

KANT AND THE NOUMENAL AGENT

Heather M. Kendrick
Earlham College

Immanuel Kant's position on free will is creative but controversial. It gives empirical science its due by asserting that everything in nature is bound by the law of causation — thus, it posits determinism; yet it also allows us to think of ourselves as moral agents, capable of acting autonomously — thus, it also posits freedom. It allows us the best of both worlds; however, it poses many difficult problems. The idea of an agent outside space and time — a noumenal agent — is an element that can be particularly difficult to tangle with. Just how does the noumenal agent work outside — or within — the law of causation? How does the noumenal agent relate to the phenomenal being? These questions must be dealt with in order to assess the viability of Kant's doctrine.

According to Kant, we can be both free and causally determined. He escapes contradiction by saying that we are not free in the same sense in which we are determined; we are transcendently free, and empirically determined: "... natural necessity is referred merely to appearances and freedom merely to things in themselves" (*Prolegomena* 343-44). As rational beings, we have a sensible character that is determined by the laws of causation, but we also have an intelligible character underlying it, which Kant says is a thing in itself, a noumenon (*Critique* B 569). Things in themselves are not in time, since time is just our own form of sensible intuition; thus, they cannot be bound in the chain of causal events, which always occur in time.

Kendrick is a senior philosophy major at Earlham College. She plans to attend graduate school in the fall of 1996.

One peril of this position (as suggested, in conversation, by Len Clark) is that if one isn't careful, one might begin talking about our phenomenal versus noumenal selves. It is easy shorthand, but is dangerous, because to talk of two selves smacks of Cartesian dualism. It leads to the obvious objection that Kant's rational being is not a unified subject, but is really two separate entities altogether. This is bad exegesis as well as bad metaphysics. First, Kant certainly didn't intend to posit two separate selves in this manner. The rational being is a unified subject that "can be regarded from two points of view" (*Critique* B 566). There is a sense in which we are phenomena, belonging to the world of appearance, and a sense in which we are noumena, belonging to the world of things in themselves. Second, to misinterpret Kant this way opens him to undeserved criticism over the supposed lack of unity in his view of the self. Allen W. Wood suggests that this "two-worlds" view does not allow us to think of ourselves as unified (Wood 75). He notes that "Norman Kretzmann has commented . . . that this may be likened to saying that a married couple is compatible, but only as long as they live in separate houses" (Wood 75). When looked at in this way, it seems as though Kant is cheating, but I disagree with Wood and Kretzmann. Kant wants to say that our phenomenal and noumenal characters belong to different worlds (which are really not so much different worlds as different ways of regarding the world), but are indeed unified. They are not two entities linked by some mystical silver cord; they are two aspects of the same entity, two ways of regarding the subject.

I refer throughout this essay to the intelligible character of which Kant speaks as the "noumenal agent." This language is not Kant's. However, I think it is justifiable. Kant does refer to the intelligible character as a noumenon (469). And it is this intelligible

character which can be considered free in action. Kant refers to it as the intelligible aspect of an "acting subject" (Critique B 567). Therefore, it is fair to call it an agent. Keep in mind, however, that I mean "the aspect of an agent which is noumenal." I don't mean that all people are made up of two agents, a noumenal and a phenomenal agent. For this would be like the dualism which I rejected earlier.

What is it, then, about this subject that permits it to be free even though causation is necessary and universal? Causation is always in time, according to the Second Analogy. But our intelligible character is not in time, since time is a form of our *sensible* intuition. Therefore, our intelligible character stands apart from the chain of causation that determines our sensible character; in the respect that we are intelligible, we are free.

But what does the intelligible character have freedom to do? If the noumenal aspect of the self can only be free in the noumenal world, completely apart from anything that happens to the phenomenal aspect, then what is the point of discussing it at all? If there were no interaction between the noumenal agent and the phenomenal world, then we could not describe any of our phenomenal actions as free. Since the phenomenal world is the world in which we live, it is there that we want to be able to talk of our actions as being free. Thus, we must say that somehow our noumenal freedom is expressed in the phenomenal world.

In fact, that is what Kant says. He writes, "the active being [i.e. the noumenal agent] *of itself* begins its effects in the sensible world" (Critique B 569). There is an interaction, although the exact mechanics of this are obscure — as is reasonable, since we are discussing noumena, about which we have to be very careful what we say.

Time is an a priori form of all our sensible intuition. It

applies, therefore, only to things in the phenomenal world. So the noumenal agent must be outside time. Yet the sensible world is always in time. So the agent outside time must be having an effect on things which are in time. The idea of the noumenal agent outside of time having an effect on events in time carries several problems with it. First, just how can it "cut in" to the chain of causal events, since these causal events will always follow universal rules? If I can follow a chain of events backward in time all the way to my birth and explain every one of my actions by pointing to something that happened in the phenomenal world, then how can I claim that my intelligible character had any choice in the matter at all?

