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IX*—KANT'S ANTI-DETERMINISM

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In this paper I will not present 'the solution to the difficult problem which centuries have sought in vain' (as Kant calls the problem of free will)¹ but I will answer a question which has proved almost as contentious: what is Kant's solution to that problem?²

I take it that Kant really does offer such a solution—that he does not simply evade the issue. Writers on Kant often argue roughly as follows: (1) Kant tells us that we must take up 'two standpoints'—one by which we are free, the other according to which we are determined. (2) Plainly, these two standpoints are irreconcilable to the ordinary human understanding. Yet, (3) Kant thinks that the existence of the moral law is sufficient reason to make the standpoint of freedom compelling, while (4) the arguments of the first Critique lead to a deterministic view of nature. Hence, (5) Kant consistently denies that an explanation

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¹ *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by L. White Beck, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) p. 99.

² To present my account in the space available I must bypass some significant issues. Most important are those which arise with respect to the status of my interpretation. Is it:

- (1) the interpretation which makes the best (most intellectually defensible) sense of what we find in Kant's text?
- (2) the unique interpretation which makes all Kant's expressed views on the subject mutually consistent?
- (3) the interpretation which corresponds to Kant's own intentions?

Ideally, I would like to make all three claims. But, as regards (1), I cannot consider alternative interpretations in detail. Moreover, one's evaluation of how defensible my interpretation is will, of course, be affected by how one sees the wider issue of free will—on which I here say nothing.

As regards (2), I am prepared to concede that there are some passages (though not many) which *appear* to contradict my interpretation. But they are not fatal to it. Either they can be accommodated (with some degree of artificiality, perhaps) within my interpretation, or, failing that, the degree of inconsistency they introduce is less than that to be found in alternative interpretations and not so great as to render the interpretation implausible overall.

Finally, though it is an interesting question whether we could, in principle, make sense of an author's text while being wrong about his intentions, I take it that, for practical purposes, the truth of (3) is entailed by the conjunction of (1) and (2).

of freedom is possible: we can only believe in a realm—the noumenal—within which they *might* be reconciled³.

Kant does, in fact, have a great deal to say about what is involved in being free (sufficient, as I shall show, to make a strong case that (2) above is false and that the two standpoints need not be irreconcilable). But he is not being inconsistent in presenting it: having some understanding of what it would mean for us to be free does not imply that that understanding gives us grounds to believe (let alone know) that we are free. Nor does it imply that (given that we had independent reasons to believe that we *were* free) we could understand how that fact should be possible. It is this which Kant denies.

Why has this interpretation been missed?⁴ I think because Kant's doctrine has been approached from the point of view of modern doctrines—so-called 'compatibilism' or 'soft determinism', for example. What is neglected thereby is the way in which, for Kant, the competing claims of freedom and determinism can only be reconciled by reference to the overarching doctrines of transcendental idealism. We would do better, in fact, to look at things from the opposite perspective: to see Kant not as a basic determinist who has to 'make room' for freedom but as a basic libertarian who has to account for the possibility of determination.

I

The point I will start from is familiar: the idea of moral responsibility. When I say of someone that they are to be blamed because they did what they did, does this presuppose that what they did was something they did freely in the sense that they could have done otherwise?

One *may* claim that moral responsibility does not require freedom in that sense. To be responsible for an action means only that it—as opposed, for example, to being a mere event—is

³ See, for example, Roger Scruton: 'But the answer, referring as it does to a transcendental perspective, is such that we can only comprehend its incomprehensibility'. *Kant* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), pp. 75–76.

⁴ Since writing an earlier version of this paper, I have discovered a paper by Allen Wood ('Kant's Compatibilism', in A. Wood (ed.), *Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P., 1984), pp. 73–101) which takes many—though not all—of my positions.

my action, not that it is not determined. The suggestion is that free actions are those which are determined internally (for example, by our own desires) while unfree ones are those constrained externally (for example, by the desires of others). But Kant rejects the suggestion that 'we might call the actions of a man "free" because they are actions caused by ideas we have produced by our own powers ... even though they are necessary because their determining grounds have preceded them in time'. It is, he says, 'quibbling'—'a wretched subterfuge'.⁵

So Kant believes that the issue of freedom cannot be dodged by saying that freedom is not opposed to determinism but just to external constraint.

