

Notes on Rosen Chapter 4  
Dunster House Faculty Dean Residence  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Office  
Wednesday October 4, 2023  
6:30 a.m.

To begin with, here's an outline of the sections in chapter 4.

1. Freedom without Arbitrariness (85-102)
  - 1.1. Positive Freedom (85-87)
  - 1.1. Autonomy and Arbitrariness (87-89)
  - 1.2. A Two-Stage Account of Freedom (89-92)
  - 1.3. Divine Freedom (93-95)
  - 1.4. The Metaphysics of Freedom (96-99)
  - 1.5. Hegelian Free Necessity (99-102)

### Overview

In chapter 3 we learned about an argument that Kant may have used to establish the possibility of metaphysical freedom. This is surprising, since Transcendental Idealism is committed to the idea that knowledge about the transcendental realm is beyond the limits of reason. How could a Transcendental Idealist like Kant argue that metaphysical freedom is possible? The trick was to argue not that we *know* we are metaphysically free, but that we *don't know* that we are *not* metaphysically free. In other words, it is consistent with what reason can establish for us that metaphysical freedom is a possibility. Michael reconstructs the argument in an interesting way. The trick is to take *one* of the two arguments from the Third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Recall that the antinomies are structured to offer equally plausible arguments for and against a given metaphysical claim. The existence of the two, equally plausible, arguments for contrasting positions is meant to convince us that *knowledge* about the issue is beyond the limits of reason. In this case, however, Michael claims that the argument for one of the positions should establish its metaphysical *possibility*. Because each argument is rational, each is metaphysically possible. In particular, the argument in the Third Antinomy for the possibility that an action can *initiate* a series of appearances (and therefore that a spontaneous origin of the world's processes is possible) establishes the rational *possibility* that a person could spontaneously originate an action. The possibility of a spontaneous origin for our actions, one that "follows upon" a person's character without "arising out of" it (83), means that it is at least possible that our actions are metaphysically free, since our characters can be spontaneously originated: "our actions, which follow from our characters, are not fixed in advance because those characters are not fixed once and for all" (83). In this sense, it is at least possible that we are metaphysically *responsible* for our actions, and so that God is just in rewarding us for the virtuous ones and punishing us for the vicious ones.

Still, the possibility of our metaphysical freedom is only a pre-requisite for a full account of human freedom. It is a *negative* account that shows it is possible that *fatalism* is false. We still need a *positive* account that doesn't just tell us that we *could be the origin of our actions* but gives a "richer and more fruitful" account of the "essence" of human freedom. This chapter reconstructs that positive account. The crucial move is to interpret freedom in terms of *autonomy*. An *autonomous* being is one that *gives itself* the *laws of its own action*. The question is what kind of freedom this is, and how we are to

understand it. Michael's approach is to explain the freedom of autonomy on the model of God, whose divine freedom is simultaneously independent of divine will but not in this way a limit to his freedom (86). The autonomous action is free in the very specific sense that it is *not arbitrary*. "The central claim of this chapter is that what motivates the connection between freedom and law in the Idealist conception of freedom as *autonomy* is the idea that freedom must be opposed to *arbitrariness*." (88). In developing this account, Michael depends heavily on a distinction that Kant draws in two late works – *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). In these texts Kant distinguishes between *Willkür* (which Michael interprets as "the power of choice") and *Wille* (which Michael interprets as "what it is that gives the power of choice its principle" (88)). (Those whose Kant interpretation focuses too heavily on the *Groundwork*, Michael argues, are prone to miss this important distinction (90). Is this a dig at Chris K.?) We can then tie the distinction between *Willkür* and *Wille* to the distinction between a merely negative account of freedom and a fuller, positive account. Negative freedom is the freedom that comes from *Willkür* alone, and it is "sufficient for responsibility" (91). It is grounded in the possibility that the spontaneous origin for the action "follows upon" a person's character. Still, this kind of negative freedom might seem merely arbitrary. Positive freedom by contrast – the fuller and richer conception of freedom that resists *arbitrariness* – must be grounded in a rational principle available only through *Wille*. This kind of positive freedom in turn is understandable only when we recognize the distinction between two different forms of *necessity*. The German Idealists following Kant are deeply influenced by his account of freedom as autonomy. Their conception of the necessity of the actions of the fully free, autonomous being, however, is different. Kant distinguishes between the "analytic" necessity of deductive inference and the *synthetic* necessity of the rational will. The Idealists, by contrast, find a distinctive kind of necessity not in a particular form of *reasoning*, but from "the distinctive kind of necessity that connects the free *agent* with his or her action" (97, my italics). This focus on the form of necessity that grounds the actions of a free, autonomous agent, in turn, generates an Hegelian form of free necessity that aims "to reassert the need for action and embodiment as part of freedom" (101).

