



Abridged: "Freedom on This and the Other Side of Kant" by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

## Freedom on This and the Other Side of Kant<sup>1</sup>

Axel Honneth<sup>2</sup> and Charles Taylor<sup>3</sup> represent a tendency to trace the “archaeology” of the notion of freedom either to G.W.F. Hegel’s *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*<sup>4</sup> or to Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.”<sup>5</sup> Without claiming to be an exhaustive investigation of the discussion of freedom since or prior to Immanuel Kant, this paper proposes, however, that the meaning of freedom since Kant has for all intents and purposes overlooked the tradition of autonomous freedom prior to Kant that stems from Pico della Mirandola and influenced Leibniz, Sulzer, and Tetens – all of whom shaped Kant’s understanding of freedom.

### I. Freedom This Side of Kant

After Kant there is a dramatic shift in the meaning of a key, pre-Kantian notion of freedom, which Kant himself represented. As a result, the heart of Kant’s project has been overlooked by significant authors because of an anachronistic notion of freedom. After Kant, the *metaphysical notion* of his positive, autonomous freedom is eclipsed (yet presupposed!) by a *sociological notion* of positive freedom as the self-determining subject shaped by a social context. One form of positive freedom does not exclude the other, but acknowledgment or non-acknowledgment of the difference between these notions of positive freedom dramatically shapes one’s understanding of human experience, action, and responsibility.

#### Hegel and Honneth

Hegel formulates a notion of freedom (more appropriately called “liberty” and based upon recognized rights) in terms of the individual’s dependence upon social institutions for the exercising of freedom. This is a *freedom with others* that can be achieved only through shared

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged paper. The original can be found at <http://www.criticalidealism.org> under the same title..

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

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

<sup>4</sup> *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* at <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Hegel.+Georg+Wilhelm+Friedrich/Grundlinien+der+Philosophie+des+Rechts>.

<sup>5</sup> “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In *Four Essays on Liberty*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

values and institutional structures that, in turn, recognize (or fail to recognize) the rights of individuals. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel treats freedom as “self-determination<sup>6</sup>” not with respect to transforming nature but with respect to the individual’s social framework. Freedom for him is exercised in the context of three institutions: the “natural spirit” of the family, the “divisiveness” of civil society, and the “objective freedom” of the state. Freedom, here, is primarily viewed from the perspective of *negative freedom* (freedom from) and addressed in terms of self-determination within the constraints of these social institutions. In short, one is free to the extent that one shapes one’s life over against society’s limits and expectations.

Drawing on Hegel’s discussion of freedom and Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth defines freedom as *communicative freedom*, which he distinguishes from *negative freedom* and *reflexive freedom*.<sup>7</sup> In common with Berlin and Taylor below, *negative freedom* means *freedom from* in the sense of rejection of any external, social determination of the individual. Honneth places Taylor’s discussion of positive freedom under the label of *reflexive freedom*, which according to Honneth means *freedom for* acting according to one’s own intentions (desires).

Honneth distinguishes *reflexive freedom* from negative freedom. In *reflexive freedom*, one consciously assumes moral responsibility for one’s self-selected goals. According to Honneth, reflexive freedom depends upon one’s morally grounding one’s decisions in something like the Golden Rule<sup>8</sup> by which one expects oneself to act as one would want all others to treat oneself.<sup>9</sup> In short, Honneth’s *reflexive freedom* only acknowledges a sociological ethics, not a metaphysical morality. 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, autonomously free but governed by a socialization process. One’s principles are relative to one’s social world,

---

<sup>6</sup> See the „Introduction“ to the *Philosophy of Right*.

<sup>7</sup> On Honneth’s notion of negative freedom, see „Die negative Freiheit und ihre Vertragskonstruktion“ in *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011): 44-57; on reflective freedom, see “Die reflexive Freiheit und ihre Gerechtigkeitskonzeption“ in *ibid.*: 58-80; on communicative or social freedom, see „Die soziale Freiheit und ihre Sittlichkeitslehre“ in *ibid.*: 81-118. On „autonomy“ as freedom from external limitations, see *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit. Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2001) and *Pathologien der Vernunft: Geschichte und Gegenwart der kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011): 65 and 85.

