

Kant's View of Freedom in The *Critique of Pure Reason*

Alexander Janiak

PHIL 331: Kant

Professor Andrew Janiak

May 1st, 2024

I. Introduction

Human contemplation of whether or not we have free will in Western Philosophy pre-dates even the discussions of Plato and Socrates¹. In fact, Kant classifies freedom alongside God and immortality² as “unavoidable problems” imposed onto humans by the nature of reason itself³. Within the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant delves into these “unavoidable problems” through four antinomies, or contradictions, that each include a thesis, antithesis, remark, and resolution. The “Third Antimony” (B472-475), in particular, focuses on freedom and presents Kant with a significant challenge. Unlike the other antinomies, it does not suppose the existence of entities like God, or a “first cause” of the world. Rather, it uniquely asserts — in its thesis — that events in the natural world are contingent upon a causal power external to the laws of nature, suggesting that nature itself is dependent on something beyond its own domain⁴.

This paper aims to explore Kant’s examination of freedom as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, particularly within the context of the “Third Antinomy”, and its resolution. Starting with an analysis of how Kant derives the concept of cause *a priori* and deduces the causal law, I seek to explain how these foundational ideals underpin his reconciliation of the deterministic constraints of natural law with the seemingly boundless nature of freedom. Through this exploration, the paper will arrive at Kant’s conclusion that, while freedom may coexist with the laws of nature through

¹ O’Connor, Timothy and Christopher Franklin, "Free Will", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/>>.

² Aside: monads are akin to metaphysical simples — entities that are indivisible and are thought to be the fundamental building blocks of reality.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Avii & B7.

⁴ Guyer, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 255.

the lens of transcendental idealism, the true nature of freedom and our own free will remains fundamentally unknowable.

II. The Nature of Causality in Kant's Philosophy

II.A. The Pure Concept of Cause

To fully understand Kant's stance on freedom, one must first grasp his deduction of the pure⁵ concept of causality and, subsequently, the causal law. In the first chapter of the "Transcendental Analytic" (B92-B143), Kant explores how the logical forms of judgment⁶ can be used to obtain the twelve pure concepts of understanding, known as categories. Specifically regarding causality, he contends that the hypothetical judgment⁷ — characterized by an *if-then* relationship between an antecedent and consequent — can be employed to attain the pure concept of cause⁸.

In fact, he believes that it is the logical form of the hypothetical judgment — the *if-then* structure — that implies causality. This structure guides our understanding, regardless of the truth of the proposition within the judgment or the existence of a casual relationship, thus enabling us to obtain the concept of cause. Notably, Kant does not utilize sensory experience in this derivation; instead, these concepts are secured *a priori*, ensuring their necessity and universality⁹.

⁵ Derived *a priori*.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B95. Judgments are combinations of concepts that form propositions, which can be thought of as either true or false. Within Kant's philosophy, the logical forms of judgment refer to the fundamental *a priori* rules, or abstracted judgments, that structure how we connect concepts to form judgments. These forms are categorized by Kant into four "titles" — "Quantity", "Quality", "Relation", and "Modality" — containing three "moments" each.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B98. The hypothetical judgment is a logical form of judgment grouped under "relation". It posits a relationship of conditionality between two propositions, i.e., an *if-then* statement, where the occurrence of one event (the antecedent) is linked to the occurrence of another (the consequent). As an example, Kant uses: "If there is a perfect justice, then obstinate evil will be punished". In this case, the existence of a perfect justice is the antecedent and the case of obstinate evil being punished is the consequent.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B98.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B4 & B124.

II.B. The Causal Law

In the “Second Analogy” (B233-256), Kant uses this concept of cause to prove the causal law, asserting that “all alterations occur in accordance with law of the connection of cause and effect”¹⁰. In other words, this principle posits that every event or change in the natural world has a cause that *precedes it in time*. He argues that our experience of an objective sequence of events in time necessarily requires us to apply the concept of cause¹¹. He also suggests that without this concept, we could not distinguish between merely subjective sequences (how we experience events) and objective sequences (how events occur independently of our perception)¹².

To clarify and support this idea, Kant offers a compelling example involving the observation of a ship’s movement:

I see a ship driven downstream. My perception of its position downstream follows the perception of its position upstream, and it is impossible that in the apprehension of this appearance the ship should first be perceived downstream and afterwards upstream¹³.

Through this, Kant contends that our perception of the sequence of the ship’s movement is necessarily ordered in time. Therefore, it is impossible to perceive this sequence in reverse. This necessary order within the sequence implies a causal connection governed by the laws of nature — in this case, the flow of the river propelling the ship downstream. If we did not assume this causal connection, we would not be able to determine the objective temporal order of these events. Therefore, Kant argues that to

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B233.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B234.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B238.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B238.

ascertain the objective temporal order of these perceived sequences, a necessary causal connection (the causal law) must underlie our perception.