#### 4.1 Positive Freedom

(85-87)

##### Summary

We have seen that the starting point for the book is the idea that Kant's project was motivated by the need to justify God's rewarding the virtuous and punishing the wicked. The first step in such a justification is to make it at least possible that we are responsible for our actions. It would be unjust for God to punish or reward actions performed by an agent if he or she were not even capable of being responsible for them. Chapter three gave the argument that such responsibility, and the freedom it requires, is at least metaphysically possible. But this is just a *negative* account of freedom: it establishes the possibility of our freedom by showing that *fatalism is not necessary*. In this chapter we introduce the *positive* account of freedom. It is based on the idea that freedom in its fuller and richer sense is properly thought of in terms of autonomy. Freedom of the will, on this account, is "the will's property of being a law to itself" (86, quoting from *Groundwork* 3). This conception of freedom as autonomy is "perhaps the most vital thread of continuity between Kant and his German Idealist successors" (86).

##### Interesting Passages Cited

1. Will is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independent of alien causes *determining* it, just as *natural necessity* is the property of the causality of all nonrational beings to be

determined to activity by alien causes. ... The preceding definition of freedom is *negative* and therefore unfruitful for insight into its essence; but there flows from it a *positive* concept of freedom, which is so much richer and more fruitful. [85, *Groundwork* §3, 4:446]

2. Natural necessity was a heteronomy of efficient causes, since every effect was possible only in accordance with the law that something else determines the efficient cause to causality: what, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will's property of being a law to itself? [86, *Groundwork* §3, 4:446-7]
3. A law that binds us a priori and unconditionally by our own reason can also be expressed as proceeding from the will of a supreme lawgiver, that is, one who has only rights and no duties (hence from the divine will); but this signifies only the Idea of a moral being whose will is a law for everyone, without his being thought as the author [*Urheber*] of the law. [86, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:227]
4. The first Idea is of course the representation of myself as an absolutely free being. [87, *The Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism*].
5. Philosophy teaches that all the qualities of *Geist* exist only through freedom; that all are but means for attaining freedom; that all seek and produce this and this alone. [87, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, *Werke* vol. 12, p. 30]

### Questions

1. How radical is the idea that the richest thread connecting Kant with German Idealism is through the account of freedom as autonomy? On the one hand, it is common to emphasize that the Idealists understood action, as opposed to reason, to be the basis of their account. We talk, on their behalf, about the "primacy of the practical" (99). And the principal feature of action, for both Kant and the Idealists, is that it aims at being free in the sense of autonomous. But on the other hand, perhaps Hartmann's idea that Hegel's project is really a philosophy of categories, or Pippin's idea that Hegel offers a 'variation on a crucial Kantian theme, the "transcendental unity of apperception"' [Pippin 1989: 6-8], are radically different approaches.
2. Are there particular views in, say Pippin or Pinkard, that you would resist if you took seriously Rosen's account of the origins of German Idealism? What are the repercussions of the view?

### Comments

I'm interested in the connection between the claims made about God's freedom and those made about human freedom. Is it right that one of the desiderata in the defense of the view of freedom as autonomy is that we couldn't make sense of God's freedom except in this way? The idea that Kant takes Plato's route in the Euthyphro question (he believes that God loves the moral law because it is good) must somehow be made to cohere with the idea that God is free. So, the move seems to be to make it the fullest expression of God's essence that he is incapable of loving anything but the good. And then to argue that this necessity is no limit on his freedom. God's autonomy – his will being a law unto itself – is special because it is his nature as a divine being fully to love what is fully good. He is a pure being in the sense that he always and only does what is the fullest expression of his essence. Is that right?

## 4.2 Autonomy and Arbitrariness

(87-89)

### Summary

Autonomy is properly understood as a form of freedom that is opposed to *arbitrariness*. You might think that freedom is opposed to constraint. The slave is normally thought to lack freedom in the sense that he or she is constrained from acting according to their own choice, desire, or impulse. But a different kind of lack of freedom comes from one's actions being haphazard or arbitrary, being capricious or random. On this account, an action can be done by means of one's own will, as the result of one's choices or desires or impulses, but still be *arbitrary* in the sense of being *capricious*. The action could fail, in other words, to express a lawlike principle. This is another way to think about the lack of freedom in a deterministic universe. Sure, if determinism is true, my actions do not follow from my choices or decisions. After all, they are determined by the laws of the universe. But those laws themselves are *arbitrary*, the result of whatever the causal conditions were at the beginning of the universe. And this, on Michael's reading of Kant, is a second way in which actions in a merely causal, deterministic universe are unfree: they ultimately follow from an origin that is arbitrary. It is the need to resist an *arbitrary* ground for our actions, on Michael's reading, that generates the Kantian account of freedom as autonomy.

