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# Kant on Freedom of Empirical Thought

MARKUS KOHL*

**ABSTRACT** It is standardly assumed that, in Kant, "free agency" is identical to moral agency and requires the will or practical reason. Likewise, it is often held that the concept of "spontaneity" that Kant uses in his theoretical philosophy is very different from, and much thinner than, his idea of practical spontaneity. In this paper I argue for the contrary view: Kant has a rich theory of doxastic free agency, and the spontaneity in empirical thought (which culminates in judgments of experience) is essentially the same sort of spontaneity found in the practical use of reason. Accordingly, the faculties of understanding and practical reason both possess genuine autonomy.

**KEYWORDS** Kant's philosophy of mind, freedom of thought, spontaneity of understanding, autonomy, judgments of experience, doxastic voluntarism, epistemic imputability

## INTRODUCTION

It is uncontroversial that on Kant's view, human beings have freedom of will and thus qualify as moral agents who are responsible for actions such as telling the truth or committing a theft (A554–55/B582–83; AA 5:96–100). Many commentators suggest that for Kant the sphere of free agency coincides with the sphere of moral agency and strictly requires the exercise of the will. This would mean that Kant does not apply the idea of freedom to acts of empirical thought that lead to the formation of judgments of experience and of corresponding mental states of belief or assent.[1] In this vein, it is often suggested that Kant's notion of theoretical spontaneity is much thinner than his idea of practical spontaneity, or that acts of empirical judgment cannot be imputed to thinkers because such acts are necessitated by the passive reception of perceptual evidence. Consider the following remarks by various commentators:

[1]Kant's label for the kind of doxastic attitude that one forms when one makes a judgment is '*Fürwahrhalten*,' often translated as 'assent' or 'belief'; see A820/B848.

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> [T]he most reasonable interpretation [of A546–47/B574–75] is that we might be rational beings, fully capable of conceptual thought and yet lacking in genuine agency or will (practical reason). . . . We would, if this possibility were realized, be rational *beings* but not rational *agents*; our sense of agency would be illusory. (Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 63)

> [T]he necessity of acting under the idea of freedom is affirmed [by Kant] not of rational beings überhaupt but only of beings who possess both reason and will. . . . [For Kant] will . . . amounts to the same thing [as] rational agency. (Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 218)

> Kant . . . sides with Hume over Descartes on the issue of . . . doxastic voluntarism . . . sufficient objective grounds typically not only license but also necessitate firm assent. . . . once we acquire sufficient objective grounds for *p*, we typically just find our assent to *p* following along. (Chignell, "Belief in Kant," 327)

> [T]he freedom required by morality should not be confused with the 'spontaneity' characterizing the understanding. (Friedman, "Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's 'Mind and World,'" 438)

> [Perceptions] . . . necessitate . . . the perceiver's assertoric belief in a corresponding propositional content. (Hanna, "Kant and Nonconceptual Content," 264)

> The I that thinks will be phenomenal and causally determined. (Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, 140)

> Kant is leaving open the possibility that the being which thinks might be something 'which is not capable of imputation'. It might, in other words, be an *automaton spirituale* or *cogitans*, a thinking mechanism. (Sellars, " . . . this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks . . . ," 25)

To be sure, the commentators cited here disagree with each other about various issues.[2] But I think that it is fair to read all of them as suggesting that for Kant our beliefs about nature cannot be considered genuinely free, and that empirical thought falls short of real agency.[3]

However, Kant often says things that suggest a rather different view. Consider first the following passage:

> In lifeless or merely animal nature, we find no reason for thinking that any faculty is conditioned otherwise than in a merely sensible manner. Only man . . . cognizes himself also through pure apperception: and this, indeed, in actions . . . which he cannot ascribe to impressions of the senses. He is thus to himself, on the one hand

[2]For instance, Kitcher thinks that the subject of thought in Kant is the empirical or phenomenal self, whereas Sellars holds that Kant envisages the idea of a noumenal "thinking mechanism." Allison seems to accept Sellars's reading in *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 63, but elsewhere (in *Idealism and Freedom*, ch. 4 and esp. in "Kant on Freedom of the Will," 389) he seems to accept that for Kant the understanding has a kind of freedom that is relevantly similar to freedom of will. A further point worth noting here is that Hanna ("Kant on Nonconceptual Content") accepts whereas Chignell ("Belief in Kant") denies that erroneous empirical judgments are necessitated by perceptual input.

[3]This view is also endorsed by functionalist interpretations of Kant's philosophy of mind; see Brook, *Kant and the Mind*, and Meerbote, "Kant's Functionalism." Commentators who dissent from this view include Ameriks (*Kant's Theory of Mind*) and Pippin ("Kant and the Spontaneity of Mind").

> phenomenon, and on the other hand, in respect of certain faculties the action of which cannot be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility, a purely intelligible object. We entitle these faculties understanding and reason. (A546/B574)

Here Kant suggests that our self-awareness as a noumenon ("a purely intelligible object") whose powers are unconditioned by sensible (i.e. empirical) conditions is bound up with the actions we perform when we exercise our theoretical faculties, such as the understanding. This suggests that he is not operating with a thin notion of theoretical spontaneity; the idea that we can act in a sensibly unconditioned manner is also central to Kant's thick conception of the spontaneity of will (A534/B562; A548/B576). Admittedly, Kant does not use the concept of freedom in this passage. But elsewhere he does characterize acts of understanding as free:

> To be able to abstract from a representation, even when it forces itself upon a human being through sense, is a much greater ability than the ability to attend: because it proves a freedom of the capacity for thought and the power of the mind to control the state of its representations. (AA 7:131)

> If an appearance is given to us, we are still completely free as to how we want to judge things from it. The . . . appearance was based on the senses, but the judgment on the understanding. (AA 4:290)

Kant's insistence that the understanding is "completely free" in its empirical judgments seems hard to square with the notion that for Kant genuine freedom is exhibited only by moral agents. Moreover, Kant explicitly states that thinkers must presuppose their freedom of thought "in the same way" as moral agents must presuppose their freedom of will. To the fatalist Schulz, who denied our freedom of will, Kant attributes the following "presupposition":

> That the understanding has the capacity to determine its judgment according to objective reasons that are valid at any time, and does not stand under the mechanism of merely subjectively determining causes. . . . He always assumed freedom of thought, without which there would be no reason. In the same way, he must presuppose freedom of will in acting. (AA 8:14)

The passages I have quoted jointly suggest that for Kant, we must think about the empirical world "under the idea of freedom" (of thought or judgment). But clearly, this suggestion raises major interpretive and philosophical issues. Chiefly among those issues is perhaps the worry that the above passages commit Kant to doxastic voluntarism—that is, to the implausible, maybe even incoherent view that we can choose what to believe. How else should we understand the notion that we are "completely free" with regard to our empirical judgments?

In what follows, I aim to show that Kant has a coherent and interesting notion of freedom of empirical thought that is consistent with the rejection of doxastic voluntarism. I shall argue that a thinker who makes judgments about the empirical world, far from being a mere "thinking mechanism," exhibits many features that are also central to Kant's conception of the freedom involved in moral agency, including the feature of autonomy.

## 1. ERROR AND IMPUTABILITY

I want to begin by examining Kant's conception of error and imputability in empirical thought. Kant famously designates the understanding as the capacity to judge (A69/B94); he repeatedly says that the exercise of this capacity depends on the way in which the "objective and subjective grounds" of judgment are combined by thinkers.[4] This idea is crucial to Kant's conception of empirical error. Consider first the following central passage:

> For truth or illusion is not in the object, in so far as it is intuited, but in the judgment about it, in so far as it is thought. It is therefore correct to say that the senses do not err—not because they always judge rightly but because they do not judge at all. Truth and error, therefore, and consequently also illusion as leading to error, are only to be found in the judgment. . . . [I]n a representation of the senses—as containing no judgment whatsoever—there is . . . no error. . . . [T]he [understanding] would not [of itself fall into error], since, if it acts only according to its own laws, the effect (the judgment) must necessarily be in conformity with those laws. . . . Now since we have no sources of knowledge besides [understanding and sensibility], it follows that error is brought about solely by the unobserved influence of sensibility on the understanding, through which it happens that the subjective grounds of the judgment enter into union with the objective grounds and make these latter deviate from their true function. (A294–95/B350–51)

This passage shows that Kant equates an empirical judgment's "objective grounds" with the laws and concepts of the understanding and its "subjective grounds" with impressions of the senses. To understand this equation, we need to remind ourselves of some general tenets of Kant's epistemology. For Kant, the impressions that we receive through the senses do not of themselves represent objects (B130–31, 137–38, 219, 233–34; AA 4:290). Having a sensible intuition or even a perception is, in itself, "subjective" because it is just a private episode in a person's mind that cannot, as such, be shared with other perceivers (B139–40, 142).[5] In order for a given perception to yield empirical cognition, it must be brought under concepts of two types: first, under pure concepts (categories) that enable the representation of something distinct from private mental states, i.e. of a public empirical object in general (A105, 111–12; B165; A93/B126); second, under empirical concepts that determine the specific character of this object. So,

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[4]I shall mostly ignore Kant's most prominent discussion of the notions of the objective and subjective grounds at A820–31/B848–58. This is because Kant here applies these notions indiscriminately to all kinds of judgments; this creates problems whose discussion would distract from the focus of my paper, which is on judgments of experience (see n. 5 below). For helpful discussion, see Chignell, "Belief in Kant."

