

**Isaiah Berlin Lectures in the History of Ideas**  
**Lecture Three: Oxford, 2 February 2010**  
**“Kant’s Anti-Determinism”**

1. Kant’s religion is a “Socratic” religion, a religion within the limits of reason alone. An intelligibly just God, must reward and punish human beings in ways that they can rationally accept as justified. If we are to be punished, we must really be the kind of responsible agents who can properly be held accountable for their actions.
2. Korsgaard:  
“Kant’s theory of the freedom of the will involves neither extravagant ontological claims nor the unyielding theory of responsibility which seems to follow from those claims.”<sup>1</sup>
3. Wood:  
Kant “lapses into supernaturalism”; “No positive doctrine about noumenal freedom has any place in Kantian ethics.” “No rationalist – and rationalism is the very heart of Kantian ethics – should have the least patience with it.” “We should believe we are practically free – but we are not justified in holding any beliefs about the noumenal world in connection with this.” “[Noumenal freedom] should be ... quarantined from Kantian ethics just as strictly as if it carried the plague.”<sup>2</sup>
4. “Morality as Freedom” (Korsgaard).
5. *Groundwork*:  
“... every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is just because of that really free in a practical respect, that is, all laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for him just as if his will had validly been pronounced free also in itself and in theoretical philosophy.” (Ak. 4:448)  
  
“... reason would overstep all its bounds if it took upon itself to *explain how pure reason can be practical*, which would be exactly the same task as to explain *how freedom is possible*.” (Ak. 4:458-59)
6. Five extensive discussions of freedom of the will in Kant’s works: the Third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787); Section III of the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785); the “Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason” in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787); Vigilantius transcript of the *Lectures on Ethics* (1793); Part One of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793,1794).
7. *Critique of Practical Reason*:  
“If this ideality of time and space is not adopted, nothing remains but Spinozism” (Ak. 5:101-102)  
  
“In fact, if a human being’s actions insofar as they belong to his determinations in time were not merely determinations of him as appearance but as a thing in itself, freedom could not be saved. A human being would be a marionette or an automaton, like Vaucasson’s, built and wound up by the supreme artist; self-consciousness would indeed make him a thinking automaton, but the consciousness of his own spontaneity, if taken for freedom, would be mere delusion inasmuch as it deserves to be called freedom only comparatively, because the proximate determining causes of its motion and a long series of their determining causes are indeed internal but the last and highest is found entirely in an alien hand. Therefore I do not see how those who insist on regarding time and space as determinations belonging to the existence of things in themselves would avoid fatalism of actions ...” (Ak. 5:101)

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<sup>1</sup> “Morality as Freedom”, in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), pp. 157-87, p.183

<sup>2</sup> *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2008), p. 138

“... the actions of the human being, although they are necessary by their determining grounds which preceded them in time, are yet called free because the actions are caused from within, by representations produced by our own powers, whereby desires are evoked on occasion of circumstances and hence actions are produced at our own discretion.” (Ak. 5:96)

“[This is a] wretched subterfuge”, by whose means some “think they have solved, with a little quibbling about words, that difficult problem on the solution of which millennia have worked in vain.” (Ak. 5:96)

If “these determining representations have the ground of their existence in time and indeed in the and indeed in the antecedent state”, then, when the subject is to act, the necessitating conditions are in past time and thus “no longer in his control” (Ak. 5:96).

This may bring about “psychological freedom (if one wants to use this term for a merely internal chain of representations in the soul)”, but remains “natural necessity”. (Ak. 5:96)

Those who adhere to a conception of psychological freedom “therefore leave no *transcendental freedom*, which must be thought as independence from everything empirical and so from nature generally, whether it is regarded as an object of inner sense in time only or also of outer sense in both space and time.” (Ak. 5:96-97)

If freedom of our will were “psychological and comparative but not also transcendental, i.e. absolute” then “it would at bottom be nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which when it is once wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself”. (Ak. 5:97)

8.