<sup>9</sup> Kant actually rejects the „Golden Rule“ as a valid principle for morality. See GMS, AA 04: 430\*. Kant defends a metaphysical morality, not a sociological ethics.

in Honneth's judgment, and individual authenticity is an illusion because one is negotiating a social world to fulfil one's interests.<sup>10</sup>

Honneth follows Habermas<sup>11</sup> in defending 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 is a civic process that can be achieved only through a shared social commitment to unhindered and unhampered "rational"<sup>12</sup> discourse as guaranteed by mutually constructed social institutions that encourage and support such rational discourse.

Honneth and the Frankfurt School call this *communicative freedom* because it is a social construction generated by commitment on the part of all individuals and groups in society and accomplished by concerned citizens engaging in an open discourse to secure shared and optimal values. In order to be accepted at the table as a participant in the ideal speech situation that generates social values, however, communicative freedom requires the commitment to "rational"<sup>13</sup> discourse and to conform to the decision of the majority, which is not absolute but subject to revision, within an institutional framework that protects the "rights" of the minority.

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

---

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Honneth is thinking of Martin Heidegger's insight that "authenticity" is always a modification of "inauthenticity." See *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979): H317.

<sup>11</sup> See Habermas, *Kommunikatives Handeln und detranszendentalisierte Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Here "reason" refers to discursive and instrumental reason, not Kant's theoretical and practical reason.

<sup>13</sup> "Rational" appears to mean discursive reason, which some argue is itself culturally relative (i.e., Western). In any event, when there is only one domain (the physical laws of nature) (on domains/*Gebieten* and territories/*Böden*, see *KU*, AA V, 174), then all other systems are speculative or enthusiastic constructions, not rational. To insist, then, that everyone at the table for the establishment of social rules must be "rational" can only mean that everyone has to buy into a specific territorial construction in order to be acknowledged as rational. A rational social order is not grounded in a territory but in the *second* domain distinguished from, but neither separable nor reduced to, the domain of physical causality. The key to this *second* domain is (autonomous) freedom, which establishes dignity (see Section II of *GMS*, 04) but requires the self-legislation of universal moral principles according to the three forms of the categorical imperative (see Section II of *GMS* 04) and the three maxims of the understanding (see *Anth*, AA VII, 200, 228; *Log*, AA IX, 057; *KU*, AA V, 294).

institutional system requires the continued vigilance and effort of its membership in order to continually renew the commitment to freedom.

Communicative freedom overlooks the important distinction made by Kant between the civic order/law (the Doctrine of Right in the *Metaphysics of Morals*) and morality (the Doctrine of Virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals*). The civic law is, to be sure, a product of communicative discourse because it is concerned with the external rules necessary for conducting affairs in the public sphere. Each society has both the power and the obligation to create such rules, and they can, obviously, be different from one society to another. However, civic laws cannot on their own establish either distributive or retributive justice. Civic laws (the Doctrine of Right) require a citizenry that adheres to moral principles *above the civic law* (the Doctrine of Virtue) in order for the civic law to be just. One can do everything “legally” according to the civic law and be extremely unjust (i.e., violate not just the autonomous freedom, discussed below, but also the dignity of individuals).

#### Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor

Isaiah Berlin distinguishes among negative, positive, and social freedoms. *Negative freedom* is freedom from external coercion, that is, freedom is a sociological issue. Negative freedom for Berlin, then, is the same as with Hegel and Honneth. In this version of negative freedom, one takes freedom to consist of resisting conformity to any external law either from tradition, society, or institution so as to maintain the radical liberty of self-determination.

In contrast, Berlin’s *positive freedom* is *coercive freedom* by which one subordinates oneself to a higher authority than immediate self-interest in order to increase one’s opportunities by limiting one’s pursuit of short-term satisfaction to achieve a greater range of freedom at some point in the future (for example, going to school). 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 and is the freedom to obtain *status and recognition on the part of a minority social unit* within a dominant society.