[5]For Kant, perceptions as such are not fully conceptualized because they do not fall under the dynamical categories (such as causality) and hence do not represent an intersubjective object of experience (B219; AA 4:297–98). Notice that I am here only concerned with Kant's conception of the epistemic spontaneity involved in the formation of "judgments of experience." I cannot discuss the status of "judgments of perception," and I cannot discuss the kinds of spontaneous syntheses that epistemically precede judgments of experience (see n. 18 below). For a seminal discussion of those syntheses and the crucial idea that they are geared toward judgments of experience (the fundamental goal of the understanding), see Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*.

the contrast here is between subjective sensible data and the conceptual rules for combining such data in a manner that enables objective empirical thought.[6]

Now, Kant says that in a case of error, the subjective grounds of an empirical judgment "enter into union" with its objective grounds. This is puzzling: sensibility and concepts *must* "enter into union" for there to be empirical cognition, because intuitions and concepts are individually necessary and (only) jointly sufficient for the recognition of empirical objects (A51–52/B75–76; A92–93/B125). Kant explains that when sensibility is "subordinated" to (the rules of) the understanding, "it is the source of real modes of knowledge" (A295/B351). It becomes a source of error only when "it influences the operation of the understanding, and determines it to make judgments." This phrase is ambiguous: does Kant mean only that the senses "influence" an erroneous judgment (by providing the understanding with an occasion for error, i.e. with merely subjective perceptual data that the understanding misapprehends), or does he want to make the stronger point that the senses causally determine the understanding to err? I think that it must be the weaker point: Kant's claim that the senses do not err (A295/B351; AA 9:53) rules out the idea that the senses are causally responsible for error. This is confirmed by Kant's remark that error "is not ascribed to the senses, but to the understanding, whose lot alone it is to render an objective judgment from the appearance" (AA 4:291). This remark entails that empirical errors are imputable to the understanding,[7] or rather to us as free thinkers: "we are . . . completely free as to how we want to judge things" (AA 4:290). The understanding is a capacity for self-conscious thought that allows a thinker to become aware of thoughts *as hers*. Thanks to this capacity, we have the status and dignity of *persons* who are elevated "infinitely" over non-rational animals (AA 7:127). For Kant, having personality is a necessary and sufficient condition for imputability (AA 6: 223).[8]

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[6]My interpretation here is not uncontroversial. Paul Abela (*Kant's Empirical Realism*) argues that the rejection of the idea that there are subjective sensible data ("the given") is the essential point of Kant's critical philosophy. This raises many issues that I cannot discuss here. But I would insist that Abela owes us an account of what Kant means when he invokes merely subjective grounds of judgment and when he appeals to a form of merely empirical awareness that cannot, due to insufficient conceptualization, be shared with other thinkers (see AA 4:298–99; B139–40).

[7]"Is not ascribed to the senses" reads '*kommt nicht auf Rechnung der Sinne*' in the German; the German word for imputability is '*Zurechnung*.'

[8]Sellars's view (in ". . . this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks . . . .") that the understanding is *incapable* of imputation results from his synthesis of two passages: first, one (A346/B404) where Kant refers to the "I or he or it (the thing) which thinks"; and second, one (AA 6:223) where Kant defines '*Sache*' as a "thing that is not capable of imputation." But, in view of passages such as AA 7:127, it is implausible to assume that Kant's (polemical) use of the term '*Ding*' in the Dialectic corresponds to the narrow definition of '*Sache*' that he puts forward in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Sellars's reading is motivated by the worry that if Kant held that we are responsible thinking persons, this would conflict with his rejection of the rationalist conception of the thinking ego or with his doctrine of noumenal ignorance; see Pippin, "Kant and the Spontaneity of Mind," and Walker, *Kant*, 131–35 for similar worries. But, arguably, Kant disagrees more with the methods than with the spirit of the conclusions of rationalistic metaphysics; for a seminal defense of this view, see Ameriks, *Kant's Theory of Mind*. For Kant, what entitles us to a notion of moral personhood that suffices for ascriptions of moral responsibility is our awareness of our capacity to comply with objective laws of volition (AA 5:37, 98–99); by analogy, he can appeal to our awareness of our capacity to comply with objective laws of thought (AA 8:14) to defend the idea that empirical judgments are epistemically imputable. This is a different basis for

against Sellars's textual "evidence"

But how does Kant conceive of cases where the influence of perception leads a thinker to form an erroneous judgment that is imputable to her as a person? Kant says that empirical error arises when a judgment has its ground only "in the special character of the subject" rather than "the character of the object" (A820/B848). This terminology refers us to Kant's discussion of merely subjective sensations such as taste: "The taste of a wine does not belong to the objective determinations of the wine . . . but to the special character of sense in the subject that tastes it" (A28). I suggest that Kant's picture here is as follows. Suppose I recognize an object as wine: I conceptualize it in terms of the valid empirical concept of (say) an alcoholic liquid that is made from grapes. Drinking the wine, I have an impression of sourness; my senses present the wine as sour to me. So far there is no error, because I have not yet assented to this impression. The error occurs when I judge that sourness is a quality that inheres in the wine, that is, when I carelessly mingle some private element of my sensible apparatus with a valid empirical concept. Kant has another example illustrating this point:

> [I]t is not the fault of the appearances at all, if our cognition takes illusion for truth, that is, if intuition, through which an object is given to us, is taken for the concept of the object . . . which only the understanding can think. The course of the planets is represented to us by the senses as now progressive, now retrogressive, and herein is neither falsehood nor truth, because as long as one grants that this is as yet only appearance, one still does not judge at all the objective quality of their motion. Since, however, if the understanding has not taken good care to prevent this subjective mode of representation from being taken for objective, a false judgment can easily arise. (AA 4:290–91)

The perceptual appearance of backward or forward motion depends on contingent facts about us (say, on our position in the solar system); it does not reflect objective qualities of empirical objects. But, again, these perceptions themselves do not say what objectively is the case. They lead to error only insofar as the thinker carelessly takes the content of these private perceptual data to present an objective quality that she ascribes to public empirical objects (the planets).[9] This is the sense in which the false judgment is influenced, but not determined, by the perceptual illusion.

For Kant empirical error also involves the faculty of imagination. The empirical, reproductive imagination is a source of contingent habitual patterns of associating representations (A100; B140), and empirical error may occur when "the faculty of judgment is misled by the influence of [the empirical] imagination" (A295/

defending imputability than the rationalistic ideas that (1) we have an inner intuition of ourselves as a *res cogitans* or (2) that we can deduce our personhood through conceptual analysis. Moreover, Kant's position is consistent with denying that our self-awareness as rational thinkers gives us knowledge of our metaphysical constitution. For instance, we cannot characterize this thinker as an entity through predicates such as "simplicity" (see A351–61); and we cannot know whether the transcendental subject that corresponds to bodily appearances is identical to the transcendental subject that corresponds to mental appearances (see A379–89; Ameriks, *Kant's Theory of Mind*, 34).

[9]Note that what Kant says at AA 4:290–91 commits him only to the view that empirical error typically results from carelessness. This leaves open the possibility that there may be cases where a thinker makes an erroneous judgment despite her careful examination of the case; here the judgment would still be imputable to her, but she would not be epistemically blameworthy. However, Kant often seems to suggest that *all* error can be avoided if we exercise sufficient care and attend to the limits of our knowledge (AA 9:54; AA 8:136). See n. 53 below for some further discussion.

B352). Again, that we may be misled by our imagination does not imply that the imagination is responsible for our cognitive mistakes. For example, as a result of socio-cultural conditioning, I might find myself connecting the thought of lemmings with the thought of suicidal tendencies. I have no control over this associative pattern. But the error occurs only when I take this pattern to indicate an objective quality and judge that lemmings as a matter of fact exhibit suicidal tendencies: this judgment is not a mere causal upshot of psychological customs beyond my control. While Kant agrees with Hume that our minds are led to associate representations by subjective empirical habits (B139–40), he does not accept that those habits determine us (considered as spontaneous thinkers) to make judgments of experience (B142).

To sum up the argument of this section: for Kant, empirical judgments and assents are "effects" (A294–95/B350–51) that result from imputable actions of thinkers. These actions and their effects are imputable because thinkers have freedom of empirical thought that consists, negatively speaking, in the absence of the determination of acts of thought by sensible (i.e. empirical) causes (such as perceptions and psychological habits).[10] Now, this might provoke a worry. The formation of a judgment and of an assent seems to be an alteration of a thinker's mental state; and does Kant not think that all alterations fall under the principle of the Second Analogy and hence must be attributed to a determining empirical cause?

objection: alteration of state and empirical causal determination

The least controversial response here is that Kant's appeal to the freedom of empirical judgment draws on the same basic idea as his appeal to the freedom of morally imputable actions (such as a theft): namely, the idea that our actions can be attributed *both* to a determining natural cause *and* to a free cause that stands outside the deterministic order (A540–41/B568–69; AA 5:95–100).[11] This idea relies on Kant's idealism, in particular on his distinctions between (i) appearances and things in themselves and (ii) empirically conditioned and empirically unconditioned capacities (only the empirical powers we ascribe to appearances are determined by empirical causes; see A180–81/B223–24).[12] Obviously, this is only a rough sketch of how Kant can consider acts of thought as free and empirically undetermined, which calls for further analysis;[13] and there are also different

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[10]The introduction of a "negative" concept of freedom (qua absence of necessitation by sensuous causes) is also the starting point of Kant's discussion of free will; see A534–35/B562–63.

