

# THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL

By Immanuel Kant

From *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

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## From: A447/B475 – A451/B479

Freedom—independence of the laws of nature—is certainly a deliverance from restraint, but it is also a relinquishing of the guidance of law and rule. For it cannot be alleged that, instead of the laws of nature, laws of freedom may be introduced into the causality of the course of nature. For, if freedom were determined according to laws, it would be no longer freedom, but merely nature. Nature, therefore, and transcendental freedom are distinguishable as conformity to law and lawlessness.

This idea is, however, the true stumbling-block for philosophy, which meets with unconquerable difficulties in admitting this kind of unconditioned causality. ... How such a faculty is possible is not a necessary inquiry; for in the case of natural causality itself, we are obliged to content ourselves with the a priori knowledge that such a causality must be presupposed, although we are quite incapable of comprehending how the being of one thing is possible through the being of another, but must for this information look entirely to experience. ... But, as there has thus been proved the existence of a faculty which can of itself originate a series in time—although we are unable to explain how it can exist—we feel ourselves authorized to admit, even in the midst of the natural course of events, a beginning, as regards causality, of different successions of phenomena, and at the same time to attribute to all substances a faculty of free action. ...

When, for example, I, completely of my own free will, and independently of the necessarily determinative influence of natural causes, rise from my chair, there commences with this event, along with its natural consequences to infinity, an absolutely new series; although, in relation to time, this event is merely the continuation of a preceding series. For this resolution and act of mine do not form part of the succession of effects in nature, and are not mere continuations of it; on the contrary, the determining causes of nature cease to operate in reference to this event, which certainly succeeds the acts of nature, but does not proceed from them. For these reasons, the action of a free agent must be termed, in regard to causality, if not in relation to time, an absolutely primal beginning of a series of phenomena.

The justification of this need of reason to rest upon a free act as the first beginning of the series of natural causes is evident from the fact, that all philosophers of antiquity (with the exception of the Epicurean school) felt themselves obliged, when constructing a theory of the motions of the universe, to accept a prime mover, that is, a freely acting cause, which spontaneously and prior to all other causes evolved this series of states. They always felt the need of going beyond mere nature, for the purpose of making a first beginning comprehensible. ...

But if the existence of a transcendental faculty of freedom is granted—a faculty of originating changes in the world—this faculty must at least exist out of and apart from the world; although it is certainly a bold assumption, that, over and above the complete content of all possible intuitions, there still exists an object which cannot be presented in any possible perception. But, to attribute to substances in the world itself such a faculty, is quite inadmissible; for, in this case; the connection of phenomena reciprocally determining and determined according to general laws, which is termed nature, and along with it the criteria of empirical truth, which enable us to distinguish experience from mere visionary dreaming, would almost entirely disappear. For, alongside such a lawless faculty of freedom, a system of nature is hardly thinkable; for the laws of the latter would be continually subject to the intrusive influences of the former, and the course of phenomena, which would otherwise proceed regularly and uniformly, would become thereby confused and disconnected.

#### **From: A532/B560 – A541/569**

There are only two ways that one can think of causality: the causality of **nature** or of **freedom**. The first is the conjunction of a particular state with another preceding it in the world of sense, the former following the latter by virtue of a law. ...

We must understand, on the contrary, by the term freedom in the cosmological sense, a faculty of the spontaneous origination of a state; the causality of which, therefore, is not subordinated to another cause determining it in time. Freedom is in this sense a pure transcendental idea, which, in the first place, contains no empirical element; the object of which, in the second place, cannot be given or determined in any experience, because it is a universal law of the very possibility of experience, that everything which happens must have a cause, that

consequently the causality of a cause, being itself something that has happened, must also have a cause. In this view of the case, the whole field of experience, how far soever it may extend, contains nothing that is not subject to the laws of nature. But, as we cannot by this means attain to an absolute totality of conditions in reference to the series of causes and effects, reason creates the idea of a spontaneity, which can begin to act of itself, and without any external cause determining it to action, according to the natural law of causality. ...

Freedom, in the practical sense, is the independence of the will of coercion by sensuous impulses. A will is sensuous, in so far as it is pathologically affected (by sensuous impulses); it is called an animal power of choice when it is pathologically necessitated. The human will is called a sensible power of choice, not an animal one, but free; because sensuousness does not necessitate its action, but in the human being there is a faculty of self-determination, independently of all sensuous coercion.

