

Jörg Noller and John Walsh (Eds.), *Kant's Early Critics on Freedom of the Will*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022

Pp. xvii + 315

ISBN 978-1-108-48246-2 (hbk) £74.99

This fascinating collection translates into English, mostly for the first time, a range of German works on freedom dating from 1786 to 1800. They illuminate Kant's early reception as well as his philosophical development during the period. The volume is also of much interest for those working on German Idealism, highlighting the importance of Reinhold for Fichte and Schelling and setting all three within a broader discussion that also includes lesser-known figures. Two central and complex topics are the role of self-consciousness in the epistemology of freedom, and the relationship between the will and pure practical reason. These are distinctively post-Kantian debates, presupposing developments such as transcendental apperception while usually departing from the letter of Kant's works.

When it comes to some basic *metaphysical* questions, however, we find many thinkers in broad agreement with Kant. The texts by Fichte, A. L. C. Heydenreich, K. H. Heydenreich, Jakob, Reinhold, and Schelling all endorse agent-causal libertarian freedom: an ability to do otherwise that is not fully determined by causes and laws. At the same time, they regard determinism among appearances as real and no "illusion," including in the crucial case of human agents insofar as they appear (p. 260; cf. A535–37/B563–65). In accepting both transcendental freedom and the empirical reality of determinism, all six can be seen as transcendental idealists in a broad sense, even if Fichte and Schelling seek to place idealism on quite different foundations from Kant's (pp. 209–10; 260). The aforementioned controversy over how will and practical reason relate also allows for varying conceptions of libertarian freedom. Reinhold, for example, maintains that even what Kant called "*reine Wille*" is radically independent from pure practical reason (CPrR 5:31; 5:55; MM 6:213; cf. pp. 98–99). This is not Kant's view, though he does seek to avoid the threat motivating Reinhold's position, namely that practical reason might itself undermine freedom by efficient-causally determining the will (pp. 242–45; cf. CPrR 5:28–29; 5:86; 5:98).

The major positive alternative to libertarianism defended here is broadly Leibnizian or Wolffian compatibilism, found in the selections from Abicht, Schmid, Schwab, Snell, and Ulrich. Forberg is unusual in arguing for *non*-Leibnizian compatibilism, but as discussed below, his position is problematic. Many of the argumentative moves appear strikingly pre-Kantian, in that they continue in the spirit of earlier rationalist objections to libertarian free will (pp. xix–xx), while doing little to dispel Kant's complaints that Leibnizian compatibilism is only "subterfuge" and "quibbling about words" (CPrR 9:96). Fichte suggests, with some justice, that his contemporaries recapitulate "what has already been said" on these topics (p. 207). Of course, old objections to libertarianism may still be sound. And even the lesser-known figures in the volume display a number of philosophical virtues. They carefully define terms and distinguish metaphysical issues from questions of epistemology and imputation.

We also find some sensitive readings of Kant, as in Schmid's taxonomy of different kinds of law (pp. 65–67).

Most of these critics—as well as Creuzer and Maimon, who withhold final judgment on the free will question—advance basically the same central objection against libertarian freedom. They begin by assuming that free will must be a causal power. Libertarian free action, they continue, must be groundless, lawless, or both. Some critics then proceed directly to the key claim that every causal power's activity requires strict determination by grounds or laws, such that libertarian freedom (as they understand it) is ruled out. This claim is taken as a conceptual truth, or as following from an indubitable principle of sufficient reason (pp. 136; 174; 219; 221; Deligiorgi 2021). The possibility of denying it, as Duns Scotus did, is not taken seriously. A variant of the argument contends that groundlessness and lawlessness independently or jointly entail *chance*, and that chancy causal powers are in turn self-contradictory or at least metaphysically impossible (pp. 11; 78; 169–71). These texts place little emphasis on the worry that chance is incompatible with agential control and hence with free will, though the problem is sometimes in the background (p. 12; Deligiorgi 2021, 36–37), and was certainly known at the time (Schierbaum 2020).

Elsewhere in the volume, defenders of libertarian freedom seek to undercut the objectors' key claim about causal powers. These responses urge, first, that the conceptual truths in question do not cover all conceivable causal powers: they may for example apply only to causal powers of appearances (p. 109). Second, the principle of sufficient reason is argued to be limited in scope (pp. 46; 188; 209). Such scope restrictions were commonplace before Kant—for one example, see Crusius (1743)—but here their justification typically rests on transcendental idealism and Kant's defense of it. For Fichte, “the true spirit of the Critical philosophy” is expressed by a restriction of the principle of sufficient reason, such that no further reason can be given for transcendently free actions (p. 209). Fichte excludes another application of the principle by denying that appearances are directly caused by transcendently free actions. Free actions are nevertheless causes in some sense, and indirectly determine appearances through the mediation of a “higher law” (which may be divine), so room is left for moral imputation (p. 210).