A detailed discussion of this proof is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the discussion of the derivation of the causal law raises an important point: because the necessity of the causal law hinges on time (a form of our sensibility), and our perception in general, it can only be applied to the realm of *phenomena*, i.e., how things appear to us, as opposed to *noumenon*, or things in themselves.

Ultimately, through the derivation of the pure concept of cause and the causal law, Kant establishes a framework that is pivotal to his theory of Transcendental Idealism and his reasoning about freedom in the “Third Antimony”. The next section of this paper will build upon these ideas and use them to show one of Kant’s greatest revelations of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: that we cannot know whether or not we have freedom over our actions.

III. Kant’s Discussion of Freedom

III.A. The “Third Antinomy of Pure Reason”

After deducing the concept of cause *a priori* and the causal law, Kant is forced to address a major obstacle: if every event is determined by a preceding cause, the chain of causality must extend indefinitely and never reach a “first cause”. If this is the case, how can we (agents) have any freedom over our actions? If one tries to insert freedom into this chain of causality, one must concede that such laws of freedom that dictated that cause would be determined by the laws of nature — which would mean that that “freedom” would be nothing other than nature¹⁴. This is the antithesis of the “Third

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B475.

Antinomy” which posits that “there is no freedom” and “everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature”¹⁵.

To contrast this, and complete the antimony, Kant proposes a contrasting view (the thesis): the incomplete infinite regress of causes with no “first cause” contradicts the idea that, within the laws of nature, everything must have a cause. Therefore, the laws of nature must not be the only possible source of cause. Instead, there must be “an absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself” that completes the causes within the series of appearances¹⁶.

More abstractly, the question that Kant poses through the “Third Antimony” is whether the regressive series of causality that leads up to an event, as described in the antithesis, is infinite, or, corresponding to the thesis, finite originating from a “first cause”¹⁷. In the former case, the series of causality would remain indefinite — denying the existence of a cause resulting from something other than natural laws¹⁸. However, since in this case, the series of causality would be infinite, it would be incomplete at every point — removing the required condition for the event’s existence. In the latter case, the series would be finite but require the existence of something that appears to violate the laws of nature and experience¹⁹.

These two cases are opposed and both have trade-offs. To accept free will, one has to postulate a “non-temporal cause, a causality outside the series of appearances in

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B473.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B472-4.

¹⁷ Guyer, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 255.

¹⁸ Guyer, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 248.

¹⁹ Guyer, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 248.

space and time”²⁰. To deny free will and, as a result, a “first cause”, one has to accept the idea of an infinite regressive series of causality and smuggle in “spatio-temporal conditions as the basis for a universal ontological claim that nevertheless transcends all experience”²¹, i.e., make a sweeping statement about the existence of events based on how things appear to us.

III.B. Kant’s Resolution

Kant’s resolution to the conflict detailed in the “Third Antimomy” is the conclusion that, although freedom must be presumed for both theoretical and practical reasons, it remains ultimately unexplainable and forever beyond our understanding²². To reach this reconciliation he appeals to transcendental idealism (B560-65) and develops a solution that distinguishes between *phenomenological* and *noumenal* “characters” (B566-69). He then applies this framework to freedom (B570-86)²³, demonstrating how free will could coexist with the laws of nature.

First, Kant argues that this conflict should be viewed from the lens of transcendental idealism. He defines freedom as a transcendental ideal and as “the faculty of beginning a state from itself”²⁴ — a definition consistent with the conflict within the “Third Antimomy”. He also contends that freedom in the transcendental sense does not rely on experience and thus cannot be determined from *phenomena*²⁵.

²⁰ Grier, Michelle, "Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-metaphysics/>.

²¹ Grier, Michelle, "Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-metaphysics/>.

²² Guyer, Paul, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 262.

²³ Allison, Henry E. Kant’s Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 258.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B561.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B561.

The definition of transcendental freedom works in tandem with what he defines as freedom in the practical sense: “independence of the power of choice from the necessitation by impulses of sensibility”²⁶. This “necessitation” highlights that, in the practical sense, freedom, although still affected by sensibility, would not be determined by it²⁷.

Kant draws this distinction because if we considered appearances to be things in themselves or if freedom were not considered a transcendental ideal, then freedom would be governed by the laws of nature and could not exist²⁸. In contrast, if freedom was held to be transcendental and appearances were not things in themselves, then freedom could exist through an intelligible²⁹ cause — grounding the realm of appearances. Although not impacted by *phenomena*, such freedom would still impact the *phenomenal* realm as if determined by the other events we observe³⁰. Importantly, this point specifically references the scope of the causal law mentioned previously. Since the causal law only holds for causes in the realm of *phenomena*, we cannot know whether or not it binds causes beyond how they appear to us. Therefore, if freedom were to exist through an intelligible cause, it could transcend the laws of nature and be free from the determinism of empiricism.

