Freedom on This and the Other Side of Kant

Charles Taylor[1] and Axel Honneth[2] represent a tendency to trace the "archaeology" of the notion of freedom either to Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" or G.W.F. Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. Without claiming to be an exhaustive investigation of the discussion of freedom since or prior to Immanuel Kant, this paper proposes that the meaning of freedom since Kant has totally eclipsed the tradition of freedom prior to Kant that stems from Pico Mirandola and influenced Leibniz, Sulzer, Tetens – all of whom shaped Kant's understanding of freedom.

I. Freedom This Side of Kant:

Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor; Axel Honneth and G.W.F. Hegel

Berlin and Taylor

Isaiah Berlin distinguishes among negative, positive, and social freedoms: *Negative freedom* is *freedom from* external coercion. Negative freedom is the notion that freedom exits to the degree that one is independent from tradition, the social order, and institutions. In short, it is freedom from any external constraints. In this version of negative freedom, then, one takes freedom to consist of refusing to conform to any external law either from tradition, society, or institution and maintains the radical liberty of self-determination to decide what one wishes to do. *Positive freedom*, in contrast, is *coercive freedom* by which the individual subordinates her-/himself to a higher authority such as parents or the state in order to increase one's, or to achieve a greater, freedom at some point in the future. Positive freedom requires us to surrender some of our negative freedom (our personal liberty) for the sake of a higher, larger/greater, rational freedom. *Social freedom*, Berlin's third option, is concerned with minorities within a dominate society.

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[1]Charles Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty', in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), reprinted in *Philosophical Papers II*.

[2] Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit: Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* [*The Right of Freedom: Outline of a Democratic Ethics*] (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011).

Social freedom is the freedom to obtain *status and recognition on the part of a minority social unit* within a dominant society.

Taylor employs Berlin's concept of negative freedom (*freedom from* external interference) as the straw man for formulating an alternative notion of positive freedom to Berlin's. In contrast to Berlin, positive freedom for Taylor is not "coercive" but *purposive freedom*. Taylor wants to acknowledge that freedom involves not merely an alternative between radical independence and external coercion, but positive freedom is concerned with "internal" elements (the individual's desires) that lead to our pursuing purposive ends. For Taylor, then, Berlin's notions of negative and positive freedom are inadequate to grasp the true character of positive freedom: the pursuit of ends governed by our internal desires. Because not all desires are moral, though, the desires that govern Taylor's notion of positive freedom as purposive require a second-order reflection that invokes moral principles to govern our desires. For Taylor, the source of these moral principles is what Kant would call "historical" religion or heteronomous, relative morality.

Hegel and Honneth

Hegel formulates a notion of freedom (perhaps more appropriately called liberty and based upon recognized rights) in terms of the individual's dependence upon social institutions. This is a *freedom with* others that can be achieved only through shared values and institutional structures that, in turn, recognize the rights of individuals.

Drawing on Hegel's discussion of freedom, Axel Honneth defines freedom as *communicative freedom*, which he distinguishes from *negative freedom* and *reflexive freedom*. In common with Berlin and Taylor, *negative freedom* means *freedom from* in the sense of rejection of any external, social determination of the individual. However, Honneth places Taylor's discussion of positive freedom under the label of *reflexive freedom*, which means *freedom for* acting according to one's own intentions (desires).

Honneth distinguishes *reflexive freedom* from negative freedom in that the individual in *reflexive freedom* assumes moral responsibility for her/his self-selected goals. According to Honneth, reflexive freedom depends upon the individual's obligation to ground one's actions in something like the golden rule by which one expects oneself to act as one would want all others to treat oneself. Honneth finds that such reflexive freedom, exemplified for him in both

Immanuel Kant's "rational self-legislation" of moral principles (autonomy) and Johann Gottfried Herder's "discovery of one's authentic wishes" (authenticity), are in fact not truly free but governed by a socialization process, which unmasks free choice and authenticity as illusions because one has appropriated socially relative principles to govern one's actions *as if* they were absolute and self-legislated. For Honneth in contrast to Theo Kobusch's latest reflections on freedom (*Die Kultur des Humanen. Zur Idee der Freiheit* [*Human Culture: On the Idea of Freedom*]), who otherwise is in complete agreement with Honneth, Charles Taylor's positive freedom anchored in religious, moral principles, then, is equally self-contradictory for what is taken to be an autonomous, self-legislated principle is in fact the product of social construction (the social construction of a religious tradition's morality).