[11]We attribute actions to a determining natural cause insofar as we adopt an observational or explanatory perspective on human beings (that considers them as empirical phenomena); we attribute actions to a free cause insofar as we adopt a normative perspective on human beings (that considers them as spontaneous noumena); see AA 4: 451–52. (For detailed discussion, see Kohl, "Kant on Freedom, Idealism, and Standpoints.") Kant also applies this distinction to the exercise of our cognitive powers, i.e. to acts of judgment: "Aesthetic judgments of reflection . . . do not state that everyone judges in this manner—if they did, they would be a task for the explanations of empirical psychology—but rather that one ought to judge in this manner" (AA 20:239; cf. AA 5:182 and A53–55/B77–79).

[12]For Kant's view that the understanding can (indeed, must) be considered an empirically unconditioned faculty whose exercise allows us to regard ourselves as a noumenon, see A546/B574 (as quoted earlier). I discuss this point in more detail in §4 below.

[13]One major issue here is whether Kant's appeal to empirically undetermined activity is to be understood metaphysically (Wood, "Kant's Compatibilism") or as a mere conceptual point (Allison, *Idealism and Freedom*). I address this issue in Kohl, "Kant on Freedom, Idealism and Standpoints."

(maybe more controversial) ways of interpreting Kant's position.[14] But I cannot further pursue this important issue here.

## 2. FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AS REFLECTIVE CONTROL

I now want to pursue the question of whether Kant's idea of freedom of empirical thought can be understood in an informative, "positive" way that goes beyond the "negative" idea that empirical judgments are not determined by sensible causes. Here we must take into account the worry that we cannot give any substance to the notion of freedom of belief (or assent) because belief, unlike choice, by its nature cannot be a state whose formation is up to us in any deeper sense. The intuition lying behind this worry is powerfully expressed by David Wiggins:

> It is up to me to make up my mind. But how far is this from the platitude that if it is my mind then only I *can* make it up, or the truistic interpretation of 'you must believe what you think true'? It does not seem to follow . . . that it is up to me *what* to think true. And it cannot be up to me if belief is to retain its connection with the world. And this connection must, from the nature of belief and its onus to match the world, be subjection. If belief does not retain this connection and subjection it could not be belief. For . . . reality is most of it precisely what is *independent* of me and my will. . . . From which it would seem to follow that if my beliefs are to relate to the world at all, I simply have to lay myself open to the world in order to let the phenomena put their print upon me. . . . If my state is one which seals itself off from the outside, this surely enfeebles its claim to be a state *of belief*. For there is subtracted everything which distinguishes belief from fantasy. (Wiggins, "Freedom, Knowledge, Belief, Causality," 143)

This passage suggests the following argument: (1) Belief, by its nature, is a state that aims at truth, that is, at matching a reality that is independent of my will. (2) Hence, if my attitudes were under the immediate control of my choices that express how I want reality to be, they would be "fantasies" rather than beliefs. (3) Thus, my beliefs have to be independent of my will. (4) Thus, my beliefs cannot be "up to me" in any non-trivial sense: their formation is wholly passive.

The inference from (3) to (4) rests on the idea that free agency as such must directly involve the will. We can witness this idea in Bernard Williams's claim that the fact that "it is not the case that belief is connected with any decision to believe" implies "the picture offered by Hume of belief as a passive phenomenon, something that happens to us."[15] Likewise, Andrew Chignell argues that since Kant rejects doxastic voluntarism, he must "side with Hume" and hold that our assents are passive states that we "find following along" the acquisition of evidence.[16]

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[14] A more controversial reading would deny that acts of empirical thought can be attributed to empirical causes. This reading might be based on two different motivations. First, one might argue that since on Kant's view a thinker's mental activity is the very source of the temporal, deterministic order of nature, this activity cannot (on pain of circularity) itself be understood in temporal, deterministic terms. (This problem is discussed by Robert Paul Wolff, *Kant's Theory of Mental Activity*, 115–17; for an attempt to solve it, see Kitcher, "Kant's Epistemological Problem and its Coherent Solution.") Second, one might claim that the argument of the Second Analogy only applies to physical alterations; see Melnick, *Kant's Analogies of Experience*, and Westphal, *Kant's Transcendental Proof of Realism*.

[15] Williams, *Problems of the Self*, 147–48.

[16] Chignell, "Belief in Kant," 127; cf. Chignell, "Kant's Concepts of Justification," 36, and Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 169.

Now, I agree that Kant rejects doxastic voluntarism. His argument here seems to be remarkably similar to Wiggins's line of thought:

> The will does not have any influence immediately on assent; this would be quite absurd. . . . If the will had an immediate influence on our conviction concerning what we wish, we would constantly form for ourselves chimeras of a happy condition, and always hold them to be true, too. But the will cannot struggle against convincing proofs of truths that are contrary to its wishes and inclinations. (AA 9:73–74)

Like Wiggins's argument, Kant's line of thought here can be reconstructed in terms of (1)–(3), with "wish" corresponding to "fantasy" and "assent" to "belief."[17] But Kant does not move from (3) to (4): he does not infer from the fact that beliefs are not under the immediate control of the will to the claim that beliefs must be considered passive states. As we already saw, he accepts that our judgments and assents result from our free, imputable actions. Hence, he must accept a non-volitional sense in which we are free and active in our assents to empirical propositions.

I suggest that (part of) Kant's point here is that how we judge the empirical world depends on our conception of how we ought to judge: our beliefs about the world are governed by, or subjected to, our representation of what our evidence is. It is by virtue of my endorsement of some perceptual datum as a sufficient reason for a belief that *p* that I bring it about that I believe that *p*; it is by virtue of my doubt about whether a perceptual datum supports the belief that *p* that I bring about a suspension of judgment; and it is by virtue of my verdict that a given perception which represents *p* as being the case is illusory that I bring about a belief that not-*p*. Thus, thinkers exercise a form of agency over assent-formation by virtue of controlling their epistemic states through reflection on their evidence. This form of agency may be called "reflective control."[18] To clarify the implications of this idea, I want to consider how Kant would respond to a range of objections that can be raised against it.

Here we can begin with a worry that David Owens raises against the Kantian model. Owens argues that there is simply no need or place for reflective control: "[I]f anything is in control of the belief-forming process . . . it looks to be the . . . experiences that motivate belief rather than the subject who enjoys these . . . experiences," and so judgments about what we ought to believe look like "an idle wheel in our motivational economy."[19] To see how Kant might respond to

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[17] One might object that at AA 4:290 (as quoted earlier), Kant does commit himself to voluntarism since he says that we are "completely free as to how we *want* to judge things" (emphasis mine). But (in view of what he says at AA 9:73–74) I think that Kant is here only loosely expressing that the judgment is not forced upon us: he adds that the judgment is based "on the understanding" and does not mention the will (the source of representations of how we *want* things to be) at all.

[18] The label 'reflective control' is borrowed from Pamela Hieronymi ("Two Kinds of Agency"). The reflective act of making a conceptually determinate judgment of experience must be distinguished from the more basic type of self-consciousness involved in what Kant calls the original synthesis of intuitions; see B133. (Pippin's otherwise helpful discussion of epistemic spontaneity in "Kant and the Spontaneity of Mind" passes over this distinction.) This synthesis prepares intuitions for eventual subsumption under empirical concepts (B143) and is thus a cognitive precondition for conceptually determinate judgments of experience: it "precedes a priori all my determinate thought" (B134).

[19] Owens, *Reason Without Freedom*, 3, 18.

this worry, consider the following example: suppose I hear an animal sound that I immediately associate with the idea of warning cries uttered by jaybirds. Now, the conjunction of (i) my perception of the sound and (ii) my association of this sound with the concept of jaybirds does not automatically induce the belief *that there is a jaybird nearby*. Suppose, for instance, that I doubt the evidential force of my perception: I have qualms about my ability to correctly interpret animal sounds, and thus I accept that the fact that I associate a sound with jaybirds is not a good reason to believe that the sound really comes from a jaybird. On this basis, I suspend judgment about what caused my perception. This suggests that *if* I adopt the belief that there is a jaybird nearby, this depends on the fact that I (however implicitly) take myself to have evidential grounds that entitle me to this assertion. For Kant, the crucial point here is that what distinguishes a judgment that lays claim to objective, intersubjective validity (i.e. that states what is the case in a public world shared with other thinkers: see B141–42) from a merely subjective, private association of perceptions is precisely that a thinker who puts forward a judgment of experience (and who holds an empirical proposition to be true) takes herself to possess valid reasons that entitle her to demand assent from others:[20]

reflection as taking of possession of evidential grounds

> If I want it to be called a judgment of experience, I then require that this connection [of sensations] be subject to a condition that makes it universally valid . . . [and] that I, at every time, and also everyone else, would necessarily have to conjoin the same perceptions under the same circumstances. (AA 4:299)

But this immediately leads into a second objection to the idea that we exercise freedom qua reflective control over our beliefs. Kant's picture might seem to imply that we cannot form a belief without going through actual episodes of reflection by means of which we form for ourselves a conception of what beliefs are required or prohibited by our evidential situation; and this clearly misdescribes ordinary, everyday patterns of belief-formation. Fortunately, Kant is quite explicit in his views about the relation between reflection and judgment-formation:

objection 2: actual reflection or merely a norm of reflection?