Both sides usually agree that if transcendental freedom were to exist, it would be theoretically “incomprehensible,” such that little is left to discuss from a theoretical perspective other than questions of logical or metaphysical possibility (p. 221). This also seems to be Kant's considered view. It is clearly expressed in a 1788 review of Ulrich's *Eleutheriology*, written by C. J. Kraus but drawing on notes sent by Kant, where freedom is repeatedly deemed a “mystery” (*Geheimnis*) (8:453–54). Creuzer complains about this situation, alleging a rational “demand” for freedom's theoretical comprehensibility (p. 169). One Kantian reply would be that such a demand is defeasible. But complications arise from Kant's own suggestions—which were highly influential even if he later retreated from them—that the pure theoretical faculties provide independent evidence for our transcendental freedom (see *Groundwork* III; Refl 18:176; 18:183; 8:14).

The libertarians in the volume sometimes try to say more about how transcendently free agents might ground their actions. Reinhold asserts in reply to Schmid, for example, that each “person” has a “capacity of self-determination as ground” (p. 110). What he seems to be saying is that even if the capacity in question is what he calls an “either/or,” it can nevertheless ground fully determinate consequences, such that free actions are not brute or ungrounded (p. 111). It is unclear how much this adds to our theoretical comprehension of freedom, however. Meanwhile, Fichte and Schelling aim to use self-activity or self-determination to ground or elucidate the moral law itself. For Fichte, self-activity “appears as the moral law,” while also “solely” determining agents’ “intelligible character” (pp. 209–10; see also Fichte 1964–, I, 2, 23). Schelling takes “the meaning of...the moral law” to consist in the mind’s “pure activity” and self-determination (p. 252). Yet it remains elusive precisely how either philosopher understands self-determination, or how it could be a source of moral content.

Atemporal agency is another prominent theme. Like some of Kant’s recent readers, Pistorius takes “a beginning,” and therefore temporality, to be contained in the concept of free action (p. 6). Agency without time, he concludes, is a nonstarter. At the opposite extreme, Forberg thinks atemporal agency on its own can solve key puzzles about freedom. His position combines an undemanding compatibilism with a kind of transcendental idealism. Atemporality is not just a necessary condition for freedom, but sufficient to dispel all general barriers to it, because a lack of control over the past is the “sole obstacle” to an agent’s freedom (p. 183). Forberg’s atemporal agents are therefore free even if they turn out to be determined by external causes. For at least in principle, these agents have the power to “prevent” foreign factors from exerting an influence, whereas changing the past is not in their power (p. 183).

At this point Leibnizian compatibilists, who require finite free agents to be independent of non-divine external causes, could raise an obvious objection. External grounds, even if they are not in the past, can still undermine my freedom in ways I am unable to prevent. If an evil demon manipulates all my actions, I am not free, whether or not these actions occur in time, and even if it is logically possible for me to prevent this interference. Kant, for his part, thinks that to conclusively dispel possible defeaters of freedom that do not stem from spatiotemporal nature—notably, theological determinism—one would need to go far beyond the basics of transcendental idealism (CPrR 5:100–3; Rel 6:142; MPT 8:264). Oddly enough, the Leibnizians in the volume are not always clear on this point, as when Ulrich seems to concede that if one *merely* grants the existence of atemporal agents to Kantians, then their account of freedom becomes “irrefutable” as well (p. 13).

The compatibilist critics also tend to confidently set forth their own definitions of ‘freedom’ and related terms, with little regard to alternatives. For example, Ulrich lays out three “meanings” of ‘freedom’ and, without giving an argument, presents these definitions as jointly complete (pp. 22–23). But incompatibilists would surely deny that they give sufficient conditions for freedom. Abicht does at least acknowledge the “common” libertarian sense of ‘freedom,’ but quickly asserts that “we must...find a better meaning” for the term, one

friendly to compatibilists (p. 136). Snell, for his part, offers a psychological and subjective gloss on traditionally libertarian language: if agents are unaware of any constraint, then they “could have acted otherwise” (p. 39). And whereas A. L. C. Heydenreich and Creuzer follow Kant in connecting libertarian freedom to what is under our “control” (*Gewalt*) (pp. 44; 176; CPrR 5:94), some of the compatibilists define agential control as mere independence from *external* finite causes, such that control and determinism can coexist (pp. 17; 86). As Maimon notes, such moves seem to only change the topic (p. 213).

Noller and Walsh provide not only clear and reliable translations but an extensive critical apparatus, including a chronology, glossary, and brief biographies. In a substantive introduction, the editors lay out helpful distinctions among meanings of ‘freedom,’ survey the secondary literature, and provide historical context. Given that the translations are said to be based “in general” on original texts or facsimiles, one small complaint is that there is little discussion of different editions and divergences between them (p. x). The Schelling essay appearing here was published twice in 1797, for example, and the editors translate the second edition without further comment. Also unfortunately absent, for the most part, are references to standard editions of Fichte, Reinhold, and Schelling (critical editions of Reinhold are mentioned only as part of the secondary literature). But these minor issues don’t detract from the importance of this volume, which provides Anglophone readers valuable resources from an era of startling innovation in practical philosophy.

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