

# David Sussman on Christopher Insole's "Kant and the Creation of Freedom"

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CHRISTOPHER INSOLE | *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* | Oxford University Press, 2013

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By David Sussman

In the First *Critique*, Kant famously claimed that he was limiting knowledge to make room for faith. This might seem to be a bad deal for the theologian, insofar as Kant's conception of faith is grounded in various moral needs that are themselves expressions of the requirements of pure practical reason. For Kant, revelation serves only to supply analogies and stories that might serve to make these moral requirements clearer or more compelling, but it does not properly add anything important to the content of faith. On this reading of Kant, theology is reduced to being little more than morality's public relations department.

In *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* Christopher Insole offers a corrective to this familiar view of the role of theological concerns in Kant's overall philosophy. Insole argues that at least from the 1750s, Kant's thought was driven in part by a distinctive theological question—how to preserve a meaningful sense of human freedom given that human beings are creations of and dependent upon God.

If God acts freely in creating and sustaining us, what is the connection between such divine freedom and the freedom we might hope to enjoy? Insole contends that Kant's thought on this issue undergoes a profound shift during the 1750s to 1770s, a shift that provides some of the motivation for the emergence of transcendental idealism itself.

Insole observes how in the pre-Critical period, Kant did not seem to take divine freedom to be any threat to human freedom. Instead, during this time Kant held a view that human freedom only required that the proximate sources of action in a free being be aspects of that being, a compatibilist conception of freedom sometimes referred to as 'practical freedom'. Such merely practical freedom does not require the agent to have the possibility of acting otherwise, nor does such freedom presuppose the agent to have 'ultimate responsibility' for beginning any new causal chains. Insole argues that as Kant's views progress, he ceases

to be satisfied with this conception of freedom, and comes to think that human freedom must involve the ability to spontaneously begin a causal series in a way that allows for both alternate possibilities of action (the agent was able not to begin the series) and ultimate responsibility for that series—a combination supposedly satisfied only by 'transcendental' rather than practical freedom, which Kant comes to dismiss as merely the 'freedom of the turnspit'.

What is particularly puzzling about this shift in Kant's account of human freedom is that it is not met with any corresponding change in his understanding of God's freedom. In particular, Kant continues to hold that God lacks the possibility of doing anything other than the good, and so his freedom is compatible with a denial of alternate possibilities. Insole sets out to determine how God's activity differs from our own in a way that makes the principle of alternate possibilities apply only to us. How does divine freedom come to be seen as a threat to human freedom so as to require added constraints on the latter that do not apply to the former?

The first several chapters of *Kant and the Creation of Freedom* serve to lay out Kant's pre-Critical understanding of divine freedom, with particular attention to the question of why God does not need to be capable of acting in any way other than the best. Insole explains that for Kant, God creates basic substances and determines what their essences are. The possibilities for creation, along with associated natural laws, are themselves determined as parts of the divine nature (as are also God's goodness and rationality) and it is from this array of possibilities that the divine will creates. Thus the divine will experiences a kind of 'shaping' by the divine nature, but this shaping does not involve anything alien to God himself, since the divine nature is itself an aspect of the divine will. The divine will does not have the power to do otherwise, insofar as it can choose only from what is made available to it from the divine nature, but neither is the divine will coerced or unfree, insofar as that nature is not really something alien to or separate from the divine will. Here it is hard not to see some intimation of the role that pure practical reason will play in human action in Kant's moral philosophy. In both cases, a will is directed by a deeper aspect of its own nature. Yet since human beings are imperfect, the moral law only governs us through a form of constraint, which finds no analogue in the holy will of God.

In the 1750s, human freedom is just the product of our volition insofar as it is determined by internal psychological sources of the right type. We act freely when, like God, we act from our understanding and will, determined by a proper appreciation of the good. Our effective activity then depends upon the divine mind that makes all inter-substantial causation possible. It is thus God who

ultimately determines whether we act freely or not, so that we do not have any interesting possibilities of doing otherwise nor any ultimate responsibility for our actions.