Thus we are led to follow Kant to the second alternative: responsibility requires freedom in the sense that it makes good sense to say that someone did what they did but *could* have done otherwise. The problem is: what is the sense of 'could'?

The transcendental idealist who equates the idea of freedom with that of the thing in itself seems to be able to give a sense to this 'could' which is compatible with the idea of a complete determination of events according to laws. The idea of freedom for Kant, it is said, is like the idea of the thing in itself, in the sense that it is a hypothesis, to which we are inclined on metaphysical grounds, about the whole course of experience.

The idea that something is the way it is just because something before it was the way it was (the series of causal conditions) does not—or so Kant says—meet our full explanatory aspirations. We still want to ask: why is *everything* the way it is? We should make use of the parallel between the role of the thing in itself and the idea of freedom, it is suggested, to give an interpretation of the possibility of alternative actions on the same lines.⁶

But this is a solution which leaves a problem. Consider the parallel with empirical explanation. Question: Why did this butter melt? Answer: Because butter melts when it's warmed. There is an empirical question with an empirical answer. Question: Why does butter melt when it's warmed? Answer:

⁵ *Critique of Practical Reason*, *op. cit.* p. 99.

⁶ R. C. S. Walker takes this to be the natural interpretation: he outlines the position (and the reasons for its unsatisfactoriness) clearly in *Kant* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 148–49.

Because the world is/things in themselves are that way. There is what is (potentially) a transcendental question and a transcendental answer (or non-answer).

Here is a similar pair of questions and answers in the realm of human action: Why did the knave of hearts steal the tarts? Because the knave of hearts is a thief. Why is the knave of hearts a thief? Because (transcendentally) he chose to be a thief.

But this is obviously unsatisfactory: if the only sense that we can give to the idea that thieves *could* not have been thieves is the same as that which we give to the idea that butter *might* not have melted when warmed, then the practice of blaming will (or ought to) collapse. Just because we can conceive of a standpoint from which it isn't necessary that the knave of hearts should be a thief, there is no reason to blame him for what, *as a thief*, he inevitably does. That would be as silly as blaming slates for falling off roofs because we can imagine (transcendentally) a world in which they float upwards.

Either Kant's defence of freedom is totally unsatisfactory or there is a reading which gives more force to the claim that we *could* have done otherwise than just the thought that there is a point of view from which we may regard the way the world is as a whole to be contingent. The latter is simply too vague, too general, to support the specific sorts of claim Kant needs: A is to blame for this because he could have done X rather than Y. And this is where my suggestion that it makes more sense to read Kant as a libertarian who is trying to make room for determination comes in.

For the libertarian has no difficulty with the notion of moral responsibility: he believes that actions, just by being voluntary (that is to say, acts of will) are free and we are responsible for them. In one sense, that is all there is to it: it is not something one needs to explain further for metaphysical doctrine and everyday intuition are in harmony with one another (we *really do* choose, there is a *real possibility* of events having turned out otherwise, and so we *really are* responsible for what we do). What needs explanation, in fact, is the opposite case—why we might think that the *sense* we have of alternative possibility is, in some way or other, mistaken and so, initial appearances to the contrary, people are actually unfree in their voluntary actions.

Kant considers two kinds of unfreedom. The first way of being

unfree is that what we choose to do is not autonomous—we choose to do unfree things. This is what happens when I choose inclination (pleasure) rather than duty (morality). It is the sense of unfreedom dealt with in the *Groundwork*. However, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had already made clear the distinction between the unfreedom which comes from choosing to act on heteronomous principles and the unfreedom of sensuous determination:

Freedom in the practical sense is the will's [*Willkür*] independence of coercion through sensuous impulses . . . The human will is certainly an *arbitrium sensitivum*, not, however, *brutum* but *liberum*. For sensibility does not necessitate its action. There is in man a power of self-determination independently of any coercion through sensuous impulses.⁷

The human will, that is to say, is unlike animal will in the fact of being free *despite* having motives other than those of a purely free and moral being. We have sensibility, but sensibility 'does not necessitate [the will's] action'.