- (1) Kant is exercised by “fatalism” with regard to actions and believes that it must be opposed philosophically, and that this requires the distinction between appearances and things in themselves.
- (2) Freedom must not just be “psychological” or “comparative”. It must be “also transcendental i.e. absolute” (Ak. 5:97)
- (3) The agent’s “consciousness of his own spontaneity” may turn out to be “mere delusion” (Ak. 5:101)

9.

Four possibilities:

- (1) The texts are misleading or the interpretation wrong.
  - (2) Kant changed his mind between the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.
  - (3) Kant’s views on freedom were inconsistent.
- Or:
- (4) Look at the *Groundwork* text again.

10.

*Groundwork*:

“I follow this route – that of assuming freedom sufficiently for our purpose only as laid down by rational beings merely *in idea* as a ground for their actions – so that I need not be bound to prove freedom in its theoretical respect as well. For even if the latter is left unsettled, still the same laws hold for a being that cannot act otherwise than under the idea of its own freedom as would bind a being that was actually free. Thus we can escape here from the burden that weighs upon theory.” (Ak. 4:448)

Natural necessity is “confirmed by experience and must itself unavoidably be presupposed if experience, that is coherent cognition of objects of the senses in accordance with univesal law, is to be possible” (Ak. 4:455).

“This seeming contradiction must be removed in a convincing way, even though we shall never be able to comprehend how freedom is possible... For if even the thought of freedom contradicts itself or contradicts nature, which is equally necessary, it would have to be given up altogether in favour of natural necessity.” (Ak. 4:456).

[It is not up to the philosopher] ... whether he wants to remove the seeming conflict or leave it untouched; for in the latter case the theory would be *bonum vacans* [unoccupied goods] into possession of which the fatalist could justifiably enter and chase all morals from its supposed property, as occupying it without title. (Ak. 4:456)

“we shall never be able to comprehend how freedom is possible” (Ak. 4:456)

Reason would “overstep all its bounds” if it were to try to “explain how freedom is possible” (Ak. 4:459).

11. If a slate falls off a roof we don't *blame* the slate. But we blame the knave of hearts for what he does in accordance with the laws of his character. Isn't this as ridiculous as blaming the slate?
12. Schopenhauer:  
“With his unalterable inborn character that is strictly determined in all its manifestations by the law of causality, here called motivation as acting through the medium of the intellect, the individual is only the *phenomenon*. The *thing-in-itself* underlying the phenomenon is outside space and time and free from all succession and plurality of acts; it is one and unchangeable. Its constitution *in itself* is the *intelligible character*, which is equally present in all the actions of the individual and is stamped on every one of them, like the signet on a thousand seals.”<sup>3</sup>  
  
“In his *esse* (what he is), however, the freedom lies. He could have *been* a different man, and guilt or merit lies in what he is.”<sup>4</sup>
13. Two standpoints (Schopenhauer). From the practical standpoint, we are committed to the belief that the knave of hearts has a real choice about stealing the tarts. Theoretically, however, we know that he could not but have stolen the tarts, given the character that he has. He is, nevertheless, blameworthy.
14. *Critique of Pure Reason*:  
“... 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 account the occasional causes that may have intervened.” (A554, B582)

Unlike the natural scientist, we do not 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.” (A555, B583)

“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”. (A550, B578)

“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 only have 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

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<sup>3</sup> *On the Basis of Morality*, p. 110

<sup>4</sup> *On the Basis of Morality*, p.112

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 the absolutely first beginning of a series of appearances.” (Observation on the Thesis of the Third Antinomy, A450, B478)

15. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone.*

“Yet duty commands that he be good, and duty commands nothing but what we can do”. (Ak. 6:47)

“If by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby “puts on the new man”), he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good” (Ak. 6:48)

“For him who penetrates to the intelligible ground of the heart (the ground of all the maxims of the power of choice [*Willkür*]), ... i.e. for God, this is the same as actually being a good human being (pleasing to him); and to this extent the change can be considered a revolution”. (Ak. 6:48)

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