# Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

## Handout 12

## Freedom and morality: Kant

**Background: Categorical imperative.** In the categorical imperative we are supposed to abstract from conditions. So it must have categorical form. Kant gives several formulations of the imperative that is supposed to underlie moral maxims, rules of conduct which are endowed with moral value.

> *FUL* 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time [rationally] will it should become a universal law.'

Closely aligned with FUL is another formula:

> *FLN* 'Act *as if* the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.'

Vitally important for the later connection of morality to freedom is this formula:

> *FA* 'Act only on those maxims that cohere with the will's own universal lawgiving.'

It is important to understand that CI is not itself a maxim. Rather, the task of CI is to provide a test for the maxims we adopt in our behaviour. CI specifies a necessary condition that a morally actionable maxim should satisfy. That is: a maxim is moral, and acting on it has a moral worth, only if the maxim satisfies CI.

**The notion of will.** We say that objects, or generally material substances, have causal powers, that they are able to act on other objects in accordance with natural laws. For example, we say that water caused salt to dissolve. Water, that is, has a causal power to dissolve salt (but air does not). And it dissolves salt in accordance with natural laws.

Thus right at the beginning Kant informs us that will should be understood by analogy with causation. Just as we attribute causal powers to inanimate objects, we should attribute will to living beings—but only to those that are rational. Just as there is a kind of necessity in the causal relation—natural necessity—there is a property of will that ensures the relation between the will and the action. This property is, however, in opposition to natural necessity. It is the property that allows the will to escape the pull of alien causes, i.e. exactly the causes obeying natural necessity. Freedom is that property. And just as objects causally act in accordance with laws, so will should act in accordance with its own laws. But its own laws must be such that would not be subject to alien causes. Hence the laws of freedom must be prescribed by the will itself. In this sense, freedom is autonomous, governing itself.

We can compare this claim with the Categorical Imperatives above. Those formulae, in particular FA, similarly mention universal lawgiving whose source is the will itself. Hence, the law according to which the will acts, by analogy with laws of nature determining causal relations, should be the law of morality.

**Freedom as presupposed in action.** We have defined the notion of free will, but what is our evidence of its existence? Well, there can be no such evidence. No experience can convince us in the reality of freedom, since every experience can be interpreted as being determined by 'alien causes', i.e. as determined by desires and inclinations. Freedom can be demonstrated only a priori.

In fact, this is misleading too. The existence of free will is not part of our theoretical picture of the world. We should not say, 'There are bodies, causal relations—and also free will.' Instead, we should think of free will as a condition of our action. If we can act at all, if we attribute actions to ourselves, then this can be done only on the assumption of free will.

**Freedom and noumenal world.** There can be a threat of circularity involved in the reasoning above (as Kant himself admits). We take ourselves to be subject to moral laws because we are free, and we think of ourselves as free because we are subject to moral laws. How to break out of this circle?

Every cognition we have of objects is due to the way they affect us—or more simply, affect our sensory organs. So we cannot know how things are in themselves, independent of that way. But this form of cognition also applies in the case of our selves. We don't know what we are, what properties we have, independent of the experiences we have of ourselves. I attribute properties to myself based on my outer experiences (my actions) and my inner experiences (say, my emotions). That is, I know my empirical self. But just as I don't know empirical objects in themselves, so do I not know my self in itself. That last self belongs to the world of understanding. That pure self is not, therefore, subject to causality and laws of nature which govern the world of sense.

Thus, I have to think of myself under two perspectives—as a part of the empirical world, and as a part of the noumenal (intellectual) world. How things are in that latter world, again, I can have no cognition about. When I say that I have a certain biography, I am thinking of myself, normally and for the most part, as purely an empirical object. When I attribute to myself the capacity of moral choice, I think of myself as free and as a noumenal object. Any choice is possible so far as the agent is free. When, however, I attribute to myself actions, I simultaneously think of myself as an empirical and a noumenal object. My action presupposes my freedom, but clearly it takes places in the world of empirical objects.

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