> Every prejudice is to be considered as a principle of erroneous judgment, and . . . erroneous judgments arise from prejudices. . . . The reason of this illusion is to be looked for in subjective grounds' being falsely taken for objective ones, from a want of reflection that must precede all judging. . . . [W]e cannot and must not judge anything without reflecting. . . . If we assume judgments without this reflection . . . prejudices, or principles for judging from subjective reasons that are falsely taken for objective ones, arise. (AA 9:76)

This shows that for Kant, it is a *norm* of empirical cognition that we ought not ("must not") judge without reflecting on whether our perceptions provide us with objective reasons. He does not rely on the false psychological description that our judgments always *are* preceded by actual reflection, for he is well aware that we do not typically comply with his normative demand.[21]

[20]Kant allows that judgments of experience can be formed under the idea that our evidence is not wholly conclusive. In such cases, the subject ought to adopt a correspondingly weak form of assent. (In Kant's terminology, her assent should take the form of mere "opinion" rather than "conviction"; see A822–23/B850–51; AA 9:66–67.)

[21]Clearly, when Kant says we "cannot" judge without reflection, he means, "cannot, rationally speaking." For he ends the passage by expounding a consequence (the generation of prejudices) that follows in cases when we do judge without reflection.

However, it is important to notice that for Kant our empirical judgments are under our reflective control even when they are not preceded by actual reflection. Consider here the analogous issue in the practical domain: our specific choices typically depend on what we think we have reason to do even when they are made unreflectively. This is because (Kant holds) we typically choose on the basis of principles of willing, "maxims," that embody standing general commitments to accept certain things as grounds of choice and thereby foreclose our answers to a variety of specific practical questions (AA 5:27). (For instance, my choice to get dressed before I leave the house is surely under my reflective control, but it is very rarely preceded by any reflection.) Now, Kant invokes an analogous notion of maxims also in the theoretical domain: he posits (see AA 9:74–76) freely adopted "principles for judging" that attribute evidential significance to certain recurring perceptual patterns and that control the automatic formation of specific beliefs.[22] Hence, for Kant, our cognitive responses to perceptual input are based on general commitments to treat certain types of perceptions as grounds for making certain types of judgments; these commitments foreclose our answers to a variety of theoretical questions.[23] In both the practical and the theoretical case, the idea that a person's automatic choices and assents are typically under her reflective control can be supported by the fact that typically a person is at no loss (when pressed or when entering into a reflective mood) to make explicit the reasons that implicitly guide her formation of choices and assents. Correspondingly, when people find that they hold beliefs they cannot support with reasons, they are typically alienated from (and not free with regard to) their doxastic states.[24]

Now, the general principles for judging without reflection that Kant mentions (at AA 9:76) are "prejudices" that rely on merely subjective grounds of assent: if we adopt such principles we incur an epistemic vice.[25] Why does Kant think that it is an epistemic virtue to form our judgments on the basis of explicit reflection? I will address this issue in section 3.

I now want to consider a third objection to the view I am ascribing to Kant: the worry that this view implies a vicious regress. On Kant's view as I reconstruct it, empirical judgments are free insofar as they are based on the thinker's reflective conception of what her theoretical reasons are; but one might worry that this

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[22] Two clarifications: first, this notion of a theoretical maxim (a general principle of judging that controls specific judgments) must be distinguished from the notion of a maxim of theoretical reason that Kant defines in terms of reason's speculative interest (see A666/B694). Second, Kant's idea that specific maxims must be traced to a foundational highest maxim (expressing a person's *Gesinnung*) is confined exclusively to the practical maxims adopted by agents with moral personality.

[23] Thus, for Kant, reflective control over belief-formation is exercised typically but often only implicitly (in the background of thought). This is different from the weaker idea that we always can exercise reflective control over our beliefs even though such control is typically not exercised at all. For this weaker idea, see McDowell, "Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality," 334.

[24] This phenomenon of alienation is explored in fascinating depth by Richard Moran (*Authority and Estrangement*).

[25] Kant considers the adoption of maxims that lead to habitual *suspension of judgment* an epistemic virtue, but this does not mitigate the normative demand that we always ought to base our judgments on explicit reflection, because a suspension of judgment is (unlike judging out of freely adopted habit) always based on one's conscious appreciation of the fact that the relevant judgment lacks adequate evidential grounds; see AA 9:74–75.

reflective conception itself involves judgments (concerning what one's reasons are) which in turn need to be based on further reflective judgments (providing reasons for one's judgments about what one's reasons are), and so on ad infinitum. To see how Kant can respond to this worry, let us recall how he motivates the need for reflective control in the first place. As we saw, Kant holds that for a thinker to judge what really is the case in the empirical world, she must take her judgment to be based on objectively valid reasons that entitle her to demand assent from other thinkers; this is (part of) what sets her mental state of assent (*Fürwahrhalten*) apart from a merely subjective association of representations. Since perceptual states cannot interpret themselves as constituting objective reasons ("the senses do not judge"), thinkers need to perform an act of thought by which they take their perceptions to provide them with valid reasons for saying that something is the case. Now, two points are important here. First, the act of taking one's perception of (for instance) a sound pattern to provide one with objective reasons for judging that there is a jaybird nearby need not be construed as a separate act of judgment over and beyond the judgment that there is a jaybird nearby. To judge that one has valid reasons to believe that there is a jaybird nearby just *is* to judge that there is a jaybird nearby; more generally, the belief that I ought to believe that *p* is "transparent to" the belief that *p*.[26] Second, since the verdict that one has good reasons to believe that *p* already achieves the appeal to universal, objective validity and thus already grounds the demand for assent from others that Kant deems essential to judgments of experience, there is no need for any further judgments here. Thus, Kant avoids an infinite regress.

appeal to tranparency

This is not to deny that on Kant's view a thinker's formation of specific empirical judgments is governed by a class of judgments that are something over and beyond those specific empirical judgments—namely, by judgments that express certain general principles of empirical thought. I will discuss the relevance of those principles to Kant's conception of freedom of thought in section 4. For present purposes, we can note that for Kant the judgments expressing those principles are epistemically fundamental; all our specific verdicts about what our perceptual evidence entitles us to judge must rely on the general principles of the understanding[27] (and on other principles as well),[28] but the judgments articulating these principles are not themselves empirical judgments based on perception.[29]

[26]For this notion of "transparency," see G. E. Moore, "Moore's Paradox."

[27]To focus here only on those principles that Kant calls "analogies of experience," we must rely upon those principles in our specific judgments of experience because those principles are required for interpreting our "private" sensations in such a way that we can represent an objective temporal order, which is a fundamental condition for making specific empirical judgments. The analogies of experience are thus "rules of universal time-determination" (A178/B220; A180/B222). For instance, all our empirical thought about events in the natural world must presuppose that events have determining natural causes, because (Kant argues) positing such causes is required for interpreting successive sensations of (for instance) cold and warmth as perceptions of two *objectively* successive states, i.e. of states that follow upon each other in the alteration of a public empirical object (B233–34; A94–96/B239–41). Our empirical thought thus proceeds from the general presupposition that events have determining causes to specific causal judgments: "For instance, a room is warm while the outer air is cool. I look around for the cause, and find a heated stove" (A202/B247–48).

[28]On Kant's view, determining our evidence typically also requires the a priori principles of theoretical reason and reflective judgment. See n. 37 below.

[29]They are a priori judgments that are independent of perception (A158–60/B197–99).

Hence, these judgments do not themselves require verdicts about what our perceptual evidence entitles us to judge. Thus, our reliance on those judgments (i.e. on the principles they articulate)[30] does not invoke a regress.

Objection 4: reflective control grounds only a trivial notion of freedom of belief

A final important objection to Kant's conception of freedom of empirical thought (as I reconstruct it) runs as follows. Recall the original worry that it cannot be "up to us" what to believe since beliefs aim at the truth. One might argue that since our reflective conception of how we ought to judge is *also* aimed at the truth, it is not up to us in any interesting sense either, and so the idea of reflective control cannot ground a non-trivial notion of freedom of belief. This objection assumes that we exercise free control over an action only if we can alter (at will) our verdict about whether this action is justified or not. But for Kant, free rational agency is clearly compatible with the inescapability of normative verdicts about how one must act. Our freedom of will is not in the least impugned by the fact that we cannot alter our conception of what we morally ought to do (AA 5:32, 35); for instance, I cannot arbitrarily give up my recognition that one must not lie for the sake of personal gratification. Moreover, if my choice to tell the truth is governed by this principle, this is a paradigmatic case of free agency. Kant squarely rejects the idea that the "liberty of indifference" to act in whatever manner pleases us is part of the definition of free will;[31] and the mark of what he calls "positive freedom" is that one can act in accordance with objectively valid moral principles (AA 4:446–47).