This brings me to the second—and, for my purposes, crucial—way of being unfree. That is the way of being unfree not just in the sense of choosing to do what is unfree, but in the sense that when we choose to do what we choose to do we do not really choose freely: our will is determined.

The question, then, is: in what way (if not by sensibility) might we think that the will *were* necessitated?

My claim is that what is at issue is a determination which is fundamentally different from the sort of mechanistic determination of billiard balls by other billiard balls (or the opening of an overflow pipe in a tank because of the rising pressure of water). When we explain why people did what they did we see them as determined not by other antecedent billiard balls (the steam in the psychological boiler) but—and Kant is quite explicit about this—by their *character*.

We can see what this means for Kant from the example he gives of someone telling a lie (B582–583). When we explain why

⁷ *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N. Kemp Smith, (London: Macmillan, 1933) B562.

someone did what they did we behave in the first instance like empirical scientists:

... we trace the empirical character of the action to its sources, finding these in defective education, bad company, in part also in the viciousness of a natural disposition insensitive to shame, in levity and thoughtlessness, not neglecting to take into account the occasional causes that may have intervened (B582).

So far, we are just like scientists investigating any other natural phenomena: we are looking round for conditions sufficient to allow us to predict the event which we are trying to explain. Yet, oddly enough, *unlike* the natural scientist, we do not, Kant believes, say that the event *had to* happen. We make the agent responsible and:

Our blame is based on a law of reason whereby we regard reason as a cause that irrespective of all the above-mentioned empirical conditions could have determined, and ought to have determined, the agent to act otherwise (B583).

How could this be so? It is not that the initial explanation given is in some way incomplete—that we only have *some* (but not all) the conditions for an event; that it is underdetermined in relation to its antecedents, with Reason to, as it were, ‘close the gap’. Kant clearly excludes this possibility. He writes at B578: ‘... if we could exhaustively investigate all the appearances of men’s wills, there would not be found a single human action which we could not predict with certainty, and recognize as proceeding necessarily from its antecedent conditions’.

So we are forced to a second possibility: that, although explanation is *complete*, the conditions do not necessitate the conditioned in such a way that they exclude the possibility that the event necessitated could have been otherwise. This is easy enough to say, but what might it mean?

A first step is to realize that not all necessity is the sort of necessity in which we discover a *mechanism* which compels. Say I have three shells, two white and one black, under three cups. If I uncover two, and the shells are white, I know that the third one *must* be black. But it wasn’t necessary because of any mechanism

in the allocation; the necessity is *epistemic*, relative to my discovery. Kant’s account may be somewhat similar.

Freedom and necessity can be reconciled if we realize that what allows us to see all actions as determined is not the existence of some mechanism underlying the will. That would exclude freedom in the true Kantian sense. What we set out to discover are the conditions for an action and these are not fixed states of affairs—brute facts like the facts of physics—but psychological facts, facts of character. What we observe are men’s actions and what we gather are ‘the actions of reason and the grounds thereof’. What we do with this observation is to ‘form an estimate concerning the subjective principles of [a man’s] will’ (B577).

The general explanations we give of actions are not more ‘real’ and ‘fixed’ than the particular actions which we perform ourselves. Rather, they form an explanation framework surrounding the actions. They are *necessary*, not because they are to be regarded as antecedently determinate, but because we have reasons to believe that such conditions *must* be discoverable.

The question was: how Kant, as a libertarian, can allow for determination. The first part of the answer is that, since the determination in question isn’t some mechanism of the sort which the hydraulic picture of the mind supposes, the idea of character and that of free action can go together: we perform free actions in conformity with our characters, and, hence, as part of a systematic context.