Insole charts how Kant's view of human freedom then starts to shift in the 1760s and 70s. There are supposedly a variety of motivations for this conceptual change, part of which Insole attributes to Kant's growing fascination with the work of Rousseau. In works like *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, Rousseau brings home to Kant a certain 'horror of enslavement', and with this the importance of understanding freedom in terms of the lack of subjection to others. Kant's pre-Critical picture of human freedom is one of absolute dependence on God, who ultimately determines whether we act from a knowledge of the good or otherwise. Kant also comes to find it difficult to make sense of our culpability and the suitability of punishment on this account, if again we have no real options, and God ultimately directs even our most basic choices. According to Insole, Kant becomes increasingly concerned that this picture of the relation of divine to human freedom runs the risk of turning into a kind of Spinozistic monism, in which God ultimately is the only real substance capable of any truly free choice (p. 84). However, Kant's worries do not seem to include one of the most obvious: that making our action subordinate to God's in this way would not only seem to obviate our responsibility for evil, but would also make God complicit in it. If Insole is right, then worries about theodicy are not yet principle motives for Kant, for reasons that are left unclear.

Insole argues that in the 1760s and 70s Kant progressively comes to see divine freedom not as an enabling condition of human freedom, but as a threat to it. Kant consistently holds that to be free one must not be determined by 'alien' causes, and he supposedly comes to see God's influence as alien to our own will in this way. Although this shift reflects Kant's growing anxieties about human subjection and responsibility, Insole sees little of a direct case for this change, observing that

[i]t is striking perhaps that this particular sheer conceptual shift in Kant's thought, so important in the development of his critical philosophy, manifests itself more by assertion and sympathy than argument. (p. 84)

The central question that Kant arrives at is how human beings can be free when they are created by and completely dependent on God, where God's activity has come to be understood as an alien force relative to human agency. Insole argues that to answer this challenge, Kant needs to find a way in which human agents are free that allows there always to be real alternatives to what they do, and which secures their ultimate responsibility for their actions. Supposedly, this need

is one of the motivations that drives Kant to transcendental idealism. By understanding space and time as merely forms of our intuition, rather than features of things in themselves, Kant can make room for a kind of noumenal first causation that is outside of time in some way.

Insole recognises that this approach comes with two problematic commitments that might be thought ruled out by Kantian epistemic strictures. For creatures to be capable of noumenal first causation, we must be entitled to use the category of substance for noumena, and we must accept the coherence of 'noumenal affection': that is, we must use the category of causation in a way that allows for there to be noumenal causes with phenomenal effects. Insole contends that both features of noumena are consistent with Kant's denial that we can have any knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Insole rejects deflationary understandings of the noumenal that would treat it as merely a limit concept marking out what we cannot hope to know, as well as readings that understand noumena as ordinary objects understood from a particular perspective. If Insole is right, then Kant, for good or ill, did indeed take noumena to be ontologically distinct from phenomena, and believed both that we could know that such noumena exist and that they really do affect the phenomenal world. However, we can have no more knowledge than that: the properties of noumena, and their real possibilities for existence, must remain permanently shrouded from us. We can 'think' of causation relating them, but we can have no knowledge of such.

Insole also argues that there is no problem with using the concept of substance for noumena. Just as the category of cause was available in a way not 'schematised' for use in empirical contexts, so too is the idea of substance. Supposedly, Kant did not deny in the Paralogisms that we can think of the soul as such an unschematised substance, but only that we can draw any interesting conclusions from this fact, such as that the soul is simple or indestructible. So understood, we can understand human freedom in terms of noumenal first causation that satisfies the demand both for alternate possibilities and for ultimate responsibility, despite the fact that all such noumenal substances are themselves created by God. As Insole has it, such a noumenal first cause should not be understood as the first domino to fall in some infinite sequence of them, but rather as a cause that is outside of the series entirely, and which determines the entire character of that sequence, being in a way present in all its moments.