Charles Taylor employs an alternative notion of *positive freedom*. Positive freedom for Taylor is not “coercive” (that is, restrictive of the individual in the moment for a greater goal in the future) 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.

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. According to Taylor, the source of these moral principles is what Kant calls “historical” religion or a heteronomous, relative morality achieved by revelation and acquired through (sacred) texts.

### III. Freedom on the Other Side of Kant: Autonomous Freedom

The notion of *autonomous freedom* is by no means a Kantian invention. Johann Georg Hamann reports in a letter to Johann Gottfried Herder from 17 May 1779 (*Briefwechsel*, vol. 4 [Wiesbaden: 1959], Brief Nr. 555, page 81) *reports* that, as Kant was writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Johannes Tetens’ two volume *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* was on his desk. Teten’s 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 intentionally to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Johannes Sulzer treated this notion three years prior to the publication of Tetens’ reflections in his *Vermischte philosophische Schriften*. Kant, Tetens, and Sulzer probably have the theme from Leibniz and Hume, and Ernst Cassirer attributes the notion to Pico della Mirandola.<sup>14</sup>

Here is Mirandola’s account of the creation of humanity and the final end of creation in the “Oration:”

“... when this work was done, the Divine ... bethought Himself of bringing forth man. Truth was, however, that there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring ... Still, it was not in the nature of the power of the Father to fail in this last creative élan ...

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

---

<sup>14</sup> 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.

‘We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.<sup>15</sup>,’

Autonomous freedom is grounded in humanity’s causal capacity of intentionally initiating (not merely by natural instinct) a sequence of events that nature’s physical causality on its own cannot accomplish. Kant calls *negative freedom* precisely this independence from the physical law and desires/self-interest.<sup>16</sup> Physical events occur “blindly” (that is, without internal intentionality) and according to the deterministic laws of physics. Given that human creativity only occurs in a physical world, however, it necessarily is not independent of the blind and deterministic processes of nature, but this positive freedom is not reducible to them, either.

Because we only experience causes as effects and never directly, there is no way for us to prove (or disprove) empirically whether or not we possess this causal capacity.<sup>17</sup> However, of those ideas that we must assume if we are to understand ourselves as rational beings (possessors of supersensible capacities of the intelligible world within the sensuous world), which are incapable of confirmation in the senses, Kant proposes in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that creative freedom is the one *pure idea* of reason (in contrast to God and the soul) that comes closest to being a *fact of reason*.<sup>18</sup> By definition, though, an idea of reason cannot be a “fact,” according to Kant, because an idea of reason is not something accessible by empirical perception. Nonetheless, he speaks of autonomous freedom as a “*fact of reason*” because we experience ourselves, unequivocally, as capable of purposive behavior that requires our selection

---

<sup>15</sup> Translated by A. Robert Caponigri (Chicago: Regnery Publishing, 1956): 5-8 and on the web at: [http://www.andallthat.co.uk/uploads/2/3/8/9/2389220/pico\\_-\\_oration\\_on\\_the\\_dignity\\_of\\_man.pdf](http://www.andallthat.co.uk/uploads/2/3/8/9/2389220/pico_-_oration_on_the_dignity_of_man.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See KpV, AA 05: §8.

<sup>17</sup> See „Erläuterung der kosmologischen Idee einer Freiheit in Verbindung mit der allgemeinen Naturnotwendigkeit“ in KrV, AA 05: B 586.

<sup>18</sup> See KpV, AA 05: §§ 4-6.

not only of the goals of our actions but also requires that we determine the (morally) appropriate means for the accomplishment of those goals. The *origin* of this sequence of *hypothetical*, technical and pragmatic necessities with respect to the means (materials, tools, and skills) necessary to achieve the intended *end* is a causality that is *categorical*,<sup>19</sup> to the degree that its source is autonomous freedom above nature.

### Autonomy is Not Merely Spontaneity

Creative freedom is no mere random spontaneity because causal systems require laws.<sup>20</sup> If dreams have no other value,<sup>21</sup> Kant proposes<sup>22</sup> that their value consists in reminding us that “clarity and distinctness” of perception in and of itself is insufficient for any sense of “causal order” and, hence, rational understanding.