Here we can see the important parallel between transcendental idealism about the causal relations of objects and transcendental idealism about actions. Transcendental idealism about the causal relations of objects argues that, in order for an event to be perceptible as an *event* at all, it must be possible to fit it into a systematic context of antecedent determination according to rules—bluntly, it must have a cause.

What transcendental idealism does in this case is to vindicate a *realistic* attitude which we spontaneously take up with regard to causal processes: we naturally think that for everything which we see happen there was some mechanism because of which it had to happen. But, in fact, transcendental idealism does not tell us this. What is says is that unless we could fit appearances into a systematic context of explanation we would not be able to

determine our perceptions as perceptions of events at all. And this, it is clear, amounts to something less than the idea that whatever happens happens because there is a mechanism necessitating that it happens. Nevertheless, the two ideas are equivalent to the extent that they lead us to the same practical maxim: every event follows necessarily from another according to a rule—that is, it has a cause.

The difference between transcendental idealism and the belief that everything is determined by mechanism becomes crucial, however, when it is a matter not of the causal relations of objects but of the systematic determination of actions. For, in this latter case, it is important to be able to leave room for the idea that the action *could* have happened otherwise. Transcendental idealism does not carry with it the idea that whatever happens is compelled to happen by some fixed and inexorable necessity; it only amounts to the idea that whatever happens happens (must be seen as happening) in a context of systematic laws.

This is so for reasons other than the existence of a necessitating mechanism connecting events. Given those reasons (the requirements of continuous self-consciousness) we can be sure of the existence of systematic connections between physical events, despite the fact that we are unable to observe directly the mechanisms which maintain them. We can be sure, too, of the existence of systematic connections between actions even if—and this is, of course, stronger—we have independent reasons (a belief in libertarianism) to reject the possibility of there being any compelling mechanism behind our actions at all.

This account is the key to Kant's reconciliation of freedom and necessity. But that is not to say that it is without problems. I want to draw attention to two major ones.

II

The first arises out of the fact that Kant assumes that the arguments which he applies in the Second Analogy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to justify the claim that we must be able to situate our perceptions of physical events in the context of causal laws are also applicable to the perception of actions. Actions, just like physical events, must fit into law-contexts, Kant thinks.

Now it is easy to see one assumption which could make this true. If actions just *were* physical events then whatever arguments show that physical events are determined according to laws must also show that actions are determined according to laws. Take some particular sequence of actions. The lecturer interrupts his lecture, searches for a piece of chalk, and writes: '*Das Nichts nichtet*' on the blackboard. Now, if only we had full knowledge of physical laws, the idea is, we could have predicted each of these events, not as actions, not as *writing a sentence*, which means in English 'The Nothing nullifies', but as physical movements. Thus we have the idea that, as physical events, our actions are determined. It is only at the level of action that they are free.

But everything we know about Kant's view of freedom cuts against this view. It makes it seem as though actions are simply overlays on real, physical processes. Actions don't *escape* determinism—they're added on top of it. In fact, Kant did not even believe that the organic realm could be mechanically explained⁸. It is not the embodied nature of human action which creates the *prima facie* case for determinism: the determinability of actions lies at the level of human significance.

First of all, Kant argues, *all* our actions—good actions or actions which merely follow sensuous inclinations—are to be treated as resulting from an act of rational will on our part:

Whether what is willed be an object of mere sensibility (the pleasant) or of pure reason (the good), reason will not give way to any ground which is empirically given. Reason does not here follow the order of things, as they present themselves in appearance, but frames for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas. . . . And

⁸ 'It is indeed quite certain that we cannot adequately cognize, much less explain, organized beings and their internal possibility according to mere mechanical principles of nature, and we can say boldly it is likewise certain that it is absurd for men to make any such attempt or to hope that another Newton will arise in the future who shall make comprehensible by us the production of a blade of grass according to natural laws which no design has ordered.' (*Critique of Judgement*, translated by J. Bernard (N.Y., N.Y.: Hafner, 1951) para. 75. Admittedly, it is not the case that the only kind of constraint which might prove threatening to the libertarian is a *reductive* one (in which a higher-order phenomenon is explained by laws on a lower level) but Kant does not consider any other possibilities.

at the same time reason also presupposes that it can have causality in regard to all these actions, since otherwise no empirical effects could be expected from its ideas (B576).

