14, p.11 ["da die ganze Metaphysik künftig in die Moral fällt"]

[21] ["einer ganz isolierten speculativen Vernunfterkenntnis, die sich gänzlich über Erfahrungsbelehrung erhebt", "ein Kampfplatz, ... der ganz eigentlich dazu bestimmt zu sein scheint, seine Kräfte im Spielgefechte zu üben"]

[22] ["die Beschränkung aller nur möglichen spekulativen Erkenntnis der Vernunft auf blosse Gegenstände der Erfahrung"]

[23] *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, *Werke* edited by E. Moldenhauer and K.-M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) II, pp. 9-140, 25, 24, 31 ["Das Absolute soll fürs Bewusstsein konstruiert werden, [das] ist die Aufgabe der Philosophie", "Die Vernunft produziert [das Absolute] nur, indem sie das Bewusstsein von den Beschränkungen befreit", "alles Bestimmte hat für [die Spekulation] nur Realität und Wahrheit in der erkannten Beziehung aufs Absolute"]

that present the task of philosophy as giving speculative knowledge of the Absolute in ways that seem to me quite implausible. There is, however, an alternative.

On this view, the development of German Idealism was indeed a development towards metaphysics of just the "speculative" kind that Kant appeared to exclude in the first *Critique*. But that does not make the Idealists simple pre-Kantians. Their debt to Kant can be understood once it is appreciated that they read even Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from a metaphysical point of view; rather than an exercise in the displacement of metaphysics in favour of epistemology, the Idealists saw the first *Critique* as an exploration of the fundamental structures of mental life and the relationships between subject and object.[24] It is in this light that we should understand the overwhelming importance for German Idealism of the concept of freedom. Freedom – the act by which an agent realises itself in moral action – expresses a kind of spontaneous necessity that is metaphysically fundamental. It is not merely of relevance to the understanding of human beings as agents, but to our capacity to grasp the structure of reality in general.

With this in mind, it is instructive to return again to the *Oldest System-Programme*. Having announced that the first Idea is that of the self as a free, self-conscious being, the author then continues: "With the free, self-conscious being a whole world emerges – from nothing – the only true and thinkable creation from nothing"[25] For the German Idealists, or so I claim, the connection between free human action and divine agency is a very close one: God shows in perfect form the kind of creative agency – at once spontaneous and necessary –

[24] Thus Hegel's remark (also in the *Differenzschrift*) that the *Critique of Pure Reason* treats the understanding with reason and reason with the understanding. ["wenn der Verstand mit Vernunft behandelt worden war, wird dagegen die Vernunft mit Verstand behandelt."] *op. cit.*, p. 10

[25] "Mit dem freyen selbstbewussten Wesen tritt zugleich eine ganze Welt – aus dem Nichts hervor – die einzig wahre und gedenkbare Schöpfung aus Nichts" in *Mythologie der Vernunft*, ed. by C. Jamme and H. Schneider (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M., 1984)

that the individual realises imperfectly, inasmuch as he or she succeeds in acting according to rational moral principles. Freedom, in other words, is a fundamental metaphysical principle.

VI Hegelian Freedom

I have claimed that the basic concept of freedom that we find in Kant represents a common thread running through German Idealism. Of course, that is not to say that it remains unchanged in all respects or that there are not extremely significant differences in the theoretical context within which it is to be found. My purpose is not to deny the often radical developments that took place from thinker to thinker within a very short space of time, but to draw attention to the perhaps surprising fact that, despite this, there is a fundamental element of continuity.

To illustrate this, I should like to note one or two of the most important features of Hegel's account of freedom and the will. The similarities of his position to that of Kant are far more significant, in my opinion, than the differences. This assertion is, I should say, at odds with a great deal of received opinion regarding the relationship between Kant and Hegel according to which Hegel's whole practical philosophy rests on a rejection of the "abstract" character of the Kantian picture of agency and freedom. Certainly, Hegel does make such criticisms of Kant – and make them fiercely. But this criticism is focused principally on Kant's presentation of the categorical imperative. As I see it, Hegel agrees with Kant that a free will is one that is determined by rational laws, but the two philosophers disagree – and disagree radically – regarding the character of those laws. Hegel, like Kant, understands freedom as requiring a particular kind of necessity – a necessity that is unlike (and is indeed fundamentally opposed to) the necessity that is at work in the causal processes of nature. Consider, as an illustration, the following passage from the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*:

> ... nature is not free, but is only necessary and contingent. For necessity is the inseparability of different terms which yet appear as indifferent towards each other; but because this abstract state of externality also receives its due, there is contingency in nature – external necessity, not the internal necessity of the notion.[26]

In the light of the argument of this paper, this passage no longer needs to seem mysterious: the claim that nature is both necessary and contingent is not, as one might think, a gross oxymoron or exercise in dialectical double-think. Freedom, for Hegel as for Kant, requires necessity and excludes contingency or arbitrariness. But natural necessity is not the necessity of freedom. It is an inferior kind of necessity: an "external", that is, contingent one.

