

Kant

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The theory of action of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) forms a central component of his metaphysical and ethical views, and several of its most distinctive features are fully intelligible only when seen against the background of his larger critical project. In the bulk of this chapter I explain the basic features of Kant's theory of human action by showing how it draws on his more general account of action and causality and how it is similar in fundamental ways to his explanation of the actions of inanimate bodies. I also sketch Kant's distinctive account of moral action and indicate how it can solve several traditional difficulties associated with the problem of free will and determinism. At the end of the chapter, I argue that Kant's theory of action can neatly avoid one problem that contemporary proponents of agent causation have faced.

Kant does not provide an explicit definition of action (*Handlung*) in any of his major critical publications. However, in the so-called L₂ transcripts of his metaphysics lectures, most likely held in 1790–1791, he makes remarks that amount to a succinct, yet still informative general definition of action:

Action is the determination of the power [*Kraft*] of a substance as a cause of an accident [*accidentis*]. Causality [*causalitas*] is the property of a substance insofar as it is considered as a cause of an accident. (Kant 1902–, Vol. 28: 564–565)

According to this definition, the concept of action essentially involves the concepts of substance and causality. Specifically, an action occurs if and only if a substance causes an accident by means of a determination of its power (*Kraft*). For an action is a determination of the substance's power by means of which it causes its effect.

This definition provides a helpful broader framework for a series of remarks Kant makes about action in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which might otherwise appear to be puzzling. In the context of the Second Analogy of Experience, for example, where Kant is attempting to counter Hume's deflationary empiricist account of causality, he notes:

This causality leads to the concept of action, this to the concept of power [*Kraft*], and thereby to the concept of substance. (A204/B249)

Where there is action, consequently activity and power [*Kraft*], there is also substance. (A204/B250)

Action already signifies the relation of the subject of causality to the effect. (A205/B250)

What is striking about both Kant's explicit definition in his metaphysics transcripts and these remarks from the Second Analogy is how general they are. **The concept of action is not limited to human cases, but rather applies to any kind of substance and to any instance of causality (Willaschek 1992: 38–39, 251).**

Accordingly, to grasp Kant's conception of human action properly, it is necessary to understand the central features of his general model of causality. Though there has been considerable scholarly disagreement about its basic structure as well as about its myriad details, my own preferred understanding of it in its simplest version is that a substance causes an effect when it acts according to its own nature, powers, and circumstances so as to determine the (change of) state of a substance (Watkins 2005: 230–297). This model contrasts starkly with event-based models of causality, according to which one event simply causes another, without requiring any further ontological commitments. Though Kant's basic model (which invokes substances, actions, natures, powers, and circumstances) is metaphysically more robust than the simplest event-based models, he not only is open to, but also emphasizes, even more complicated cases. In the Third Analogy of Experience, for example, Kant maintains that at least *two* substances stand in mutual interaction by *jointly* acting according to their natures, powers, and circumstances in the determination of their simultaneous (changes of) state.

Kant's basic model of causality is able to account for two central claims of the Second Analogy: (1) his assertion of a necessary connection between cause and effect (of which Hume failed to find an impression in the world); and (2) his claim that all events in the sensible world occur according to universal laws of nature.

Necessary connections can be explained on the basis of the natures that substances have. For if substances have natures, insofar as they necessarily act in accordance with their natures, the effects they bring about follow necessarily. (It is to be noted that this kind of necessity is hypothetical insofar as it depends on the natures of things.) In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Kant distinguishes between the nature and the essence of a thing (1902–, Vol. 4: 468), the former being the inner principle of all that belongs to the *existence* of a thing and the latter being the inner principle of all that belongs to the *possibility* of a thing. (Since the essence of a thing concerns what must be the case for a thing to be at all possible, it involves an absolute necessity.) As a result, **even within the nature of a thing there can be both essential (or necessary) and contingent (though still explanatorily basic) properties.** This distinction will be important below. The main point for present purposes is that, **by positing natures that substances act in accordance with, Kant's model has sufficient resources to account for the possibility of necessary connections in the world.**