But, if we allow that free action involves the 'causality of reason', it follows, Kant claims, that it presupposes a rule:

Reason though it be, it must nonetheless exhibit an empirical character. For every cause presupposes a rule according to which certain appearances follow as effects; and every rule requires uniformity in its effects (B576-77).

The idea, then, is that our actions follow rules not, as it were, indirectly—because, as actions, they are also events, and because, as events, they form part of the system of rules. The idea is, rather, that in their very character as actions—as realizations of the will—they are susceptible to rules.

But the objection is that the arguments of the Second Analogy are not available to Kant here: that argument was that, if there were no system of rules of synthesis for what is received by the mind, it would not be possible to have perception of a world of events taking place against a permanent background. Here, however, we are dealing with actions, and it is not the case (in Kant's view) that we need to put together data derived from external sources in order to know *what* our actions are. 'Man', Kant writes, '... who knows all the rest of nature solely through the senses, knows himself also through pure apperception' (B574).

We do not need to *observe* our actions in the way that we observe houses and boats going down the river, so the famous arguments for the need for synthesis according to rules are inappropriate. In consequence, Kant is forced to reverse the order of argument: instead of arguing for the rule-governedness of perception and thus its causal nature, as he does in the Second Analogy, he must infer the rule-governedness of action from the causal character of the will.

III

The second objection to the account of freedom and determination which I have given here concerns the relationship which our ability to fit actions into systematic contexts of explanation has to our ability to predict actions. Kant makes it clear that the

existence of systematic contexts makes every action predictable from its antecedent conditions:

... if we could exhaustively investigate all the appearances of men's wills, there would not be found a single human action which we could not predict with certainty, and recognize as proceeding necessarily from its antecedent conditions (B578).

Given the fact that there are conditions, it must be possible to predict from these conditions what event will take place, what action will be performed. But now, the objection is, does that not return us to the very same problem of reconciling freedom and determination that the doctrine of transcendental idealism was supposed to help us escape? It is one thing, one might say, to defend the freedom of the will by saying that the existence of systematic structures of conditions does not mean that there is a *mechanism* connecting conditions with what are conditioned, but if, despite the fact of there not being a mechanism, it is possible to *predict* from the conditions what will happen, then surely determinism is just as forceful as it would be *were* there a mechanism. Even if transcendental idealism were to enable us to separate the determination of actions from the existence of a necessitating mechanism, the sheer fact of actions' predictability would undermine the idea of freedom.

This objection is, if sustained, entirely devastating: even if there is no mechanism, the fact that our actions are, relative to certain conditions, preordained, negates an important element in the idea of freedom. Is there any defence? I believe so. To understand it let us recall what Kant has to say about determination: '... if we could *exhaustively investigate* all the appearances of men's wills, there would not be found a single human action which we could not predict with certainty'. How are we to take this? Does it mean that we could think of investigating the state of men's wills at some time, T_1 , discover there the 'subjective principle' of the will, and so predict all future actions at times $T_2 \dots T_n$? If this were the case, then the spectre of determinism would present a real threat: at time T_1 all future actions would be predictable.

But that this is not the nature of Kant's claim can be shown, I think, from his own text—when we read that text in the light of

his commitment to transcendental idealism. The transcendental idealist, it will be remembered, is committed only to the following claim: given any event, there exists an antecedent event such that the existence of the later event follows from the existence of the antecedent event according to some rule.