Since noumena somehow — although we cannot know how — underlie phenomena, one way to explain this is to take the position that our intelligible character creates a complete causal history that enables us to make the decisions that we make in our lives (Wood 91-92).

Let's consider a woman named Jennifer for example. Jennifer makes a moral decision which involves donating a sum of money to an organization which fights against racism. Now, insofar as she is intelligible, Jennifer made this decision freely. However, insofar as she is sensible, we must be able to explain her action causally. So we discover that Jennifer is very tolerant of other races and very much against racism. We can explain this causally, too: Jennifer was raised by her parents to be very tolerant. Jennifer's parents raised her that way because they were strongly affected by the Holocaust.

Now, since we can explain Jennifer's decision completely through causation in the sensible world, how can we explain the connection that her intelligible freedom has to her decision? One way is to say that her noumenal aspect ordered the phenomenal

world in such a way that allowed her to make the decisions which she made. She created a world in which she was able to have the beliefs she had and perform the actions she performed according to the laws of causation.

The trouble with this is readily apparent. The Holocaust seems to be an essential part of the causal history leading to Jennifer's decision. Does that mean that Jennifer created the Holocaust, and is responsible for it?

Critics of Kant contend just that, and say this model has disastrous consequences. Jonathan Bennett holds that in this way we could possibly be responsible for such things as the Holocaust, although we don't realize it, because our noumenal aspects made a choice about our life which has the Holocaust as an indirect but necessary causal condition. If true, this would undermine Kant's theory considerably, since he is trying to construct a model in which we could think of ourselves as being responsible for our own actions. If we never knew what actions and events we were or were not responsible for, the theory would be relatively useless.

Since the Holocaust involved the moral choices of other noumenal agents, who are free and autonomous, it does not seem possible that they could have been determined by a different noumenal agent in this manner. If I personally were responsible for the Holocaust, that would mean that the moral decisions of a lot of Nazis would have been caused by me. But the noumenal agent "begins its effects in the sensible world," not the intelligible world (*Critique* B 569). Kant would not allow us to say that we determined the noumenal choices of other subjects.

It is less clear how Kant could respond to the idea that I caused, for example, an earthquake due to my noumenal choices. Let's say this time that Jennifer is a very stingy person and will not

give money to charity. That's because when Jennifer was growing up, her family was impoverished and needed to save whatever it had. Her family's impoverishment was due to an earthquake which destroyed their home. So, in deciding not to give money to charity, is Jennifer responsible for the earthquake that allowed the causal series necessary for her to make that decision? Since it involves a sensible object that has a noumenal character but no noumenal agency, it is not contradictory like the Nazi example. However, Kant still would not want us to be held responsible for destructive forces of nature. He only wants us to be responsible for our own actions.

This is a problem for Kant, but only so long as we continue to speculate about how noumena underlie phenomena. But Kant intended us to do no such speculation. After all, noumena are things which are not an object of sensible intuition. Since we have no intuition other than sensible, we cannot learn of them through intuition. We are allowed to make certain assumptions about them, but only when practical reason is at stake. We need to leave the door open to freedom in order to permit morality in any reasonable form. We do not need to know the exact mechanics of that freedom. Our difficulty comes from asking questions which should not rightly be asked. Things in themselves are unknowable; we can speak negatively of them (they are not determined in time), but we should be wary of saying anything strongly positive about them (they cause phenomenal events). Kant does assert the latter (Critique B 569), but in a mild way. We must have some idea that they have effects in the sensible world, or else the theory of freedom is useless, as mentioned previously. However, we should not even try to map out just how they accomplish these effects. That would be out of bounds; we would be going beyond the practical interest of reason.

One may rightly question the fairness of building a theory on

a cornerstone that one is not allowed to ask certain questions about. However, if one accepts the distinction between noumena and phenomena — and I am not in a position to argue for this distinction in this paper — then one should recognize the validity of what Peter Suber (in conversation) has called the “shut up!” defense. Kant is only trying to show that the ideas of free will and natural necessity are not automatically contradictory: he writes, “What we have been able to show, and what we have alone been concerned to show, is that . . . causality through freedom is at least *not incompatible with nature*” (Critique B 586). The question of whether we can be held responsible for the Holocaust does not disprove Kant’s assertion that freedom and natural necessity are noncontradictory. It poses a question that involves the working of noumena, something about which we cannot know.