For his part, Honneth defends a Hegelian notion of *communicative freedom*, which means *freedom with* others that can be achieved only through shared values and, most importantly, institutional structures that recognize the rights of individuals. Communicative freedom can be achieved only through a shared social commitment to unhindered and unhampered rational discourse as guaranteed by mutually constructed social institutions that encourage such rational discourse.

Honneth and the Frankfurt School call this *communicative freedom* because it is nothing natural and requires a social construction generated by commitment by all individuals and groups in society and accomplished by all concerned engaging in an open discourse to secure shared and optimal values. Communicative freedom requires a commitment to respect the voices of all and to conform to the decision of the majority within an institutional framework that protects the "rights" of the minority. Here Honneth joins forces with his colleague, Jürgen Habermas, in the pursuit of distributive justice based upon the construction of appropriate social institutions devoted to facilitating such justice.

Communicative freedom acknowledges, Honneth points out, that different institutional systems will recognize such freedom to varying degrees and in different respects. One can evaluate social systems in terms of the degree to which they, in fact, further the "right to freedom" among their participants/citizenry. Because no institutional system can be perfect, however, there is no one system of communicative freedom that is universal, and any given institutional system requires the continued vigilance and effort of its membership in order to continually renew the commitment to freedom.

II. Freedom on the Other Side of KantThi:
Autonomous Freedom

The notion of *autonomous freedom* is by no means a Kantian invention. He himself reports that, as he was writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Johannes Tetens' two volume *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwickelung* (*Philosophical Investigations on Human Nature and its Development*) were on his desk.[3] Tetens' second volume is devoted to the discussion of the significance of humanity's possession of what appears to be a unique causality over against the blind determinism of nature, our ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Johannes Sulzer treated the notion three years prior to the publication of Tetens' reflections in his *Vermischte philosophische Schriften* (*Compiled Philosophical Writings*). Kant, Tetens, and Sulzer probably have the theme from Leibniz and Hume (see, as well, Kremer and Wolff in bibliography), and Ernst Cassirer attributes the notion to Pico Mirandola.[4] Unfortunately, the discussion of freedom Diesseits von Kant has for all intents and purposes totally neglected this discussion Jenseits von Kant that so profoundly takes center stage in Critical Idealism.

Autonomous freedom is grounded in humanity's causal capacity to initiate a sequence of events that nature (physical causality) on its own cannot accomplish – Kant calls precisely this independence from the physical law and desires *negative freedom* (*Critique of Practical Reason* – KpV, 05: §8). Physical events occur blindly according to the deterministic laws of physics.

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[3] Although in *Reflexionen Kants zur kritischen Philosophie. Aus Kants handschriftlichen Aufzeichnungen,* Vol. II, one finds the following comments on Tetens by Kant. Entry 230: "Tetens untersucht die Begriffe der reinen Vernunft bloos subjective (menschliche Natur); ich objective. Jene Analysis ist empirisch, diese transcendental." Entry 231: „Ich beschäftige mich nicht mit der Evolution der Begriffe wie Tetens (alle Handlungen, dadurch Begriffe erzeugt werden), nicht mit der Analysis wie Lambert, sondern bloss mit der objectiven Giltigkeit derselben. Ich stehe in keiner Mitbewerbung mit diesen Männern." (68)

[4] Ernst Cassirer suggests that Pico Mirandola's "De hominis dignitate" is the source of this "revolutionary" idea of creative freedom, and Cassirer points out that Mirandola is the source of this idea for Leibniz. See "'Über die Würde des Menschen' von Pico della Mirandola" in *Studia humanitatis,* 12 (1959): 48-61.

