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Transcendental Freedom and its Discontents

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Abstract:

This introduction briefly lays out the basics of Kant's concept, *transcendental freedom*, and some of its discontents. It also provides an overview of the *dossier* itself, introducing Katerina Deligiorgi's discussion of ought-implies-can, Patrick Frierson's account of degrees of responsibility, and Jeanine Grenberg's treatment of the third-person.

Keywords

Kant, Freedom, Transcendental Idealism

Transcendental freedom is one of the jewels in Kant's system. But what exactly is it? In the first Critique, Kant describes it as "a faculty of absolutely beginning a state" (A445/B473) and "an independence of [...] reason itself (with regard to its causality for initiating a series of appearances) from all determining causes of the world of sense" (A803/B831). So conceived, transcendental freedom involves the ability to initiate causal chains in the world of experience, and is thus is a *libertarian* conception of freedom.

To complicate matters, Kant attempts to make this libertarian conception of freedom compatible with natural necessity. Transcendental Idealism is the key to this. It allows Kant to conceive of everything in space, time and experience as determined by natural necessity, but to nevertheless maintain transcendental freedom by locating it outside of space, time and experience in the noumenal. Of course, what exactly this means is complicated.

Transcendental freedom is not an isolated concept in Kant's system. For one, it has two moments: a *negative* moment, independence from all determining causes in the world of sense; but also a *positive* moment, the following of the moral law, or autonomy. Kant

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thinks that transcendental freedom is tightly connected to morality, as it makes possible both our distinctive moral agency and moral status.

This takes us to the first of our discontents. Schiller worries that Kant's picture of freedom, autonomy and morality is self-alienating. As Katerina Deligiorgi puts it:

Agents may count as autonomous then, insofar as and only to the extent that they are able to implement reason's prescription. This is the bare Kantian picture. The problem, as Schiller originally put it, is that this is also a picture of self-alienation, since parts of one's identity, feelings, emotions, and attachments, are kept at arm's length and treated with suspicion (e.g. AW XXb: 280). (Deligiorgi 2018)

In her paper in this *Dossier*, Deligiorgi attempts a response on Kant's behalf. She investigates the ought-implies-can principle, and argues that a full understanding of this reveals how *moral* autonomy can be expressive of *individual* autonomy.

A second source of discontent concerns the dualistic nature of Kant's conception of freedom. Kant conceives of every act as both determined by natural necessity and also transcendently free – independent from determination by all determining causes of the world of sense. The worry is that this set up does not allow for *degrees* of freedom or responsibility.

Recently, Claudia Blöser (2015) has attempted to find a way to mitigate this worry, accepting that Kant cannot accommodate degrees of *accountability*, but arguing that he can accommodate degrees of *praise and blame worthiness*. In response, Saunders (2018) has pushed the original objection, arguing that transcendental freedom and transcendental idealism constrain Kant such that he cannot adequately accommodate either type of degrees of responsibility.

In the second paper in this *Dossier*, Patrick Frierson responds to this, offering a careful and detailed reply to Saunders' objections. He also draws upon Kant's Religion to propose a unique way of accommodating degrees of responsibility within Kant's framework.

Earlier, I noted that Kant locates transcendental freedom outside of space, time and experience. This invites some more discontent. First of all, perhaps the most famous complaint concerning transcendental freedom concerns Kant's that transcendental freedom is – in some sense – *timeless*. Kant conceives of everything that happens in time as determined, and thereby locates transcendental freedom outside of time. This is an understandable manoeuvre, but it creates difficulties for his position. Our freedom appears to come and go over time, actions begin and end, deliberation can take time, and it is not clear how we are to understand any of this timelessly.

Secondly, if transcendental freedom is outside of experience, and we cannot have knowledge of the noumenal, then it looks like we have an *epistemic* problem on our hands. How are we to know about this freedom? Kant has an ingenious solution here, whereby I am aware of the moral law in *my own* case, and this reveals my freedom to me. And

Jeanine Grenberg has recently offered an excellent defence of this *first*-personal phenomenological approach.

In response, Sticker (2016) has drawn attention to the various *third*-personal elements in Kant's practical philosophy, and has posed these as a challenge to Grenberg's first-personal account. In addition, Saunders (2016) has argued that both Grenberg and Kant face epistemic difficulties when it comes to third-personal knowledge of others' freedom.

In the final paper in this *Dossier*, Grenberg responds to both Sticker and Saunders. She argues that Sticker overstates her emphasis on the first-person, and discusses the ways in which her approach can accommodate third-personal aspects of our moral practices. And in response to Saunders, she offers a fascinating discussion of how we might encounter the moral obligatedness of others.

Finally, there are discontents and then there are discontents. One obvious point of departure for some critics of transcendental freedom concerns its libertarian nature. But Kant was not interested in a compatibilist conception of freedom, he wanted something more ambitious. As noted above, he attempts the unenviable but admirable task of making a libertarian conception of freedom compatible with natural necessity. Some critics object to his libertarian conception of freedom, where others object to his attempt to make this compatible with natural necessity. I think the second complaint is more interesting than the first. The debate between compatibilists and libertarians is well-worn, but there is something impressive and ambitious about the attempt to make a libertarian conception of freedom compatible with natural necessity. Of course though, this comes with problems. For what it is worth, I think we need to move beyond Kant here, and attempt to maintain transcendental freedom without transcendental idealism. However, that is another story, and one that will no doubt face problems of its own. And indeed, perhaps Kant's own account can be salvaged, and I very grateful to the authors of this *Dossier* for attempting this on Kant's behalf.

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