The closeness of Hegel's views to Kant's is also apparent in one of Hegel's most extensive discussions of human agency (the other comes in the Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*) at the beginning of the *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel presents his account of the will in three stages. First, there is the stage of abstract universality – the indeterminate freedom of a detached will – then that of particularity – the determinate actions that come from following this or that impulse – and then, finally, that of concrete universality: a self-determining will. Behind this dialectical schema, however, Kant's distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* is playing an important role. Just like Kant, Hegel denies that *Willkür* can be true freedom and for the same reason: that it is arbitrary:

> *Willkür* implies that the content is made mine not by the nature of my will but by chance. Thus I am dependent on this content and this is the contradiction lying in

[26] *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* II, *Werke*, IX, para. 248, p. 30. ['… so ist die Natur nicht frei, sondern nur notwendig und zufällig. Denn Notwendigkeit ist Untrennbarkeit von Unterschiedenen, die noch gleichgültig erscheinen; daß aber die Abstraktion des Außersichseins auch zu ihrem Rechte kommt, ist die Zufälligkeit, die äußerliche Notwendigkeit, nicht die innere Notwendigkeit des Begriffs.']

> *Willkür*. The common man thinks that he is free if it is open to him to act arbitrarily but his very *Willkür* implies that he is not free.[27]

As we have seen, for Kant, the *Willkür* is a domain of arbitrariness in relation to the *Wille*: a set of contingent impulses which threaten to lose connection with the self altogether. Hegel sees the domain of particular drives and desires as part of freedom, but only a subordinate part: the free self must determine itself in such a way that it remains "*bei sich*" in its determinacy. He gives an example of the will as it operates at the level of feeling – in friendship, or in love:

> Here we are not inherently one-sided; we restrict ourselves gladly in relating ourselves to another, but in this restriction know ourselves as ourselves. In this determinacy a man should not feel himself determined; on the contrary, since he treats the other as an other, it is there that he first arrives at the feeling of self-hood. ... Freedom is to will something determinate, yet in this determinacy to be by oneself and to revert once more to the universal.[28]

With this, it seems that Hegel has reversed the forces that led the self to threaten to disappear: rather than detaching itself from everything contingent, the self re-establishes itself as part of the concrete and the everyday. That, certainly, is part of Hegel's intention (and it is, surely, too, a part of the reason for the perennial appeal of his practical philosophy). Yet we must not misunderstand what is going on. While Hegel wishes to reassert the need for action and

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[27] *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, *Werke*, VII, para. 15, *Zusatz*, p. 67. ["In der Willkür ist das enthalten, dass der Inhalt nicht durch die Natur meines Willens bestimmt ist, der meinige zu sein, sondern durch *Zufälligkeit*; ich bin ebenso abhängig von diesem Inhalt, und dies ist der Widerspruch, der in der Willkür liegt. Der gewöhnliche Mensch glaubt, frei zu sein, wenn ihm willkürlich zu handeln erlaubt ist, aber gerade in der Willkür liegt, dass er nicht frei ist."]

[28] *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, *Werke*, VII, para. 7, *Zusatz*, p. 57. ["Hier ist man nicht einseitig in sich, sondern man beschränkt sich gern in Beziehung auf ein Anderes, weiss sich aber in dieser Beschränkung als sich selbst. In der Bestimmtheit soll sich der Mensch nicht bestimmt fühlen, sondern indem man das Andere als Anderes betrachtet, hat man darin

embodiment as part of freedom, the standpoint from which this assertion is made is – for Hegel every bit as much as for Kant – the standpoint of reason. Like Kant, it is the universal requirements of moral action, not the particularities of individual personality and subjectivity, that give free action its content:

> When I will what is rational, I am acting not as a particular individual but in accordance with the concepts of *Sittlichkeit* in general: in an ethical action I do not assert myself but the matter in hand. Men allow their particularity to come to the fore most when they perform wrong actions. What is rational is the high road on which everyone travels and no one is conspicuous.[29]

Hegel's theory of freedom contains the germ of an idea – that of human beings needing to assert themselves in practical action while at the same time remaining "at home in otherness" – that was to be of the very greatest importance for later philosophy. That idea would only show its full force, however, once it had been detached from its place within the rationalistic presuppositions of the idealist concept of freedom.

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erst Selbstgefühl. ... die Freiheit ist ein bestimmtes zu wollen, aber in dieser Bestimmtheit bei sich zu sein und wieder in das Allgemeine zurückzukehren."]

[29] *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, *Werke*, VII, para. 15, *Zusatz*, p. 67. ["Wenn ich das Vernünftige will, so handle ich nicht als partikulares Individuum, sondern nach den Begriffen der Sittlichkeit überhaupt: in einer sittlichen Handlung mache ich nicht mich selbst, sondern die Sache geltend. Der Mensch aber, indem er etwas Verkehrtes tut, lässt seine Partikularität am meisten hervortreten. Das Vernünftige ist die Landstrasse, wo jeder geht, wo niemand sich auszeichnet."]