Kant's model of causality can also account for his claim that all events occur according to universal laws of nature. If a substance acts according to its nature and its nature is general in the sense that a substance never exists without it (since the

nature in question is an internal principle that belongs to the very existence of the substance, regardless of what other substances exist), then a substance will always act in the same way in the same circumstances, causing the same events. Another way to think about this point is to note that the laws of nature are laws that derive from the general natures of the substances that are causally active in bringing about events in the world in accordance with these natures. A model of causality that involves natures in this way is thus in a position to explain why events would occur in accordance with universal laws of nature.

In developing this general model of causality, Kant clearly has in mind the way it applies to physical bodies in Newtonian science. In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, for example, Kant argues that bodies are spatial substances endowed both with mass and with attractive and repulsive forces, which necessarily act in accordance with the laws of mechanics in the communication of motion. Thus, when one body either repels or attracts another, it acts by exercising its causal powers (its force of repulsion or attraction) in accordance with its nature (its elasticity or its mass) and its circumstances (its position and state of motion, or its distance from the other body). It also obeys the laws of mechanics insofar as, for instance, any change of state in one body must have an external cause in another body and the action of the one body is equal (and opposite) to the action of the other body.

It is important to note that on this model the cause of the acceleration or deceleration of a body is not an event (such as the motion of the one body), but rather a substance (the body itself). More specifically, it is in virtue of the *action* of the substance, the exercise of its causal powers, that the substance can be a cause. In fact, the exercise of a causal power cannot be an event (a change from one determinate state to another); it is, rather, what makes such an event possible in the first place. Kant refers to it instead as “a uniform continuous action” (A208/B254). The difference is particularly manifest in the case of gravity: all bodies act *continuously* on all other bodies according to *uniform* laws. There are no discrete changes in their actions (which we could observe), as there are in their effects. Nor, for that matter, does Kant think that any of the circumstances in accordance with which a substance acts is, properly speaking, the cause, though we may talk in this way in certain contexts, for the sake of brevity. Thus the motion of one billiard ball is not the cause of the motion of another billiard ball with which it comes into contact (even if one can establish a strict correlation between these motions); it is rather the exercise of their repulsive powers (according to their degree of elasticity). This is perfectly consistent with holding that the causal powers are exercised *in accordance with* such events (as relevant circumstances) in bringing about such an effect, and that regularities involving them can be stated.

Armed with this general account of action and causality as well as with a sense of how it applies to the case of bodies, we can now turn to the basic structure of Kant's explanation of *human* action. A human being acts if and only if it is a substance that exercises its causal powers according to its nature and circumstances. It was common at the time to refer to the causal powers of human beings as faculties (*Vermögen*), and Kant does not depart significantly from this practice (but see 1902–, Vol. 29: 823–824). Though he distinguishes numerous particular faculties – wit, fantasy, memory, and so on – his most fundamental division is into three faculties: cognition, feeling, and

desire. And the actions of each of these faculties can be divided into higher and lower kinds, which results in intellectual or sensible cognitions, (dis-)satisfactions or (dis-)pleasures, and motives or impulses. Now the faculty which is crucial for intentional human action is that of desire, which is defined as “the faculty of the soul for becoming cause of the actuality of the object through the representation of the object itself” (ibid., p. 1012; see also p. 894). Insofar as the nature of the soul is rational and the faculty of desire is exercised in accordance with it (through a representation of the goodness of its object), this faculty is called the will – although Kant does on occasion appear to define the will in other ways. However, Kant attributes a range of propensities and predispositions to human nature in addition to rationality. For example, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), he discusses animality, which includes the propensities for self-preservation, propagation, and community with other beings (Kant 1902–, Vol. 6: 27). Moreover, different human beings can have these propensities and dispositions to different degrees, and hence they can have different characters. Kant’s account of intentional human action can thus be summarized at this point as follows: to say that a human being acts is to say that a substance whose nature involves rationality and a range of propensities and predispositions exercises its faculty of desire (or determines its will) according to its specific character and circumstances so as to bring about in the world an object which it represents as good.