Hence, for Kant the fact that it is not "up to us" to reject valid principles that prescribe how we ought to judge nature cannot tell against our freedom of empirical thought. For instance, I cannot reject the principle that I must suspend a judgment that *p* if I suspect that my apparent perceptual awareness of *p* might be misleading; but if my suspension of belief is governed by this epistemic principle, then this suspension is a free act of rational control. Or, to take a different case that Kant deems very important: for Kant, we cannot rationally give up the principle that events must be attributed to a determining cause. If my belief that a pen is causally determined to fall if dropped is based on my "recognition of [this] rule" (A196/B241),[32] it is under my rational control and thus free. Notably, I would lack such freedom in Hume's scenario, where my belief that the pen must fall is not based on any recognition of rules but rather occurs wholly regardless of whether I consider causal beliefs rationally justified.[33]

[30] We must not confuse the principles of the understanding (etc.) with the "principles for judging" discussed in §2. The latter are subjective principles that express a thinker's conception of what her reasons for judging are; the former are *laws* that express objective truths. For an analogous ambiguity of "principles" in the practical domain, see AA 4:420.

[31] See AA 6:226–27, and Wood, "Kant's Compatibilism."

[32] When Kant refers to the "recognition of the rule" that is presupposed by specific causal judgments, he does not mean the recognition of any particular causal rule but, rather, the recognition of the general rule "supplied" by the category of causality: namely, "the rule . . . that everything which happens has a cause" (A196/B241). In our experience of an event (and therefore in our specific empirical judgments about the causes of events) we must "always presuppose that something precedes it, on which it follows according to a rule"—i.e. we presuppose the general rule that events are determined by some condition that operates according to some specific causal rule or law. For helpful discussion of the multiple senses of "rule" at issue here, see Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, 368–71. See also n. 27 above.

[33] In Hume's words, causal and inductive beliefs are due to operations that "are a species of natural instinct, which no reasoning or process of . . . the understanding is able either to produce

the reflective gap

I want to summarize the argument of this section. While Kant agrees with Wiggins that the formation of an empirical belief requires that we "lay ourselves open to the world to let objects put their print upon us," Kant denies that the passive reception of sensory data is sufficient for the formation of belief. On Kant's view, there is what I want to call a *reflective gap* between taking in perceptual data and judging what these data reveal about the world. Kant accepts that our cognitive responses to perceptual input are not under the immediate control of the will (and so the resulting mental states do not collapse into mere "wishes"). But for Kant this does not imply that we are passive with regard to our assents to empirical propositions. The formation of such assents is an act of free control, since it depends on the thinker's conception of what her theoretical reasons are (rather than, as in Hume, on sub-personal psychological processes that are completely divorced from a thinker's sense of what she ought to think).

Thus, we can give positive content to Kant's notion of freedom of empirical thought: such freedom not only consists (negatively speaking) in the absence of determination by sensible causes but also involves our "capacity to determine [our] judgments according to objective reasons" (AA 8:14), namely, through our reflective appreciation of doxastic norms. That we have this capacity makes us doxastic *agents*.[34]

## 3. FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND IMPERFECT RATIONALITY

I have argued that for Kant freedom of empirical thought consists in a thinker's ability to reflectively control her empirical judgments. This raises an important question: on Kant's view, should our freedom of thought be identified with the capacity to think in accordance with the correct norms, so that we are only ever free to get things right?[35] Or does our freedom of thought also involve a propensity to think incorrectly? Kant holds that it is characteristic of our human freedom of choice (i.e. of *Willkür*) that we have a propensity to violate moral laws.[36] But here

or prevent" (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section V, Part 1, 38). On some readings, Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature* holds that causal beliefs are based on reason or the understanding; see Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise*, 53–59. But even on such a reading, two fundamental differences between Hume and Kant remain: first, Hume reconfigures the notion of "reason" or "understanding" in terms of a purely associative faculty that operates independently of the thinker's reflective endorsement; and, second, the representation of causal necessity is excluded from "reasonable" belief in Hume.

[34]Here we can appeal to Stuart Hampshire's point (*Thought and Action*, 91) that "it would be a crude metaphysics that implied that an action is necessarily a physical movement." Kant denies that agency requires the use of our bodily capacities; he distinguishes between "inner" and "outer" actions (AA 6:214; 218), and in the practical sphere he holds that only inner acts of choice are always fully within our control (see AA 5:36–37). Hence we should take his frequent reference to "actions of the understanding" (A330/B387), "real act[s] of the faculty of cognition" (AA 7:131) that "cannot be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility" (A546/B574) at face value, as also designating a genuine kind of inner, rational agency. I see no textual evidence for the view (held by Allison [*Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 63, 218] and Kitcher [*Kant's Thinker*, 178]) that in Kant, "action" contrasts with "thought."

[35]See Pettit and Smith, "Freedom in Belief and Desire" for this notion of "freedom as orthonomy."

[36]He says that the propensity to violate practical laws "is . . . deeply rooted in the *Willkür* . . . of man" (AA 6:35). Note that this is consistent with Kant's (aforementioned) rejection of the idea that human

Kant's view depends on the idea that there is a gap between our recognition that we morally ought to (for instance) tell the truth and actually telling the truth. This gap exists (in part) because of the weakness (the "frailty" [AA 6:29]) of human *Willkür*. We already saw that Kant denies the existence of an analogous gap in the theoretical domain; Kant holds that the *Willkür* cannot struggle against a thinker's recognition of compelling theoretical reasons to believe that *p*, and therefore such recognition compels actual belief that *p*.

Nonetheless, I shall argue that for Kant our freedom of theoretical thought characteristically leaves us the option to form our doxastic states improperly. Belief, as such, aims at the truth, and this provides a constraint on what counts as conscious belief-formation. But concepts such as truth or evidence by themselves provide no concrete guidance as to what one should believe. To adopt a belief, a thinker must form for herself a representation of her evidence or of what considerations bear on the truth of a certain proposition. Hence, the notions of truth or evidence call for interpretation; and if it is always possible for us to (carelessly and imputably, albeit not knowingly) misinterpret our evidential situation, it always possible for us to judge improperly. I shall now mention three aspects of Kant's epistemology that jointly explain why our doxastic agency is pervasively afflicted with a real threat of error.

First, Kant's epistemology is radically holistic. For Kant, individual perceptions depend for their evidential significance on their place within a unified framework of further perceptions, concepts, and laws.[37] This assumption is based on the (regulative) idea that the disparate parts of nature that our various perceptions disclose to us are systematically connected. In this spirit, Kant prescribes that "we must endeavor, wherever possible, to bring systematic unity into our knowledge" (A650/B678). Keeping in mind the holistic character of Kant's epistemology is important for understanding two points that have emerged in the previous section. It explains *both* why Kant holds that there is a reflective gap between receiving perceptual input and judging *and* why Kant endorses a norm that demands that our judgments be based on active reflection. If empirical propositions had their confirmation conditions in isolation from one another, the need for active reflection would be greatly diminished; having sufficient evidence for accepting a certain proposition would reduce to the reception of the perceptual data that individually confirm the proposition. Correspondingly, on such an atomistic model it would be hard to see why a thinker must take active epistemic care to form an adequate conception of her evidential situation; having a perception would leave the subject with no reflective option.[38] By contrast, Kant's holism requires

freedom of will can be *defined* in terms of the possibility to choose wrongly. Part of Kant's point here is that the propensity to violate practical laws is a mere want of an ability, i.e. a "privation" which cannot be invoked in a definition. For further discussion of this point in relation to Kant's incompatibilism about free will, see Kohl, "Kant on Determinism and the Categorical Imperative."

[37]For Kant's claim that without the search for systematic unity we would lack "a sufficient criterion of empirical truth," see A651/B679. For example: although we know that there is a determining cause for every event (see n. 27 above), we cannot cognize whether an observed regularity has the status of a necessary law of nature without invoking considerations of systematic unity; see AA 5:179–80; Guyer, "Kant on the Systematicity of Nature: Two Puzzles," 285–86. For a very clear summary of Kantian holism, see Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism*, 99.

[38]For an example of how an atomistic conception of evidence encourages a deterministic picture of belief-formation, see Brewer, "Mental Causation: Compulsion By Reason."

that a thinker actively works out what, if any, implications a given perception has in the light of her overall system of cognition. This holistic pursuit of empirical knowledge is a complex matter that requires an informed grasp of nature as a whole. Given the complexity of this task, we must take great reflective care not to misconstrue our evidence.