Bearing this in mind, there are two things to be said about Kant's view of determinism. First, we should recall the phrase 'if we could exhaustively investigate all the appearances of men's wills' which Kant gives as the condition of a complete prediction of actions. If we interpret this phrase as implying that we can indeed give a complete description of what determines the state of men's minds at some T_1 , then Kant would seem to be claiming the total predictability of actions. But, if what I have been arguing is right, then this is just the wrong way to interpret where Kant's thought is leading. The point is that if, as Kant puts it, the reality of the conditions is no greater than that of the conditioned, then the whole idea of determining the actions a man will perform in advance of the actions he actually does perform will be incoherent: it may be—indeed, in Kant's view, it must be—that, at the end of time, when we see what men have done, we will be able to set those actions into a systematic explanation-framework; further, it may be possible to say now, before the end of time, for *a priori* reasons, that such an explanation-framework must necessarily be possible; yet that does not mean that it would be possible now (or at any given time) to provide that explanation antecedently. The conditions are not now 'there', constraining future actions. If we *could* exhaustively investigate all the appearances of men's wills (and all the dispositions of their characters) we should be able to predict what they will do before they have done it; but we can't exhaustively investigate them, and just for that reason—that they have not yet done it.

This interpretation connects with one of the more mysterious ideas of the Antinomy: the idea that we must regard actions as *initiating* series of appearances. This idea Kant introduces in the Observation on the Thesis of the Third Antinomy. Having argued that we must at least entertain the idea of an origin of the world, this allows us, Kant says, to infer that particular spontaneous origins in the course of the world's process are also possible:

But since the power of spontaneously beginning a series in time is thereby proved (though not understood), it is now also permissible for us to admit within the course of the world different series as capable in their causality of beginning of themselves, and so to attribute to their substances a power of acting from freedom. And we must not allow ourselves to be prevented from drawing this conclusion by a misapprehension, namely, that, as a series occurring in the world can have only a relatively first beginning, being always preceded in the world by some other state of things, no absolute first beginning of a series is possible during the course of the world. For the absolutely first beginning of which we are here speaking is not a beginning in time but in causality. If, for instance, I at this moment arise from my chair, in complete freedom, without being necessarily determined thereto by the influence of natural causes, a new series, with all its natural consequences *in infinitum*, has its absolute beginning in this event, although as regards time this event is only the continuation of a preceding series. For this resolution and act of mine do not form part of the succession of purely natural effects, and are not a mere continuation of them. In respect of its happening, natural causes exercise over it no determining influence whatsoever. It does indeed follow upon them, but without arising out of them; and accordingly, in respect of causality though not of time, must be entitled an absolutely first beginning of a series of appearances (B478–479).

Read in the context of my interpretation this passage now makes good sense. The transcendental idealist knows that whatever event (or action) he considers will be explicable as part of a causal series. But that does not mean that the causal series precedes or is more real than the event itself. As Kant says, the action 'follows upon' without 'arising out of' natural causes. Hence the natural causes 'exercise over it no determining influence whatsoever'.

This brings me to my second point about Kant's conception of determination: that it is, in advance of the performance of some action, an *open* one. Consider an agent before some moral

'crossroads'—the knave of hearts in front of the tart tray. All his actions up to now will fit into an explanation-framework: they will be consistent with his character. But the psychological explanation which corresponds to his actions until now will not be unique. In particular, there will *both* be explanations (descriptions of the knave of hearts' character) which conform to the case in which he takes the tarts *and* explanations which conform to that in which he doesn't. Say he takes the tarts. Then we will, perhaps, see the knave of hearts as a rogue who is continuing on down the path to moral ruin. If he doesn't, then perhaps he will be understood as someone who is capable of reforming himself.

Ex ante, there is something like the underdetermination of theory by data. It is the action which we actually do perform which enables us to settle, retrospectively, which were the applicable laws, for, in principle, exactly the same argument applies at the knave of hearts' next point of decision, and so on. The stubborn determinist can always, of course, regard it as a purely epistemic matter: we simply *discover* what the knave of hearts' character always was. But, for Kant, it is this open texture which makes freedom and explanation compatible.