One problem with this model of freedom is that it would seem to make each human being, in every choice, responsible for the entire history of the world. The problem stems from the fact that for Kant, things as they appear are joined together in determinate series by some necessary laws. If I noumenally  $\phi$  (timelessly), it would seem to follow that such  $\phi$ -ing determines not merely

phenomenal facts about my desires and intentions, but also those laws that relate these psychological or neurophysiological states to everything else that counts as their phenomenal causes and effects. Since those causes and effects are themselves related by natural laws to indefinitely many such events, it would seem that in my noumenal choice of any act in particular I am in effect choosing the entire causal nexus, where each strand is ultimately entangled in all the rest. The result would seem to be that *qua* noumenon, I can only make one timeless choice that determines the entirety of the phenomenal world for me. If other people are supposed to share this world, then we must conclude that all such noumenal agents together make one joint, timeless choice that fully determines the character of the world that they then can experience in common.

Insole is sensitive to this worry, although he thinks our responsibility need not spread out so far as to include absolutely everything that is determined by causal law. Instead, following Wood, he argues that our noumenal choice only makes us responsible for the psychological facts of our own character, and that Kant's 'epistemic humility' blocks us from any extensive speculation about how far those facts are implicated in other features of the natural world.

I confess, I don't really understand the reply. It is no violation of Kantian epistemic strictures to recognise that all phenomenal events are bound together, on some level of description, by laws of efficient causation (whether we have any chance of learning what those laws are is a separate matter). Insofar as all events are supposed to be determinately located in one spatio-temporal order, it seems there must be a unique system of laws that embraces them all together. If so, then our noumenal choices could not be limited in their effects to just facts about our character. Those facts in turn are necessarily connected to other natural facts that extend beyond my existence, and which ultimately impinge upon everything else that makes any causal contact, no matter how remote, with anything I think, feel, or do. If so, then there seems to be no way my choice of character can be treated as anything less than a choice of my entire phenomenal world, insofar as my character is a necessary element of that world as it is.

But even if we grant Insole the claim that our noumenal choice only has effect on our character, the resulting picture is still pretty incredible. If he's right, then our free agency is not something to be found in anything like our ordinary, datable efforts, decisions, and strivings. We would not choose something and then, upon further reflection on the results, change our minds and make new choices. Instead, there would be one timeless act of choice of our character, which does not occur before, after, or at the same time as any of the acts in our ordinary empirical biographies. Kant does seem to suggest this picture in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, when he discusses the timeless 'revolution of the

heart' that each of us is called on to undergo. The result of all this seems to be less a satisfying picture of human freedom than a kind of estrangement from our own noumenal choosing. Such choice seems to be less and less something we really do in any familiar sense, and instead becomes a kind of inscrutable fact that lies behind all our choices, somehow both 'always already' and 'never yet' the particular way it is.

Here it seems that we have traded a picture of our complete subjection to God to an equally mysterious subjection to ourselves. Kant had worried about how, if we are completely dependent on God, we avoid subjection to an alien power in a way that would strip us of all responsibility for our actions. On the revised view, it seems that Kant has only recast our own agency in the role of just such an alien power that governs us in ways we can only guess about. Even though such agency nominally counts as our own, we seem to suffer from all the limitations with respect to ourselves as we did before in our relation to God. Kant seems not to have explained how we can be truly free, but instead merely shown how we might experience our own choice as an alien force to which we are subordinated, despite somehow bearing ultimate responsibility for it.

As Insole observes, this picture also makes evil incomprehensible. If our entire character is something that is the product of a timeless noumenal choice, then we cannot understand evil as the result of a failed struggle with out sensible nature. Our sensible nature instead is part of what we really choose: that is, that nature and our over-valuing of it are part of the effect of our bad choosing, and so cannot be a cause of such choice as well. Yet if Insole is right, this is just what Kant concludes: that evil is essentially unintelligible, and that it is a mistake to try to find an explanation for evil that makes it something we can fully understand from the point of view of the agent. Supposedly, this conclusion is just what we should expect from someone, like Kant, who is working fundamentally in the Augustinian tradition.