My second point concerns the pervasiveness of empirical illusion. For Kant, empirical illusion is not just a feature of certain special cases, for instance, when we see a straight stick as bent in the water. Rather, Kant holds that our perceptions always present empirical objects in ways that depend on the contingent, subjective constitution of the perceiver (i.e. on "the special character of the subject"). When we are affected by outer objects, we cannot help but having "sensations of colors, sounds, and heat [that] do not of themselves yield knowledge of any object. They cannot rightly be regarded as properties of things, but only as changes in the subject, changes which may . . . be different for different men" (A29/B45). Even an objective property such as motion is displayed by our senses in a distorted fashion: "The course of the planets is represented to us by the senses as now progressive, now retrogressive," and this is a merely "subjective mode of representation" (AA 4:290–91). So, on Kant's view, our senses constantly give us subjective impressions that seem on par with representations of objective properties such as shape and size; hence, we are globally susceptible to empirical illusion *whenever* we represent a particular empirical object. Moreover, this susceptibility is persistent; it continues to affect us even once we see through sensory illusions. If we recognize, in hindsight, what led us to make some empirical judgment "without having to take account of the character of the object, we expose the illusion and are no longer deceived by it, although we are always still in some degree liable to come under its influence, in so far as the subjective cause of the illusion is inherent in our nature" (A821/B850). Thus, to prevent assents to subjective perceptions of color, taste, apparent motion, and so on, one must exercise great reflective care; even someone who has recognized the deceptive nature of these perceptual appearances must constantly bring this realization to the foreground of her reflective consciousness to resist the influence of perceptual illusions on her empirical thought. Hence, Kant's uncompromising rejection of the "naïve" idea that our sense perceptions represent the real empirical character of objects further explains why he posits a reflective gap between the reception of perceptual input and the formation of empirical judgments, and why he insists that our empirical judgments ought to follow from reflection about what the contents of our perceptual states reveal about nature.[39]

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[39]This claim is disputed by Chignell, who argues that for Kant epistemic justification does not require reflection: "Joe's assent that the sky is blue can *be* justified simply by way of his having the experience of the sky as blue; he doesn't also need actively to introspect and determine *that* his perceptual experience is a sufficient objective ground for his assent. Kant would presumably agree with this" ("Kant's Concepts of Justification," 46). But it seems obvious that Kant would not agree at all. For Kant, Joe's assent that the sky is blue is not only unjustified but even wrong, since "colors are not properties of . . . bodies [but] . . . are . . . only . . . effects accidentally added by the particular constitution of the sense organs" (A29). Chignell might respond that this objection does not bear on his point that generally speaking (leaving aside the case of color) perceptions can justify our assents independently of reflection. But on Kant's view, reflection is generally required for epistemic justification because we generally (namely, whenever we make judgments about physical objects) face the need to determine

transcendental illusion

My third and most complicated point concerns the influence of what Kant calls transcendental illusion. Unlike empirical illusion, which depends on the contingent constitution of our sensibility, this is a form of illusion which "reason must necessarily encounter in its progress" (A422/B450).[40] An exhaustive discussion of Kant's conception of transcendental illusion is much beyond the scope of this paper; I must limit myself here to sketching what "harmful influence" (A642/B670) such illusion has on our doxastic agency.[41]

First, we have the tendency to make an illegitimate use of the idea of a complete totality of explanatory conditions for a given empirical explanandum (A308/B365; A462/B490): namely, by claiming to know how this totality is constituted. This tendency can lead either to the empiricist notion that the totality consists in an infinite series of empirical conditions that cannot have a first beginning or cause (A470/B498), or to the rationalist notion that this totality must consist in a finite series that terminates in a privileged member (a first beginning or cause). Neither of those notions is supported by our objective evidence, because the totality of empirical conditions is not itself an object of our experience (A482–84/B510–12). Moreover, both of these notions have drastic negative effects: the rationalist picture posits elusive non-natural causes or first beginnings as explanatory conditions and thereby destroys our understanding of nature; the empiricist picture declares that all there is must be part of the deterministic order of nature and thereby makes freedom and responsibility absolutely impossible (A472/B500).

Second, we have the tendency to make an illegitimate use of the idea of the purposiveness of organisms—namely, by misconstruing this as an objective ("constitutive") feature of nature. This can lead to the claim that purposiveness (thus understood) is impossible because it conflicts with the mechanistic structure of nature (AA 5:386–89), a claim which hinders empirical thought, since it prevents us from achieving systematic unity in our cognition (A651/B679; AA 5:183). It can also lead to the reverse notion that nature is objectively teleologically structured, an erroneous assumption that encourages a number of epistemic vices (such as the "laziness" of reason, which cuts off the arduous search for mechanistic causes by appealing directly to the purposes ordained by an all-wise creator; see A689–95/B717–23).

Likewise, we have the tendency to mistakenly objectify the ideas that (i) various different natural objects can be systematically understood by reference to common properties (A652/B680) and that (ii) there is endless "manifoldness and diversity" in nature (A654/B682). If these ideas are misconstrued as describing the objective constitution of nature, they come into conflict; the notion that nature

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whether the content of our perceptions indicates an objective quality that falls under public concepts or rather derives from the private character of sensibility. Owens (*Reason Without Freedom*, 1, 5, 9) notes that Kant, Locke, and Descartes all endorse the idea that we should determine our empirical judgments through reflection. In my view, this agreement derives (in part) from the fact that all these philosophers deny that the perceptions of which we are unreflectively aware adequately represent physical reality.

[40]For the distinction between empirical and transcendental illusion, see A296/B352. For the necessity and the indestructibility of transcendental illusion, see A421–22/B449–50.

[41]It is noteworthy that Kant holds that transcendental illusion is not only harmful but indispensable for the correct use of theoretical reason. This is argued forcefully by Michelle Grier in *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion.*

is intrinsically heterogeneous is hard to square with the notion that nature is intrinsically unified.[42] Thus, under the influence of this illusion, researchers neglect the search for either homogeneity or heterogeneity. This severely hinders their pursuit of empirical truth (see A667–68/B696–97) because we need to look both for unifying properties and for diversifying properties to achieve the widest possible expansion of our web of empirical knowledge—that is, we must comply with the norm that "prescribes that we ought to study nature as if systematic and purposive unity, combined with the greatest possible manifoldness, were everywhere to be met with, in infinitum" (A701/B729).

The point of my brief discussion of transcendental illusion was to show that for Kant finitely rational thinkers are prone to think about reality in a subtly but gravely distorted fashion. This tendency is rooted in the very nature of theoretical reason, and this provides a transcendental (i.e. a necessary, a priori) ground for the possibility of theoretical error.

To sum up the argument of this section: the holistic character of empirical knowledge, the global presence of empirical illusion, and the ineradicable force of transcendental illusion jointly (in conjunction with other factors such as concealed wishful thinking or misremembering; see A53/B77) afflict finite thinkers with a pervasive propensity to misinterpret their theoretical reasons. According to Kant, systematic reflection is the only way in which we can guard ourselves against this propensity.

## 4. THE AUTONOMY OF UNDERSTANDING

The joint argument of sections 1–3 suggests a reason why the mechanistic picture of empirical thought (envisaged by Wilfrid Sellars and others) cannot be Kant's. We saw that for Kant, our rational powers always enable us to correctly interpret our evidential situation (cognitive errors are not forced upon us),[43] but the imperfections inherent in those powers also give rise to a pervasive possibility that we may misapprehend our theoretical reasons. By contrast, a thinking mechanism (an *automaton spirituale*) would always be necessitated to respond to external stimuli in one particular manner; it would be determined either to function or to malfunction.[44]

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[42]See A666–67/B694–95. Guyer ("Reason and Reflective Judgment: Kant on the Significance of Systematicity," 32) argues that the conflict could only be practical, relating to limits on time and resources. But Kant might have a stronger point in mind: if a thinker proceeds on the assumption that nature is objectively unified or heterogeneous, the source of this assumption is likely to be a general "either-or" worldview. The empiricist view is based on the conviction that nature has a chaotic, unorganized character; this implies that there cannot be systematic unity. For the rationalist, the claim that nature is infinitely diverse is in tension with the foundational principle that nature is ordained (by God) to have a unified, purposive structure that makes it completely intelligible.

[43]Of course this does not entail that we can always know the truth about any given empirical subject matter. 'Correctly interpreting our evidential situation' for Kant typically means: suspending judgment due to the recognition that we lack sufficient evidence. (See n. 25 above.)

[44]Kitcher (*Kant's Thinker*, 170) suggests that for Kant a judgment of experience cannot be causally undetermined because cognition for Kant consists in an appreciation of necessary rational connections between contents of thought. But the idea that proposition *A* entails proposition *B* as a matter of *rational* necessity does not entail that a thinker who accepts *A* is *causally* necessitated to accept *B*. This is because, among other things, finite thinkers afflicted by conditions of rational imperfection (as described in §3) may misapprehend the extent to which a certain consideration rationally supports a certain proposition.