Kant specifically builds on this last point to formulate his solution to the conflict. If appearances are not things in themselves, he contends that every appearance would essentially be a representation of a transcendental object — something that exists

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B562.

²⁷ Allison, Henry E. *Kant’s Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 259.

²⁸ Allison, Henry E. *Kant’s Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 262.

²⁹ Pertaining to objects of our senses which are not in themselves appearances.

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B565.

beyond our sensory experiences. He suggests that these transcendental objects can have causality that does not manifest as appearance, yet their effect can be observed within the *phenomenal* world we experience³¹.

Kant then asserts that every effective cause must have a “character”, i.e., something that explains it. In the *phenomenal* realm, these are termed “empirical characters” and are fully integrated within the network of other appearances consistent with the laws of nature. This integration allows them to be derived from their conditions, connecting them in a seamless sequence of natural order³². In the *noumenal* realm, these are termed “intelligible characters” and the basis of empirical characters³³. The intelligible characters are “free of all influence of sensibility and determination by appearances”, do not have a place in time, and cannot be known³⁴. In a sense, for some particular effect or action, its empirical character is the *image*³⁵ of some unknown intelligible character.

Through this framework, Kant is able to resolve the conflict of the “Third Antimony”. If freedom, as a transcendental ideal, were to exist as an intelligible character, it could impact the *phenomenal* world through an empirical character while not being dictated by other appearances. This would allow freedom and the laws of nature “to be found in the same actions, simultaneously and without any contradiction”³⁶. Regarding the chain of causality, an original cause outside of the laws

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B567.

³² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B567.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B567.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B568-9.

³⁵ i.e., appearance. This is an abuse of terminology but helps to intuit the distinction between an empirical and intelligible character. In mathematics, an image is the set of output values produced by applying a function to every element in its domain. So the image of an intelligible character would be how it is empirically perceived — the empirical character.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B569.

of nature could exist as such an intelligible character while *appearing* to be dictated by natural laws.

Notably, in this resolution, Kant does not try to prove the possibility of freedom. In no way does he say that freedom exists nor that our actions are free. His intentions were only to show that freedom and natural necessity could coexist and that the conflict within the “Third Antimony” “rests on a mere illusion”³⁷. His final conclusion establishes this goal while remaining consistent with transcendental idealism: he realizes that concepts *a priori* are part of our cognitive framework, designed to process and order sensory inputs, not to reveal the intrinsic nature of things that exist independently of our perception³⁸. By defining freedom as a transcendental ideal and assigning it an intelligible character, he resolves the “Third Antimony” but concedes that we could never know whether or not freedom exists.

IV. Conclusion

Free Will, or freedom, has been traditionally defined as “a kind of power to control one’s choices and actions” either in the sense that the agent is able to choose otherwise or they are the source of their own actions³⁹. Kant, on the other hand, believes that in order for an agent to have free will, they need to be able to not only have acted differently but also *willed* differently⁴⁰. This is, in a sense, what he means when he views freedom as a transcendental ideal. By applying transcendental idealism to freedom, and by separating practical and transcendental freedom, he is able to show

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B585.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B585.

³⁹ O’Connor, Timothy and Christopher Franklin, “Free Will”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/>>.

⁴⁰ O’Connor, Timothy and Christopher Franklin, “Free Will”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/>>.

that the *will* of someone's actions (transcendental freedom) can be free from the preordained realm of *phenomena* — essentially resolving the classic dispute between freedom and determinism⁴¹. In this manner, Kant provides a strong argument for compatibilism if freedom were to exist but forbids us to know whether or not freedom does, in fact, exist.

The result of this conclusion discredits the attempts of naturalists and wishful religions (or religion-like faith) to prove whether we have free will⁴². It does, however, allows us to forgive our struggles as humans in trying to solve intractable “unavoidable problems”⁴³. Instead, like Kant, we are left with no option but to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith”⁴⁴.

⁴¹ O'Connor, Timothy and Christopher Franklin, "Free Will", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/>>.

⁴² Guyer, Paul, ed. The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. of Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 262.

⁴³ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Avii.

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxxx.

Bibliography

- Allison, Henry E. *Kant's Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 259.
- Grier, Michelle, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-metaphysics/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-metaphysics/).
- Guyer, Paul, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. of *Cambridge Companions to Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 262.
- Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- O'Connor, Timothy and Christopher Franklin, "Free Will", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/freewill/).