Note that this account of human action is still very general and, as such, must be applicable both to the empirical actions of human beings and to *freely* chosen moral actions. While Kant discusses the empirical actions of human beings in detail in his treatments of empirical psychology and anthropology, we can focus here simply on how the empirical actions of human beings are consistent with the conditions specified by the Second Analogy, namely that they must involve necessity and must follow according to uniform laws of nature, just as all other events in nature do. Indeed, Kant expresses a clear commitment to these conditions as applied to human action:

if we could investigate all the appearances of his power of willing [*Willkür*] down to the ground, then there would not be a single human action that we could not predict with certainty, and cognize as necessary from its preceding conditions. (A549–550/B577–578; cf. also Kant 1902–, Vol. 8: 17)

Now, as Frierson has shown (2005: 1–33), Kant maintains that, in certain circumstances, certain intellectual (higher) or sensible (lower) cognitions are followed by corresponding feelings of (higher) (dis-)satisfaction or (lower) (dis-)pleasure, which in turn are followed by corresponding (higher) motives or (lower) impulses, according to the empirical characters of human beings and the psychological laws which govern them. As a result, cognitions and feelings are the antecedent circumstances, and our actions follow with necessity according to uniform (psychological) laws, just as Kant’s Second Analogy requires.

Kant’s account of freely chosen moral actions involves a number of particularly difficult issues. According to his argument in the Third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, freedom and determinism are inconsistent unless one draws a distinction between the knowable realm of spatio-temporal appearances and the unknowable but still conceivable realm of non-spatio-temporal things in themselves, since that

distinction allows one to maintain determinism with respect to the world of appearances, while still being open to the possibility of freedom for things in themselves. Considerable scholarly and philosophical controversy has arisen over the way in which one is to understand this distinction and the larger doctrine of transcendental idealism, of which it is a foundational element. However, one can largely, if not entirely, avoid some of the most controversial features of Kant's position in sketching a picture of the possibility of the occurrence of freely chosen moral action at the level of things in themselves.

Kant's basic idea is that a human being acts morally if the soul, as a thing in itself whose nature includes rationality, freely adopts a maxim (a subjective principle) which subordinates happiness to the moral law (as expressed by the "categorical imperative") in accordance with its character or, as he puts it, "conformably with the conditions of the subject" (Kant 1902–, Vol. 4: 421). As with Kant's general model of causality, we have a substance (the soul) that exercises its causal powers (its will) according to its nature (its rationality and character) and circumstances (being faced with the choice between happiness and the moral law).

Needless to say, there are several elements of this picture that require further spelling out. One crucial element is freedom. On the one hand, Kant sometimes defines freedom negatively, as **independence from sensible causes** (such as appearances in general and impulses in particular). This kind of freedom, which he calls practical freedom, is assured by moral action's being located at the non-empirical level of things in themselves, because things in themselves are not determined by appearances. On the other hand, he asserts freedom in a positive sense as well – in which case the soul is not only free from external determinations but also, in virtue of its practical rationality, responsible for "absolutely beginning a state" (A445/B473) (and then it is spontaneous) and for giving itself a law, namely the moral law (and then its principle is autonomous). A second crucial element is that the empirical actions of human beings depend on the non-empirical actions (or adoption of a maxim) of the free agents. Kant sometimes expresses this point by saying that a person's empirical character is caused by that person's intelligible character (A539/B567). The intelligible character, by contrast, is basic.

While this description of moral action would require considerable filling out, one can see, at least in bare outline, how one could use it to navigate a number of difficult problems that arise in attempting to explain free will and determinism (Watkins 2005: 301–361). First, it provides clear guidance on whether moral actions are determined by laws of nature, in which case freedom appears to be threatened, or whether they occur independently of such laws, in which case they might seem to be random. Because the agent is an atemporal thing in itself, its actions will not be determined by the laws that govern appearances. (Admittedly, not everyone is immediately comfortable with the notion of an atemporal action, but one might reasonably be more optimistic about making progress in this respect than about tackling the difficulties that come with other possible responses.) At the same time, moral action is not random for that reason, because the agent does act according to his character or nature.