Kitcher on causal determination

But I do not think that this point quite gets to the bottom of the issue. Let us consider here Sellars's main reason for holding that the spontaneity of the understanding is much thinner than the spontaneity of practical reason. He says, "[F]or practical reason to be autonomous, there must be a practical premise which is . . . intrinsic to reason. . . . For, surely, if all its premises come from without, then it is indeed 'set in motion' from without—its 'causality' is caused; its 'spontaneity' relative."[45] On Sellars's view, the premises of the understanding may come "from without" and therefore the understanding may lack genuine spontaneity and autonomy: "[W]e can conceive Kant to argue that although we are conscious of ourselves as spontaneous in the synthesizing of empirical objects, this spontaneity is still only a relative spontaneity, a spontaneity 'set in motion' by 'foreign causes.'"[46] In much the same vein, Michael Friedman suggests that we must put scare quotes around the term spontaneity when we want to speak of the "spontaneity" of understanding as compared to the freedom required for morality.[47]

In my view, Sellars is right to stress that it is essential to Kant's conception of practical spontaneity that our moral deliberation and action is guided by a fundamental "premise" concerning what we ought to do (namely, the categorical imperative) that has its source in pure practical reason itself rather than (say) in our contingent empirical desires or in the will of God. But is Sellars also right in suggesting that nothing similar can be said about the understanding? Earlier (in section 2) I intimated that on Kant's view our specific empirical judgments rely on fundamental "premises" that concern the general constitution of nature and that (accordingly) demand that we think about nature in certain general terms. These "premises" include, for instance, the principle that for any event there must be a determining cause. (This principle is presupposed by empirical reflection aimed at specific causal judgments.) So one way of scrutinizing Sellars's view is by examining what Kant says about the origin of these fundamental principles and concepts (such as causality). Here is one important relevant passage:

> [It] may be proposed that . . . the categories are subjective dispositions of thought, implanted in us from the first moment of our existence, and . . . ordered by our Creator. . . . [But] the concept of cause . . . which expresses the necessity of an event under a presupposed condition, would be false if it rested only on an arbitrary subjective necessity, implanted in us. . . . I would not then be able to say that the effect is connected with the cause in the object . . . but only that I am so constituted that I cannot think this representation otherwise than as thus connected. This is exactly what the skeptic most desires. (B167–68)

Kant here attacks the idea that we can take our concept of causal necessity to have objective validity because we can confide in the benevolence of a divine creator who has wired our minds so that we cannot help but using this concept. However, his line of thought extends to the Humean explanation of why we think in causal terms; Kant uses the notion of an "arbitrary subjective necessity" to discredit his opponent's picture, and this is Kant's standard term for describing the Humean

[45] Sellars, " . . .this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks . . . . ," 26.

[46] Sellars, " . . .this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks . . . . ," 23.

[47] Friedman, "Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition: Comments on John McDowell's *Mind and World*," 438. See also Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 63, 218, 228; Chignell, "Kant's Concepts of Justification," 43; Dieter Henrich, "Die Deduktion des Sittengesetzes," 65–67; Kitcher, *Kant's Transcendental Psychology*, 140.

claim that our minds posit necessary connections because our thinking is controlled by empirical, psychological habits.[48] Thus, Kant's argument here targets all views on which we are determined to use the categories by a mental constitution that an external source (either God or nature) has implanted in us. He claims that on such views the concept of causality would lack objective validity because on such views the understanding would "stand under the mechanism of merely subjectively determining causes" (AA 8:14). This shows that for Kant, who argues that the concept of cause has objective validity, the understanding is not determined by "foreign causes," i.e. by an external creator or by our empirically given psychology.[49]

The idea that our understanding operates independently of empirical conditions calls for clarification; clearly, Kant does not unqualifiedly affirm this idea. We must distinguish here between two points. On the one hand, the *application* of concepts such as causality requires empirical intuitions: we can claim that things stand in necessitating causal relations only with regard to empirical representations "that supply the material" (B423) for object-directed causal thoughts. On the other hand, the categories are produced by the purely spontaneous activity of the understanding that does not stand under empirical laws. Thus, these concepts have a wholly non-empirical ("pure") *origin*, which is a condition on their objective validity:

> Pure synthesis . . . gives us the pure concept of the understanding. (A78/B104)[50]
>
> The empirical is only the condition of the application, or of the employment, of the pure intellectual faculty. (B423)[51]
>
> If . . . a judgment . . . asserts a claim to necessity, then . . . it would be absurd to justify it by explaining the origin of the judgment psychologically. For . . . if the attempted explanation were completely successful it would prove that the judgment could make absolutely no claim to necessity, precisely because its empirical origin can be demonstrated. (AA 20:238)

One might wonder here why Kant equates the idea that the concept of cause has an empirical origin with the idea that this concept has its origin in our internal empirical psychology. Why does Kant not allow that the empirical origin of this concept is an empirical representation, namely, a perception of causality that we receive from the outside when objects affect our sense organs? The answer is that Kant agrees with Hume that causality (in particular, causal necessity) cannot be perceived or sensibly intuited (A94–95/B126–28; A137–38/B176–77).

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[48]See B5, 167–68; A94/B126–28; AA 5:12–13.

[49]With regard to the first option (divine design), we should notice the parallels between two important passages: first, the passage quoted from the Deduction (B166–67) where Kant argues that the categories would lack objective validity if (contrary to his own view) our minds were wired to use these concepts by a divine creator; and second, a passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (AA 5:101) where Kant argues that if (contrary to his own view) our actions were the product of the "foreign hand" of a divine manufacturer, we would be thinking mechanisms and our awareness of the spontaneity of thought would be an illusion.

[50]For Kant's insistence that synthesis, "inasmuch as . . . [it] is an expression of spontaneity," does not stand under empirical laws (e.g. of reproductive imagination), see B151–52.

[51]See AA 4:452 and A547/B575 for a similar distinction between the pure origin and the sensible conditions for applying the categories. See also n. 55 below.

Hence, for Kant the pure understanding itself is the author or source (see A127; B163–65) of general a priori theoretical laws, such as the principle of sufficient reason (restricted to appearances; see A201/B246). This is to say: we are not determined to accept those laws by our contingent empirical constitution or by a divine manufacturer; nor are these laws given to us from outer objects (via perceptual representations). So in this regard the spontaneity of understanding satisfies the conditions that Sellars (rightly) deems essential to the spontaneity of will qua practical reason. Practical reason likewise is the author of practical laws that are not imposed on us by "the particular [empirical] constitution of human nature" (AA 4:425) or by the will of God (AA 4:442). Hence, both the principle of sufficient reason and the categorical imperative have their origin in our purely spontaneous intellectual powers.[52] Accordingly, for Kant both our pure theoretical and our pure practical capacities can be considered autonomous: he applies the term 'autonomy' both to "the understanding, in view of theoretical laws" and to "reason, in practical laws" (AA 20:225; see also AA 20:241). The fact that we judge nature autonomously proves that our empirical thought cannot be conceived as the operation of a thinking mechanism.

## 5. FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND FREEDOM OF WILL

My argument so far shows that there are number of deep parallels between freedom of empirical thought and freedom of will. First, both kinds of freedom involve, negatively speaking, the absence of determination by sensible causes. Consequently, sensibility is not a source of either practical or theoretical failure. In the theoretical case the senses do not err, and in the practical case the senses are not responsible for evil choices.[53] Second, both freedom of thought and freedom of will involve

[52]Compare the following remarks concerning the respective origin of (1) moral concepts and (2) the categories: (1) "[A]ll moral concepts have their seat and origin entirely a priori in reason. . . . [T]hey can be abstracted from no empirical and hence merely contingent cognitions. In the purity of their origin lies their worthiness to serve us as supreme practical principles" (AA 4:411). (2) "[The categories] have their seat in the pure understanding" (A81/B107). "David Hume recognized that [in order to justify the categories] . . . it was necessary that these concepts should have an a priori origin. But . . . he was constrained to derive them . . . from a subjective necessity. . . . Now this empirical derivation . . . cannot be reconciled with . . . a priori knowledge" (B127–28).

[53]About the theoretical case, Kant says, "[T]he senses do not err—not because they always judge rightly but because they do not judge at all" (A293/B350). "If an appearance is given to us, we are still completely free as to how we want to judge things from it. . . . And then it is not the fault of the [sensible] appearances at all, if our cognition takes illusion for truth" (AA 4:290). About the practical case, Kant says, "[T]he source of the bad cannot lie in any object that determines the *Willkür* through inclination, or in any natural impulse, but only in a rule that *Willkür* will makes for itself for the use of its freedom" (AA 6:21). "[T]he source of this badness cannot, as is usually done, be placed in the sensibility of man and the natural inclinations springing therefrom . . . [it is rather] found in him as a freely acting being" (AA 6:38). There is an important question, which I cannot consider here, about how moral and epistemic imputability relate to each other. Kitcher (*Kant's Thinker*, 247–48) seems to suggest that all accountability in cognition ultimately reduces to the kind accountability that derives from moral duties such as truthfulness. I agree that for Kant we can be morally accountable for certain epistemic errors, given the indirect sense in which theoretical judgments stand under the control of the will (AA 9: 74). But Kant also leaves plenty of conceptual space for imputable epistemic errors, such as beliefs based on perceptual illusions, that reflect *sui generis* doxastic vices (e.g. carelessness) rather than underlying moral flaws. Accordingly, for Kant the personality required for imputability is not simply identical to moral personality (AA 6: 223; AA 7: 127).

the positive capacity to act on the basis of our awareness of objective reasons. These reasons derive from foundational a priori principles that have their origin in our pure, autonomous intellectual powers. Finally, in both cases our ability to respond to objective reasons is shadowed by a "privation," namely, by our pervasive propensity to choose or think incorrectly. These parallels explain Kant's claim (at AA 8:14) that cognizers of nature must presuppose their freedom of thought "in the same way" that moral agents must presuppose their freedom of the will.

However, despite the deep structural parallels between freedom of will and freedom of empirical thought, these are two specifically different kinds of freedom. I want to draw attention to three substantive differences between free volition and free empirical thought.