### Interesting Passages Cited

1. The impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to a law that one has prescribed to oneself is freedom. [87, Rousseau *The Social Contract*, p. 56]

### Questions

1. Can we get any better sense for the threat of arbitrariness? Do cases of addiction help? There's a fascinating exhibit now at the Harvard Art Museum called [Objects of Addiction: Opium, Empire, and the Chinese Art Trade](#). Among other things, there are many depictions and descriptions there of the life of the opium addict. There is some sense in which the actions of these addicts are the result of their choices and decisions. As Harry Frankfurt would say, their actions are the result of their first-order desires. But they have no overall significance to them, they do not make any real sense in the context of a life. Perhaps Kant would say they are, in this sense, arbitrary. Frankfurt says that what is lacking is the ability for the addict to bring their first-order desires into alignment with a set of second-order desires about who they want to be. Is this account different from or the same as Kant's account that their actions are troublingly *arbitrary*?
  - a. Compare with the passage from *The Metaphysics of Morals* quoted on p. 91. It looks like it is only the negative freedom, *Willkür*, which is "independence from being *determined* by sensuous impulses." So, does the addict even have *Willkür*? Maybe we have to say, with Kant, that whatever the addicts physiological desire, their action only came about as the result of their *endorsing* that desire. So the addict did freely choose – the sensuous impulses were there to be endorsed or rejected, but they did not *cause* the action.
2. Can we spell out the two different problems with autonomy – the one from the perspective of the *nomos* and the other from the perspective of the *autos*?
  - a. Paradox of autonomy [*nomos*]: How can a law that I choose be binding for me? Can't I just un-choose my commitment to it?
    - i. Is the response to this problem that it's not a paradox for Kant since he takes Plato's side of the Euthyphro dilemma? (See 87.) As a result, even God's autonomy doesn't depend upon his *choosing* the moral law.
  - b. Problem of the *autos*: "How can a law that is binding be thought of at the same time as an expression of the freedom of the *self*?" (88).

## Comments

I really feel we have to get clearer on the two parts of the paradox of autonomy.

### 4.3 A Two-Stage Account of Freedom (89-92)

#### Summary

This section generates and aims to solve a problem for Kant's account of freedom as autonomy. The problem is almost as old as the first reception of Kant's position. Namely, if freedom consist in acting in accordance with the moral law, then I seem not to be free when I act immorally. How can I be held responsible for my bad actions, then? Michael attempts to solve this problem on Kant's behalf by means of the distinction between *Willkür* (the power of choice) and *Wille* (what it is that gives the power of choice its principle) (90). This distinction is the basis of what Michael calls Kant's "two-stage account of freedom." At the first stage, human beings are free if our actions are exercised by means of the power of choice (*Willkür*). This is a form of negative freedom – our actions are not determined by something other than us. If our actions manifest this kind of freedom, then we are responsible for them. At the second level, however – the level of genuine *spontaneity* – we are free only if "our power of choice is determined by a principle that is itself the product of the *Wille*" (91). This is the form of positive freedom that resists arbitrariness.

This solution, alas, does not work, according to Michael. That's because freedom for Kant is defined in terms of freedom from arbitrariness. So, the mere negative freedom of *Willkür* is no freedom at all. More generally, there is another, and deeper, problem underlying Kant's account, according to Michael. The account of freedom that Kant offers, according to Rosen, leaves no room for the possibility that acting freely is acting *as myself*. "If Kant has given us an account of freedom, it is not clear that it is an account of the freedom of the concrete human individual. ... This is the deep, deep dilemma at the heart of the Kantian conception of freedom: freedom must be under law if it is to be intelligible; but if so is it still *me*?" (92).

#### Interesting Passages Cited

1. Since the concept of causality brings with it that of laws in accordance with which, by something we call a cause, something else, namely an effect, must be posited, so freedom, although it is not a property of the will in accordance with natural laws, is not for that reason lawless but must instead be causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind; for otherwise a free will would be an absurdity [*ein Unding*]. [89, *Groundwork* §3, 4:446]
2. From *Wille* there arise laws; from *Willkür* maxims. [90, *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:226]
3. Freedom of *Willkür* is this independence from being *determined* by sensuous impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be itself practical. But this is not possible except by the subjection of the maxim of every action to the condition of its qualifying as universal law. [91, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:213-14]

#### Questions

1. I don't understand Michael's first criticism of the two-stage account (p. 91). It seems like it's just a terminological disagreement. Surely, there is a notion of freedom that is tied to whether I am responsible for my actions, and indeed this notion is crucial for responding to the theodical question that Michael says is at the heart of Kant's project.
  - a. Look at the argument on p. 92 about mineness.

## Comments

**4.4 Divine Freedom (93-95)**  
**Summary**

**Interesting Passages Cited**

**Questions**

**Comments**

**4.5 The Metaphysics of Freedom (96-99)**  
**Summary**

**Interesting Passages Cited**

**Questions**

**Comments**

**4.6 Hegelian Free Necessity (99-102)**  
**Summary**

**Interesting Passages Cited**

**Questions**

**Comments**

Seminar Session

Selorm: This is my favorite chapter. Descartes' 4<sup>th</sup> Meditation. The more something is dictated the freer my choice. Compare to Spinoza.

Fabio: What is the notion of responsibility? Tied to autonomy?

Marley: Do you mean there could be a way of being responsible without being autonomous?

Anne: Neuroscientists think there's no agency. Everything is determined by environment.