Wood uses an analogy that I find very appropriate to describe what Kant is doing (Wood 83). Just as, in our court system, a man is innocent until proven guilty, free will should be assumed to exist unless it is proven otherwise. Why should we assume the existence of free will? We have a couple of good reasons. The first, as mentioned by Wood, is that morality presupposes freedom, and so maintaining the plausibility of freedom is essential for explaining how we can talk about morality in rational beings. The second, which Wood did not mention but which is equally important, is that we are always assuming that we have freedom. We always act under that presupposition. It is so integral to our thinking that if we deny it, we had better have an extremely strong argument for doing so.

As in the courtroom the burden of proof is on the prosecution, in this case, the burden of proof is on those who would deny free will. Kant needs only introduce a reasonable doubt (Wood 84). If freedom contradicted the fact of necessary causation, then we would prob-

ably be justified in denying freedom. However, although there are things left unaccounted for (and rightfully so, as they are noumenal issues), Kant shows that we are at least not being contradictory to assert the existence of both. This lack of contradiction is enough to introduce the “reasonable doubt.”

The noumenal subject as timeless agent brings with it more problems than just the question of how noumenal events determine the phenomenal. As Wood points out, since our noumenal aspect is not in time, as noumenal agents, one might say that we must make all of our decisions at once — “all in a lump.”

This leaves us floundering when we try to account for change in moral character. Our noumenal decisions are not made through time; so they must be made all at once (or so the criticism goes). Noumena are not in time, and thus are unchanging. This makes it puzzling to consider how some people start out as decent people and end up becoming immoral, or how some people are crooked but through some effort manage to better themselves. Somehow, such people must make a noumenal choice to be strangely morally inconsistent, and that is difficult to understand.

Closely related to that is the idea that it is useless for one to try to improve himself (Wood 97). All our choices are presumably made in a lump, so the idea of striving to become a better person over time seems worthless. But I believe Kant would have wanted people to try to become more moral over time. This seems like a flaw in Kant’s theory.

I believe that these two problems are based on an inaccurate premise, i.e. if choices are not made through time, then they must be made “all at once.” We cannot talk about things happening “all at once” in the noumenal world — there is no such thing as coexistence in the noumenal world. So how do we make our choices in the

noumenal world, if they are neither through time nor simultaneous? Well, that is a dangerous question, as it ventures into territory that we can't say a whole lot about. The question asks us to discuss something of which we have no conception — timelessness.

Perhaps the most damning is the idea that, since we have already made all of our noumenal choices, we are not really free anymore, having been determined already by our own noumenal choices (Wood 96). The criticism holds that if we could examine all the factors involved, we could predict with certainty that we would, e.g., tell a lie on November 2. It implies a rather disturbing fatalism. Again, my criticism of the "all at once" idea stands, because it implies some sort of phenomenal relation. It doesn't make a lot of sense to say that one has "already" made noumenal choices since "already" implies a time relation that does not exist in the noumenal world. But I have a more specific answer to this position: even if we are determined in this way, we are determined by our own choices, which is a sort of freedom — autonomy. If we determine ourselves, then it means we are not being determined by outside, or heteronomous, influences. "Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law *to itself* [emphasis mine]. . ." (Foundations 440) It's a rather counterintuitive explanation, since the idea of acting under rules — even if they are our own rules — seems to go against the conception of freedom that some people have, but it still allows for the core of morality, which is that we are responsible for our own actions. Even if it were true that at a certain point I could analyze every relevant cause and discover that at a certain point I would tell a lie, I don't think that would be grounds to reject Kant's position. I'm willing to accept that brand of autonomy. Admittedly, it would be an unpleasant and strange situation if I really did know I was going to tell a lie on Nov. 2, but fortunately we do not have the ability to take

into account everything we would need to in order to discover that outcome. So, to me, it is irrelevant whether it is theoretically possible or not.

Kant's doctrine of freedom can be difficult to deal with, particularly the idea of the noumenal, timeless agent. It is an unusual way of looking at our place in the world, but it still allows us to hold common-sense beliefs about morality, while it also takes empirical science into account. The trouble that people run into when criticizing Kant's position is due to their attempting to ask questions about noumena that should not be asked, and trying to attribute phenomenal qualities to noumena.

WORKS CITED

- 1 Bennett, Jonathan. "Commentary: Kant's Theory of Freedom. IN Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy. Ed. Allen W. Wood. Cornell University, London: 1984.
- 2 Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Pure Reason. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. St. Martin's Press, New York: 1965.
- 3 Kant, Immanuel. Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics. Trans. Lewis White Beck. Macmillan, New York: 1950.
- 4 Wood, Allen W. "Kant's Compatibilism." IN Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy. Ed. Allen W. Wood. Cornell University, London: 1984.