IV

Kant did not, of course, express his position in this language. But there is confirmation for my interpretation in the way that it makes sense of two of Kant's more important and difficult ideas. The first is the conception of moral self-improvement which he presents in his discussion of the structure of character in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

There are, Kant makes clear, two morally relevant dimensions to our characters. There are the sensuous impulses which present themselves to us as possible motivations for action. Not everyone will feel the same inclinations in the same circumstances, but, in the short-term at least, these are not matters for decision on our part, even though it is clear that some sets of inclinations are morally inferior to others. Behind our inclinations, however, there are the principles on which we choose our actions—what Kant refers to as our 'maxims'—and these, he believes, are always a matter of responsibility.

Typically, then, 'bad' character will show itself in both dimensions: by acting on bad principles one develops undesirable appetites and inclinations. This is why, Kant says, the Christian religion is right to think that moral reform is a radical process—a 'change of heart' or even a 'rebirth':

But if a man is corrupt in the very ground of his maxims, how can he possibly bring about this revolution by his own powers and of himself become a good man? Yet duty bids us do this, and duty demands nothing of us which we cannot do. There is no reconciliation possible here except by saying that man is under the necessity of, and is therefore capable of, a revolution in his cast of mind, but only of a gradual reform in his sensuous nature (which places obstacles in the way of the former). That is, if a man reverses, by a single unchangeable decision, that highest ground of his maxims whereby he was an evil man (and thus puts on the new man), he is, so far as his principle and cast of mind are concerned, a subject susceptible of goodness, but only in continuous labour and growth is he a good man.⁹

Such a regeneration amounts to exactly the kind of 'absolutely first beginning . . . not . . . in time but in causality' which Kant suggested in the Third Antinomy—provided, that is, that we understand the causality in question not as an empirical event amongst others but as what Kant calls 'transcendental causality'.

And this is the second point of confirmation for my interpretation. The notion of 'transcendental causality' is often taken to represent a serious weakness in Kant's thought: why, when he has argued that the category of 'cause' is to be restricted to the sphere of experience, does he persist in talking as if things in themselves could be thought of as 'causes' of experience?

It must be admitted that Kant's terminology is not easy to disentangle, but there is, in fact, a clear thought behind it. When we ask why a particular event happened, we point to an empirical cause. But when we ask why *just these* particular laws

⁹ *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1960) p. 43.

govern the events in question we pass beyond the realm of empirical knowledge and can, at most, point to the idea of the thing in itself—not so much as an explanation but as a placeholder for an explanation.

'Transcendental causality' should not be thought of as an event in the chain of events, but as in a certain sense standing behind them: a transcendental cause is whatever determines the laws according to which phenomena are related. 'The word *cause*', Kant writes in the *Critique of Judgement*, 'when used of the supersensible, only signifies the *ground* which determines the causality of natural things to an effect in accordance with their proper natural laws'.¹⁰

So the 'absolutely first beginning' should not be conceived as an event with no antecedents: it is, viewed externally, not an event at all in the ordinary sense—we do not have to think of the causal chain as being, as it were, 'interrupted' to make room for it.

The non-temporal character of transcendental causality allows Kant to present his highly unusual but in its way appealing account of the nature of decision-taking. It is natural to think of transcendental causes, because they are non-temporal, as given *in advance* of the temporal order. But this is not necessary. We could as easily set our reference point anywhere within the unfolding history of our lives. So a choice made by us (which we, of course, and rightly, think of as temporal) can also be conceived non-temporally, as fixing the governing framework within which our actions are set. The perspective which would regard our actions as being outside time does not, as is commonly supposed¹¹, conflict with our common perspective on them as temporal: Kant's conception of freedom *can* be reconciled with our ordinary temporal notions of decision-taking and moral responsibility.

Transcendental idealism shows us, then, how we can think of our world as a world in which spontaneity truly has a place, without sacrifice of the idea of it having a systematic structure. The secret is that what precedes our actions is not a really existing mechanism, but simply the knowledge that we will be,

¹⁰ *Critique of Judgement*, *op.cit.* Introduction, IX

¹¹ For example, by Wood and Walker, *op.cit.*

able to describe whatever happens in terms of a structure. Explanation and decision have equal status: there is no threat that the former will turn out to undermine the latter¹².

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