

**Phil 104, Friday, October 29, 2010**  
**Kant, *Groundwork*, III**

If there is a categorical imperative, then it is the supreme principle of morality, which can be formulated in several ways: such as the formula of universal law and the formula of humanity.

But what shows that the categorical imperative is “no phantom” (445)? What shows that the categorical imperative is valid, that it actually applies to us?

The categorical imperative is a synthetic (=not analytic) a priori (=not empirical) proposition.

- Because it is synthetic, it cannot be validated by definition.
- Because a priori, it cannot be validated by experience.
- So how can it be validated?

*Theoretical standpoint:* When we *explain* past choices, or try to *predict* our future ones, we view acts of choice as like any other event, as having causes.

*Practical standpoint:* When we *reason or deliberate* about what to choose, however, we cannot at the same time view our act of choice as caused like any other event. We must act under the “idea of freedom,” viewing our will, or practical reason, as free, in the negative sense of “uncaused.”

Why?

1. We can’t be passive: we can’t wait and see what happens. We have to be active: we have to make up our minds.
2. We have to view ourselves as able to follow the reasons where they lead, no matter what desires and other causal influences we’re subject to. “Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences.”

Although, *when we deliberate*, we cannot view our will as subject to a causal law as the *effect of something else* (and therefore “heteronomous,” “hetero”=other, “nomos”=law), we must view our will as subject to *some* law.

Why?

1. The will is itself “a kind of causality,” which must operate according to laws.
2. Otherwise, our choices would be random, arbitrary, or accidental, which would make the free will “an absurdity.” (This was part of Hume’s worry: that unless our choices conformed to a causal law, they would be accidental. Kant is suggesting, in effect, that Hume overlooked a possibility: that our choices might conform to a law of another kind.)

Therefore, *when we deliberate*, we must view our will as subject only to a *law that the will gives itself*. Our will must be free, in the *positive* sense of “autonomous” (“auto”=self, “nomos”=law).

When does the will give itself a law?

Not when the will chooses maxims on the basis of inclination. The will would then be determined by something outside the will: the inclinations that present themselves.

Instead, when the will follows the supreme principle of morality: when it chooses only those maxims that it can will as laws.

Therefore, *when we deliberate*, we must view our will as subject to the supreme principle of morality.

A paradox:

We *must* view our will as *free* and *subject* to morality.

But how *can* we view our will as *freely complying* with morality?

- No matter how much we look, all we see are choices produced by desires.
- How could we? After all, choices are events in natural world, like any others.
- This, I conjecture, is what Kant means when he writes that we cannot find the “interest attaching to the ideas of morality” (448, see 460).

How do we resolve the paradox?

One resource, however, still remains to us, namely to inquire whether we do not take a different standpoint when by means of freedom we think ourselves as causes efficient *a priori* than when we represent ourselves in terms of our actions as effects that we see before our eyes (450).

“Third Antinomy” from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:

When theoretical reason applies the *a priori* concept of cause, it lands itself in contradiction:

- A. Every event has a cause. Given any event, we can ask: Why did this happen?
- B. Some event is an uncaused cause. Otherwise, given any event, there could never be an adequate answer to the question: Why did this happen?

How do we resolve the antinomy? By recognizing that we apply the concept of cause to things regarded in two different ways:

When we regard things as *phenomena* (roughly, “appearances”), we regard them

- (i) only as they might appear to us, as they are presented to our senses (e.g., sight, taste),
- (ii) as objects of possible knowledge.

When we regard things as *noumena* (roughly, “things thought”) we regard them

- (i) as they are in themselves, not as they presented to our senses,
- (ii) only as objects of thought, never as objects of possible knowledge. We cannot have knowledge about things as noumena, since they are not presented to our senses as noumena.

- We know that, as *phenomenon*, every event has a cause.
- But we do *not* know that, as *noumenon*, every event has a cause. Again, we cannot have any knowledge of things as noumena.

When we take up the *theoretical* standpoint, and ask after the fact, “Why did I do that?” we view ourselves as *phenomena*, and so as governed by causal laws. We will never appear to ourselves as acting freely.

But when we take up the *practical* standpoint, and deliberate about what to do, we view ourselves as noumena and as free.

Since *theoretical* reason does *not know* that, as noumena, we are not free, theoretical reason cannot prevent us from *thinking* of ourselves, as noumena, as free, so long as we do not go beyond this and pretend to *know* that we are free.

But all that *practical* reason needs is to be able to *think* of itself as free. Practical reason is not concerned with knowledge, but instead with *action*. To validate the categorical imperative we only need to show that, *when we are deciding what to do*, we must see ourselves as subject to it. Since the only role of the categorical imperative is to guide us when we deciding what to do, it doesn’t make sense to ask for anything more.

every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is just because of that really free in a practical respect, that is, all laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for him just as if his will had been validly pronounced free also in itself and in theoretical philosophy (448, see also the footnote).

### Review Questions:

1. “If our choices are not caused by our desires, then our choices are random.” How would Kant respond?
2. “A choice is an event. All events are caused by prior events. So every choice is caused by prior events. So no choice is free.” What is the status of these claims, according to Kant, from the theoretical standpoint, from which we view ourselves as phenomena? What is the status of these claims, according to Kant, from the practical standpoint, from which we view ourselves as noumena? Explain your answers.