It is plain that, if all causality in the world of sense were mere nature, every event would be determined by another according to necessary laws, and that, consequently, phenomena, in so far as they determine the will, must necessitate every action as a natural effect from themselves; and thus all practical freedom would fall to the ground with the transcendental idea. For the latter presupposes that although a certain thing has not happened, it ought to have happened, and that, consequently, its phenomenal cause was not so powerful and determinative as to exclude the causality of our will—a causality capable of producing effects independently of and even in opposition to the power of natural causes, and capable, consequently, of spontaneously originating a series of events. ...

The question, then, suggests itself, whether freedom is possible; and, if it is, whether it can co-exist with the universality of the natural law of causality; and, consequently, whether we enounce a proper disjunctive proposition when we say: "Every effect must have its origin either in nature or in freedom," or whether both cannot exist together in the same event in different relations. The principle of an unbroken connection between all events in the phenomenal world, in accordance with the unchangeable laws of nature, is a well-established principle of transcendental analytic which admits of no exception. The question, therefore, is: "Whether an effect, determined according to the laws of nature, can at the same time be

produced by a free agent, or whether freedom and nature mutually exclude each other?" And here, the common but fallacious hypothesis of the absolute reality of phenomena manifests its injurious influence in embarrassing the procedure of reason. For if phenomena are things in themselves, freedom is impossible. In this case, nature is the complete and all-sufficient cause of every event; and condition and conditioned, cause and effect are contained in the same series, and necessitated by the same law. If, on the contrary, phenomena are held to be, as they are in fact, nothing more than mere representations, connected with each other in accordance with empirical laws, they must have a ground which is not phenomenal. But the causality of such an intelligible cause is not determined or determinable by phenomena; although its effects, as phenomena, must be determined by other phenomenal existences. This cause and its causality exist therefore out of and apart from the series of phenomena; while its effects do exist and are discoverable in the series of empirical conditions. Such an effect may therefore be considered to be free in relation to its intelligible cause, and necessary in relation to the phenomena from which it is a necessary consequence—a distinction which, stated in this perfectly general and abstract manner, must appear in the highest degree subtle and obscure. ... Here, I have only wanted to note that, since the complete and unbroken connection of phenomena is an unalterable law of nature, freedom is impossible if one supposes that phenomena are absolutely real. Hence those philosophers who adhere to the common opinion on this subject can never succeed in reconciling the ideas of nature and freedom. ...

Now this active subject would, in its character of intelligible subject, be subordinate to no conditions of time, for time is only a condition of phenomena, and not of things in themselves. No action would begin or cease to be in this subject; it would consequently be free from the law of all determination of time—the law of change, namely, that everything which happens must have a cause in the phenomena of a preceding state. In one word, the causality of the subject, in so far as it is intelligible, would not form part of the series of empirical conditions which determine and necessitate an event in the world of sense. Again, this intelligible character of a thing cannot be known immediately, because we can perceive nothing but phenomena, but it must be capable of being thought of in harmony with the empirical character; for we always find ourselves compelled to place, in thought, a transcendental object at the basis of

phenomena although we can never know what this object is in itself.

In virtue of its empirical character, this subject would at the same time be subordinate to all the empirical laws of causality, and, as a phenomenon and member of the sensuous world, its effects would have to be accounted for by a reference to preceding phenomena. Eternal phenomena must be capable of influencing it; and its actions, in accordance with natural laws, must explain to us how its empirical character, that is, the law of its causality, is to be cognized in and by means of experience. In a word, all requisites for a complete and necessary determination of these actions must be presented to us by experience.

In virtue of its intelligible character, on the other hand (although we possess only a general conception of this character), the subject must be regarded as free from all sensuous influences, and from all phenomenal determination. Moreover, as nothing happens in this subject—for it is a noumenon, and there does not consequently exist in it any change, demanding the dynamical determination of time, and for the same reason no connection with phenomena as causes—this active existence must in its actions be free from and independent of natural necessity, for necessity exists only in the world of phenomena. It would be quite correct to say that it originates or begins its effects in the world of sense from itself, although the action productive of these effects does not begin in itself. We should not be in this case affirming that these sensuous effects began to exist of themselves, because they are always determined by prior empirical conditions—by virtue of the empirical character, which is the phenomenon of the intelligible character—and are possible only as constituting a continuation of the series of natural causes. And thus nature and freedom, each in the complete and absolute signification of these terms, can exist, without contradiction or disagreement, in the same action, according to whether one compares them to their intelligible or their sensible cause.