Second, the modal problem posed by the fact that a free action is supposed to be both determined (insofar as it is necessary according to natural laws) and contingent (insofar as the agent could have done otherwise) can be solved, because the laws of nature that

necessarily determine an agent's empirical action derive (at least in part) from the agent's empirical character or nature, which is, in turn, caused (at least in part) by the agent's intelligible character, which is basic. As a result, Kant can maintain that while, given the laws of nature, all the appearances follow with necessity from them, these very laws depend ultimately upon the natures of things in themselves. Given that certain things in themselves, namely rational souls, could have characters that are not necessary, the empirical laws of nature that depend on them could have been otherwise. This claim is consistent with maintaining that the laws of nature which do not pertain to specifically human actions are necessary, since the natures on which they are based might include only necessary properties.

Third, there are problems posed by regress and location: any human action *qua* event is caused by a previous event (such as a desire), which is caused in turn by another previous event, and this goes on either *ad infinitum* (but then a regress ensues) or until one identifies an uncaused event which clearly lies outside the agent's control (but then agency is outside the agent's control). Such problems can be solved too, because human actions do not depend causally solely on events that might lead, via a potentially infinite series of events, beyond an agent's control. They depend instead, at least in part, on agents, which are to be conceived of as substances endowed with rationality and a will. The rejection of an exclusively event-based model of action – and thus of the belief-desire model of human action, which presupposes such a model – in favor of an agent-causal theory provides the means to block the regress through the agent and its nature and to locate the source of an action in an appropriate place, with the agent rather than with a potentially never-ending series of events.

Moreover, Kant's account has one important advantage over many contemporary theories of agent causation. The scenario with which contemporary advocates of agent causation begin is that events in the world not involving humans directly are governed by event causation. Then they introduce some notion of an agent and explain how such an agent is distinct from an event or set of events (for instance in terms of the agents' being 'things' that 'endure' as compared to events whose temporal duration is instantaneous or at least indexed to a specific datable time). The final step is then to explain how such an agent could act freely – where freedom is typically understood in incompatibilist terms – though not necessarily, as Markosian has argued (1999: 257–277). For an excellent instance of this kind of approach, see O'Connor (2000).

However, such advocates of agent causation then encounter the challenge of reconciling event causation, which obtains throughout most of the world, and agent causation, which occurs only in the case of human beings. What happens if one event would, in the normal course of things, cause another event, but an agent cause intervenes so as to cause some other event? Is a 'normal' event no longer sufficient to bring about its effect? How, or by what means, could an agent be in a position to preclude one 'normal' event from having its 'normal' effect? While these questions are not necessarily unanswerable, the advantage that Kant's account enjoys is obvious and real. At the empirical level there is no fundamental difference between human action and the action of bodies, given that in both cases substances bring about events in accordance with their natures, causal powers, and circumstances, which will include other substances, their natures, and their causal powers. Human action involves a different kind of substance: an agent, with a different nature: rationality, and different

causal powers: faculties; but the fundamental philosophical account is essentially the same. As a result, explaining how a human being interacts with a billiard ball is not fundamentally different from explaining how two billiard balls interact. This is not to say that Kant's account of human action solves all problems associated with free will and determinism, or that his theory is without problems of its own. For example, the crucial relations that Kant maintains between the noumenal character of agents and the phenomenal actions that are grounded on them, as well as Kant's agnosticism about this point, present immediate problems. However, his overall account does provide an independent and distinctive perspective on an especially important set of contemporary problems.

See also: VOLITION AND THE WILL (13); REASONS AND CAUSES (17); AGENT CAUSATION (28); MOTIVATIONAL STRENGTH (33); FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM (38); RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTONOMY (39); HUME (63).

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