

## Free Will - Libertarianism

**1. Descartes:** Descartes notes two sorts of causes that act upon human beings:

- Volitions: These are the actions of the soul—i.e., the will—and it is under the complete control of the soul.
- Passions: These are the actions of the body, and are not directly controlled by the soul.

“Passions” are things like happiness, sadness, anger, fear, etc., and are the result of the motions of tiny corpuscles (“animal spirits”) which move through the nerves and affect the brain. Descartes held a mechanistic view of the material world, where all bodies are governed by fixed physical laws. Because of this, Descartes believed that the passions were completely determined. Therefore, they cannot be freely controlled except indirectly.

In the section on mind-body dualism, we saw that Descartes' view is that the soul can affect the body and vice versa via motions in the pineal gland in the brain. The soul (or, mind) can only affect the passions insofar as the mind can, for instance, imagine certain things that automatically excite or dull the passions. For instance, remembering a death in the family is almost certain to excite sadness. Except for these sorts of instances, the passions occur independently of our will.

We are free insofar as the soul is able to resist the passions, even when they are quite strong. Descartes gives an example of someone experiencing intense anger. If their fist flies up to strike someone, the soul can resist this passion and force the hand to remain still. When this happens, a conflict occurs in the pineal gland, with the soul exciting the gland in one way, and the passions exciting it in the other way. Ultimately, whichever agitation is stronger wins.

In some people, the soul never wins against the passions. However, we can train our minds to be able to control our passions. How? By learning truths, such as those about good and evil, and by making a habit of controlling them. Knowledge of good and evil, he says, are the “proper weapons” against the passions. Descartes believes that everyone has the capacity to master their passions, and we should all strive to do so. In doing so, our wills become free.

[Objection: Descartes states that the stronger agitation cancels the weaker in the pineal gland. Also, the strength of the soul is a function of how much training someone has had, and what sort (for, some people are trained to learn falsehoods, and this will affect how they respond to their own passions). But, these things do not seem to be under our control. So, then, how are we free?]

**2. Kant:** Immanuel Kant was a Libertarian about free will. Like Descartes, he too believed that the world (at least, the one that we perceive) was completely determined—and yet, we are free (or, we might be).

Kant rejects the Compatibilist position. “Freedom (independence) from the laws of nature is indeed a liberation from coercion,” he admits, in agreement with the Compatibilist, “but also from the guidance of all rules. For one cannot say that in place of the laws of nature, laws of freedom enter into the course of the world, because if freedom were determined according to laws, it would not be freedom, but nothing other than nature.” (*Critique*, A447) In other words, the world of nature is governed by the LAWS of nature. But, nothing governed by those laws (or ANY laws) can be free. So, freedom is not governed by the laws of nature.

Interestingly, due to Kant's peculiar philosophical system, he concludes further that freedom is not a part of nature AT ALL. The natural world—or, what he calls the “phenomenal realm”—is completely deterministically governed by laws. So, if there is to be a free cause, it must be OUTSIDE of that realm.

The things outside of the phenomenal realm are called “noumena.” Noumena are non-spatial, non-temporal objects that we cannot perceive and therefore cannot know anything about. This means that, if I am free, the free “me” is some unobservable, unknowable noumenal object. The phenomenal “me”, however—i.e., the one I am aware of—is not free at all (since the phenomenal realm is governed by the laws of nature).

Free (noumenal) actions have an effect in the phenomenal world. Kant notes that each free action is a break away from the endless (phenomenal) chain of causes, and results in a totally new chain of events. He says, “in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses.” (A534)

He argues that at least one such cause exists, using a version of the Cosmological Argument, where the conclusion is that there exists a First Mover (or First Cause) that is not itself moved or caused. (More on this argument in Unit Three). He concludes that we are like that too. Kant writes, of the free subject, that:

since, in it, insofar as it is a noumenon ... and hence no connection with appearances as causes is encountered in its actions, this active being would to this extent be independent and free of all the natural necessity present solely in the world of sense. Of it one would say quite correctly that it begins its effects in the sensible world **from itself**, without its action beginning **in it** itself. (A541)

From the above argument, it might be noted that, at best, Kant has proved only that it is POSSIBLE that we are miniature first movers, capable of beginning causal chains. He has not proven that we ARE this way. But, he believes that we ARE free because of the way that we assign moral responsibility. We do, in fact, praise and blame people for their actions. In other words, we hold people responsible for their actions. It is evident that people are morally responsible. But, it is only fair to hold someone morally responsible for an action if they were FREE to perform that action (i.e., they were in control). Moral principles, Kant says, “would be absolutely impossible without the presupposition of freedom.” (Bxxviii)

How does the faculty of freedom work? Kant has little to say. He writes only, “How such a faculty is possible is not so necessary to answer, since ... such a thing must be presupposed, even though we do not in any way comprehend how it is possible ...”

[Objections: First, Kant has earlier stated that we do not know anything about noumena—we do not even know whether they exist. But, now he ACCEPTS that there are definitely noumena, and we know something about some of them (i.e., they are free)?.

Also, since we cannot know anything about them, then we never know which actions are free (i.e., which we are morally responsible for).]