Given that human creativity only occurs in a physical world, it necessarily is not independent of the blind and deterministic processes of nature, but it is not reducible to them.

Because we only experience causes as effects and never directly, there is no way for us to prove (or disprove) by means of empirical data whether or not we possess this causal capacity. However, of those ideas that we must assume and that are incapable of confirmation in the senses if we are to understand ourselves as rational beings (i.e., God, the soul, and freedom), Kant proposes in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that creative freedom is the one *pure idea* of reason that comes closest to being a *fact* of reason. We experience ourselves as capable of purposive behavior that requires our selection not only of the goals of our actions but also requires that we determine the means appropriate for the accomplishment of those goals. The *origin* of this sequence of *hypothetical*, technical necessities with respect to the means (materials, tools, and skills) necessary to achieve the intended *end* is a causality that is *categorical*: it arises solely from ourselves and is our ability to do things that nature cannot accomplish on its own.

No other animal is capable of the degree of purposive behavior like we are. In fact, much of what is viewed as purposive in other species is instinctual, by no means *categorical and rational* (i.e., initiated solely on the part of the initiator by reflection and the purposive selection of an end).

Autonomy is Not Mere Spontaneity

If creative freedom is a form of causality that rises above but is never independent from physical causality, creative freedom is also no mere random spontaneity because causal systems require laws (GMS, AA IV: 446.13f). If dreams have no other value, they have the value, Kant proposes (*Critique of Pure Reason*, KrV: B 520f; *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, V-Met/Mron, AA 29; and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Prol, AA 04) that they remind us that "clarity and distinctness" of perception in and of itself is insufficient for any sense of "causal order." What obviously distinguishes dreams from the waking state is that the former is not, whereas the latter is, governed by a causal *order*. This causal order is imperceptible to the senses, hence, it is incapable of absolute proof (or disproof), but it makes all the difference in the world whether or not we approach the physical world as if its events conform to a causal order of physical laws.

What dream and the physical world teach us, then, is that, where we have causality, there we have a causal order that we can depend upon and must depend upon for the expansion of our understanding and future actions. The same applies to the causality that is our creative freedom.

Creative freedom is no mere capricious spontaneity, but, rather, it is a causal system governed by the one system of laws that are compatible with freedom: a self-legislated moral order.

Freedom and the Moral Order are no Merely Vicious Circle

At the risk of what appears to be a vicious circle, we can view causal order (moral principles) as an indication of autonomous freedom. The very encounter with moral principles presupposes the causality that makes them necessary. Confronted with one's own execution if one were not to testify falsely against a stranger, everyone knows *what is right* although no one can determine for someone else what s/he must do. The principle that forbids false testimony presupposes that one has the capacity to do something that nature on its own cannot do. In short, it presupposes autonomous freedom.

In Section III of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (GMS, AA 04: 450.17f), Kant discusses this apparent vicious circle with respect to moral principles and the creative, efficient causality that is freedom. A creative causality presupposes a lawful order and a lawful order presupposes a creative causality especially because neither this causality nor moral principles are capable of proof or disproof. However, the circle is avoided, Kant proposes, when we recognize that autonomy is not an isolated capacity for itself but presupposes that we simultaneously and inseparable live in two "kingdoms:" 1) a sensible realm and 2) an intelligible realm.

Autonomous freedom is the tip of a hierarchy of intelligible capacities that allows Kant to speak of humanity as the *goal of nature*. To be sure, this is not a pronouncement of humanity's right to treat nature as a mere means to satisfy its unlimited interests. Rather, humanity is the goal of nature to the extent that it exercises its autonomous freedom by self-legislating moral principles to govern it.

This hierarchy of intelligible capacities stretches from a capacity clearly shared with species (determining judgment) to a capacity only shared in degree with other species (reflecting judgment). Determining judgment is the capacity to apply a concept that one already possesses to classify a set of phenomena. The concept can be given (in the case of other animals, by instinct) or it can acquired by means of reflecting judgment. The latter consists in the capacity to search out a concept that one does not possess already for classification of phenomena that,

without the acquisition of the unknown concept, would not be understood. Reflecting judgment is a powerful tool for a species so poorly endowed with instinct as in the case of humanity.