What dreams and the physical world teach us is that, where we have causality, there we have a causal order upon which we must *necessarily* depend for the expansion of our understanding and future actions. The same applies to the causality of autonomous freedom. Autonomous freedom is a causal system complementary to the physical causal system but ultimately governed by the one system of laws that are compatible with freedom: a self-legislated moral order. Autonomous freedom involves an acknowledgement of our creativity that can self-legislate categorical principles<sup>23</sup> to govern the application of that creativity – even contrary to our personal self-interest.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

---

<sup>19</sup> See the discussion of *hypothetical* (i.e., technical and pragmatic) and *categorical* necessity in Section II of *GMS*, AA 04.

<sup>20</sup> See *GMS*, AA 04: 446.13f.

<sup>21</sup> The claim here has to do with the content of the dream, not with the physical conditions that might contribute to the generation the content.

<sup>22</sup> See *KrV*: AA 05: B 520f; V-Met/Mron, AA 29: 885, 927; and *Prol*, AA 04: Anmerkung III.

<sup>23</sup> See *GMS*, AA 04: 454, 6f.

<sup>24</sup> The capacity to act independently of self-interest is a corollary of Kant’s metaphysical (not sociological) notion of „autonomy.“ The unconditional „good will“ is that will that legislates its moral maxim for itself independent of interest. This is possible to the degree that humanity can exercise autonomous freedom. See *GMS*, AA 04: 444 „Der schlechterdings gute Wille, dessen Prinzip ein kategorischer Imperativ sein muß, wird also, in Ansehung aller Objekte unbestimmt, bloß die Form des Wollens überhaupt enthalten, und zwar als Autonomie, d.i. die Tauglichkeit der Maxime eines jeden guten Willens, sich selbst zum allgemeinen Gesetze zu machen, ist selbst das alleinige Gesetz, das sich der Wille eines jeden vernünftigen Wesens selbst auferlegt, ohne irgend eine Triebfeder und Interesse derselben als Grund unterzulegen.“ Nonetheless Kant recognizes that we can never be certain that we are not acting out of “interest.” See the opening pages of Section II of *GMS*, AA 04.

*Autonomous freedom* is more than Hegel's and Honneth's *communicative freedom* capable of being accomplished only through social institutions. Furthermore, unlike Berlin's and Taylor's *negative freedom*, then, autonomous freedom is no arbitrary rejection of tradition, social orders, or institutions. Yet, autonomous freedom is also more than Taylor's *purposive freedom*. To be sure, autonomous 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 and even above nature to be able to assume personal responsibility for our decisions and actions. This, in turn, not only enables us to generate and modify the civic law, which is a product of *communicative freedom* as described by Habermas and Honneth but also, most remarkably but also dangerously, enables us to transform both nature and social institutions. Autonomous, creative freedom places humanity in what Kant calls a “precarious position.<sup>25</sup>”

### Works Cited

- Berlin, Isaiah. “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In *Four Essays on Liberty*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Cassirer, Ernst. See “‘Über die Würde des Menschen’ von Pico della Mirandola” in *Studia Humanitatis*, 12 (1959): 48-61.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Kommunikatives Handeln und detranszendentalisierte Vernunft*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2001.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* at  
<http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Hegel,+Georg+Wilhelm+Friedrich/Grundlinien+der+Philosophie+des+Rechts>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979.
- Honneth, Axel. *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit. Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*. Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Pathologien der Vernunft: Geschichte und Gegenwart der kritischen Theorie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anth*, AA 04
- \_\_\_\_\_. *GMS*, AA 04.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *KpV*, AA 05.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *KrV*. AA 05.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Log*, AA IX.

---

<sup>25</sup> *GMS*, AA 04: 425-426.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *MS*, AA 04.  
\_\_\_\_\_. V-Met/Mron, AA 29.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Prol*, AA 04

Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Chicago: Regnery Publishing, 1956: 5-8.

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