First, Kant stresses that our free will or practical reason may have causality with regard to the objects that it cognizes as good; we regard our free will as an efficient cause that can change the observable world according to its representation of what the world ought to be like (A547–48/B575–76; AA 5:55–56). By contrast, we cannot conceive of our free empirical thought as the cause of the existence of the objects it cognizes (B71–72; A92–93/B125). This distinction is very important for Kant, but we must not read Kant as claiming that being able to cause the existence of objects is an indispensably necessary condition for "genuine" freedom. For Kant, a will counts as free even if, due to unfortunate empirical conditions, it happens to be completely inefficacious with regard to outer (physical) objects, as long as it has free control over its inner states (maxims) and can choose in accordance with necessary moral reasons (AA 4:394; AA 5:36–37).

A second, related difference between practical and theoretical freedom concerns, again, the role of sensibility. Our free theoretical faculties need the contribution of sensibility for their proper exercise. Sensibility is both a (potential) defeater and a (necessary) enabler of proper empirical judgment; the influence of the senses on empirical judgment may result (if we are careless) in empirical error, but it is also a necessary condition for the proper exercise of our cognitive capacities (that culminates in empirical cognition). By contrast, the proper exercise of our free practical faculties does not (as far as moral agency is concerned) depend on the contribution of sensibility. Here, sensibility plays solely the role of a potential defeater. In the case of morally good choices that exemplify our practical autonomy, the influence of sensible inclinations is a mere obstacle that pure practical reason must remove: "The essential point in every determination of the will by the moral law is that being a free will it is determined simply by the moral law, not only without the co-operation of sensible impulses, but even to the rejection of all such" (AA 5:75). In the case of practical reasoning that issues in moral judgments, the legislation of practical reason is unconstrained by sensibility:

> [Practical] Reason does not here follow the order of things as they present themselves in appearance, but frames for itself with absolute spontaneity an order of its own . . . according to which it declares actions to be necessary although they have never taken place, and perhaps never will take place. (A548/B576)

> [The understanding] cannot produce by its activity any other concepts than those which serve to bring the sensible representations under rules. . . . [O]n the other

hand, reason shows such a pure spontaneity in the case of ideas [*Ideen*] that it far transcends anything that sensibility can give to consciousness. (AA 4:452)

Thus, one central difference between practical and theoretical freedom is that the free exercise of the understanding does whereas the free exercise of practical reason does not (with regard to moral agency) depend on the deliverances of our receptive, sensible nature.[54] As I pointed out earlier, we need to be careful here: Kant does not deny that the understanding produces its own pure representations independently of any empirical conditions, but he insists that the (proper) application of these representations depends on sensible input (i.e. on empirical intuitions).[55]

3. rational imperfection is different in each case

A third difference between freedom of will and freedom of thought relates to the manner in which our rational imperfection manifests itself in each case. We saw that in the practical case, recognizing what we morally ought to do does not (in part because of the "frailty" of the human will) automatically transfer into morally right action, whereas in the theoretical case our verdict that we have valid theoretical reasons for judging that *p* leads directly into the judgment that *p* (precisely because the judgment does not stand under the immediate control of the will). This is one side of the story. Now, Kant thinks that the fundamental principles

[54]To be sure, the imperative formula through which we apprehend moral judgments ("ought") does depend on the fact that we are sensibly affected (AA 4:413–14). My claim that moral judgment is independent of sensibility pertains to its content, namely, to the prescriptive law it represents. The justification of this law does not defer to the character of our sensibility (contrast here: the causal principle, which is valid only as a principle of time determination), and therefore this law can be deemed valid for all rational beings including those that have no sensible nature (AA 4:389, 393, 411–12, 425–27; AA 5:34). Some insist that for beings like us, moral reasoning is essentially receptive; see Longuenesse, *Kant on the Human Standpoint*; for the contrary view, see Rüdiger Bittner, *Moralisches Gebot oder Autonomie*, 151–52. Two points are relevant here. First, one could argue that we can reach moral judgments only when we confront a manifold of sensible desires and seek to determine to what extent it would be permissible to incorporate these desires into our maxims. However, the procedure by which we test whether a maxim can be conceived or willed as a universal law does not require actual experience of sensible inclinations just like empirical thought requires actual sensible data: a subject of moral reasoning need not be sensibly affected with a given inclination in order to validly judge whether acting upon that inclination would be permissible. (Consider, for instance, third-personal moral criticism.) Second, one might argue that our moral reasoning is receptive insofar as it must recognize empirical facts to prescribe specific duties. This point raises central issues that I cannot adequately discuss here; one potential response is that Kant might wish to restrict the independence of moral reason from conditions of receptivity to abstract judgments such as the most general representations of the categorical imperative or judgments such as, "Thou shalt not lie" (AA 4:389).

[55]See, again, AA 4:452: "[Understanding] . . . is . . . a spontaneous activity and does not . . . merely contain representations which arise only when one is affected by things, [but] it cannot produce by its activity any other concepts than those which serve to bring the sensible representations under rules. . . . Without this use of sensibility it would think nothing at all." This last remark must be taken with a grain of salt. The understanding thinks *something* through the categories without the use of sensibility. For instance, the unschematized category of causality expresses the thought "that there is something from which we can conclude to the existence of something else" (A243/B301). Kant's point is that this thought fails to refer to a determinate object unless it is supplemented with a sensible criterion of application (A240–41/B299–300). Even this point requires qualification: the category of causality can be used for the representation of an object independently of sensibility within the context of practical reasoning, namely, for the representation of the atemporal spontaneity of freedom (AA 5:54–57). For discussion of this point and the complications it raises, see Kohl, "Kant on the Inapplicability of the Categories to Things in Themselves."

of morality leave an inescapable mark on our deliberative consciousness, which prevents a lasting corruption of our awareness of what we morally ought to do:[56]

> It is only necessary to analyze the judgment that men pass on the lawfulness of their actions, in order to find that, whatever inclination may say to the contrary, reason, incorruptible and self-constrained, always confronts the maxim of the will in any action with the pure will, that is, with itself, considering itself as a priori practical. (AA 5:32)

> [T]he voice of reason in reference to the will [is] so clear, so irrepressible, so distinctly audible, even to the commonest men. (AA 5:35)

By contrast, the voice of reason in the theoretical sphere is not distinctly audible; there is no persistent call of epistemic consciousness that could counter the corruption of our representation of our theoretical reasons by illusion or by prejudice. In this spirit, Kant laments that "reason . . . does not in . . . speculation easily become aware of its errors" (A424/B452). Kant here refers specifically to the influence of transcendental illusion on theoretical reason. But the understanding also falls into empirical error in an "unobserved" manner (A294/B350; AA 9:53), and is thus likewise unaware of the corruption of its grounds of judgment.

Hence, for Kant there is a double asymmetry between free practical and doxastic agency. On the one hand, our reflective awareness of how we ought to choose is characteristically well–informed whereas our reflective awareness of how we ought to judge nature is characteristically misinformed. On the other hand, our choices often fail to accord with our ideas about how we ought to choose, whereas our judgments about nature must accord (for better or worse) with our reflective sense of how we ought to judge nature.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Kant has a coherent, anti-voluntaristic conception of freedom of empirical thought that is no less substantive and bound up with the notion of autonomy than his conception of freedom of will. As I have shown, this surprising conclusion is connected to many central topics in Kant: for instance, his views about the objectivity of empirical thought and the validity of fundamental epistemic principles, his conception of epistemic justification and normativity, and his general theory of (imperfectly) rational agency.

My conclusion should also be relevant to a number of further important issues. For instance, taking into account Kant's insistence on the freedom and the empirically unconditioned activity exhibited by the "I that thinks" should be relevant to interpreting his subtle and elusive views on the epistemology and metaphysics of the self.[57] Second, if I am right in claiming that for Kant there are deep parallels between theoretical and practical freedom, this might allow us to bridge certain gaps between the theoretical and the practical side of his philosophy and to better understand his claims about the unity of reason. Specifically, my argument might cast a new light on Kant's tendency to argue for our practical

[56]This is consistent with allowing that our sense that we are complying with moral demands is susceptible to self-deception (see AA 6:392–93; AA 6:38).

[57]In this paper I could not go beyond some very basic remarks on this topic; see n. 8.

freedom (of will) by appeal to our theoretical freedom (of empirical thought).[58] But working out whether Kant has a promising line of argument here is the topic for another day.[59]

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Quotations from Kant's works, apart from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*KrV*), cite the volume and page number (AA, Volume:page) of the Academy edition, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vols. 1–29 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–). Quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited according to the standard A and B pagination for the first and second editions, respectively. All translations are my own, although I have made only minor changes to the translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* indicated below.

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[58] See, for instance, AA 8:14. Some commentators have located this line of thought in the third section of the *Groundwork* and at A546–48/B574–76; see, for instance, Ameriks, "Kant's Deduction of Freedom and Morality." Commentators who sharply criticize Kant's attempt to move from theoretical to practical freedom include Allison 1990, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, 69, 227–28; Henrich, "Der Begriff der sittlichen Einsicht und Kants Lehre vom Faktum der Vernunft," 245; and "Die Deduktion des Sittengesetzes," 72; Dieter Schönecker, *Kant: Grundlegung III: Die Deduktion des kategorischen Imperativs*, 209, 299. All of them presuppose that theoretical freedom has very little in common with practical freedom.

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