However, the intelligible realm is not limited to such theoretical reason (i.e., the making sense of phenomena), but it includes aesthetic judgment where (as in the case of "free" beauty in nature; see §16 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, KU, AA 05) one can formulate a judgment without a concept or where (as in the case of the mathematical and dynamical sublime, see §§ 23-29 of *ibid*., KU, AA 05) one can discovers the illimitable nature of consciousness and, even more profoundly, one can discover that one possesses a causal capacity, precisely because it is not reducible to natural causality, that in principle can destroy nature. This capacity, of course, is autonomous, creative freedom that is at the pinnacle of our intelligible capacities.

In other words, the apparent circle of autonomous freedom and moral principles can be defended (even if it cannot be proved) (GMS, AA 04: 459.14-18) not to be vicious because they are only the pinnacle of an illimitable, intelligible realm that is irreducible to the sensible realm. As a consequence, it can be *defended* as incapable of being accounted for by the blind, mechanical causality of physical nature alone. Our assumption of this intelligible realm and its hierarchy is what allows our escaping both from a vicious circle and from a status of being mere animals, marionettes, or automatons.

Autonomous freedom is an extraordinary *categorical* capacity by means of which we have control with respect to the selection of the principle upon which we will act, and it is not reducible to any other form of freedom (Berlin's *negative, coercive*, or *social freedom*; Taylor's *negative* or *purposive* freedom, Hegel's *institutional freedom*, or Honneth's *negative, reflexive, or communicative freedom*). Autonomous freedom involves an acknowledgement of our creativity that can self-legislate categorical principles (see GMS, AA 04: 454, 6f to govern the application of that creativity – even in a fashion contrary to our personal self-interest. As a consequence Kant, too, speaks of negative freedom, but he means it as a freedom that is not governed by physical causality alone.

Conclusion

Rather than seek to escape the conditions of possibility for our exercising of freedom, autonomous, creative freedom calls us to exercise our obligation as the *goal of nature* with moral responsibility. It would be a denial of our creative freedom and our status as human beings for

us in the name of freedom to reject the material world, our interests/appetites, our desire for status and prestige in the eyes of others, or our creative activity in the physical world. Assuming our place in the physical world, then, creative freedom commits us to technical and pragmatic imperatives (i.e., necessities), but these are possible only because we are beings who can exercise a categorical causality *higher than nature* in conformity with nature. When we exercise our categorical causality on the basis of self-legislated moral principles, we experience no higher satisfaction – even when we fail in our aim and/or when we act contrary to our personal interests. Although it is not because moral principles interest us that they have moral validity. Rather, it is because they have moral validity that they interest us (Section III, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*).

Unlike Berlin's and Taylor's negative freedom, then, autonomy is no arbitrary rejection of tradition, social orders, or institutions. Yet autonomous freedom is more than Taylor's purposive freedom as well as more than Hegel's and Honneth's communicative freedom capable of being accomplished only through social institutions. To be sure, creative freedom can only occur in a material world and under social conditions (e.g., the civic law and public institutions), but our autonomy raises us above them to assume personal responsibility for our decisions and actions that, in turn, not only enable us to generate and modify the civic law but also, most remarkably but also dangerously, enable us to transform nature. Autonomous, creative freedom affirms that the only freedom that we can possess is because we are in a physical world in communities. Yet, this places humanity in a precarious position:

> Here ... we see philosophy put in fact in a precarious position, which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or on earth from which it depends, or on which it is based. Here philosophy is to manifest its purity as sustainer of its own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it, all of which -- though they may always be better than nothing at all -- can still never yield basic principles that reason dictates and that must have their source entirely and completely a priori and, at the same time, must have their commanding authority from this: that they expect nothing from the inclination of human beings but everything from the supremacy of the law and the respect owed to it or, failing this, condemn the human being to contempt for himself and inner abhorrence (GMS, AA 04: 425-6.32f).

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