In the middle chapters of the book Insole focuses on Kant's peculiar insistence that God does not create space and time, nor does he create appearances generally. Here Insole endeavors to dispel what seems to be the 'Titanism' of Kant's view, where it appears that human beings, and their ways of thought, would be responsible for the existence and character of the phenomenal world. Of course, we might just say that God creates phenomena indirectly, by creating us and giving us the forms of intuition that we have, and Insole wonders why Kant does not accept this less dramatic position.

Insole contends that in approaching this issue, Kant is moved by a need to protect both human freedom and God's impassibility, that is, his imperviousness to being effected by anything beyond himself. Insole argues that Kant comes to worry that the closer space and time come to being direct creations of God, the greater the threat of Spinozism. If space and time were direct creations of God, then they would have to apply to things in themselves in a way that is both infinite and absolute. If so, Insole claims, we would no longer be able to conceive of ourselves as distinct from God—God would be spatialised and temporalised, in a way that would require him to be the only substance. Unfortunately, Insole does not spell out the worry to explain why, even if space and time applied to created things in themselves, they would also have to apply to God who is not so created. Kant apparently thought that if space and time were directly created, they would become conditions of God's existence, but the connection is never really made clear. God would seem to escape space and time whether these are direct or indirect creations by the simple fact that he is prior to his own creative acts and therefore to whatever follows from them.

Insole does help answer the charge of 'Titanism' against Kant's position. Space and time are in a sense human creations, and so there is a way in which we might conceive of the phenomenal world as a product of human sensibility. But for Insole the making of space is importantly constrained. God directly creates free noumenal substances, which exist together not in time and space but rather in the 'divine omnipresence'. Space and time are forms of our intuitions, but as such they are also the way that divine omnipresence manifests itself to us. We contribute a form of sensibility here, but it is God's nature that ultimately establishes the character of the world so experienced.

At this point, one might well wonder if anything has really been gained by way of making sense of human freedom. The problem of freedom began with human beings considered as created parts of the causal nexus of the world in time and space. What transcendental idealism has added is a view of ourselves as created noumenal substances who exist together in the divine omnipresence. We can perhaps assert of the latter that they are or at least might be free, but it would seem that most of the worries we had about a created freedom in the former case would return in the latter. Insole argues, however, that for Kant created noumenal substances do not need to stand in a causal series with respect to one another, but instead stand in a relation of community. In the case of a series, each part is wholly subordinated and determined by some other part. In the case of community, however, the members are coordinated but not subordinated to each other. Our warrant for this conclusion is supposedly moral;

the vision of the Kingdom of Ends that Kant describes in the *Groundwork* serves as a model of how free beings could be related to each other as means and ends in a way that acknowledges and preserves the equal freedom of each.

Here Insole seems to pull back just as the issue is coming to a head. Free noumenal agency is possible, or at least conceivable, insofar as we can make sense of this distinction between the reciprocal relations of the fellow members of a community and the structure of a causally ordered series. Yet Insole does not really unpack just what makes something a community, or what noumenal substances would have to be like to be members of one. Insole is surely right that the model Kant has in mind is the Kingdom of Ends, but Insole seems unwilling to wade to any depth in Kant's moral philosophy in order to make the idea of community something much more than a mere place-holder for a distinctive type of relation that has been left unspecified.

Instead of unpacking the idea of a noumenal community, Insole concludes his book by an examining in greater detail just how divine action and human freedom might be related for Kant. Here the central contrast is between three models of how our action might depend upon God's activity. According to occasionalism, God does everything. When other substances would seem to be interacting, it is really the case they are only serving as occasions for God to bring about whatever effects he will, which fortunately are sufficiently regular and uniform as to allow us to predict future events. For the occasionalist, all real agency belongs to God; we merely present him certain opportunities to act in one way or another. Opposed to this is the view that God creates the substances in the world and actively conserves and sustains them in their existence, but their doings are up to them. On this 'mere conservation' view, such substances have a fair degree of independence in their activity. God must allow their action, and must sustain them as they act, but given these conditions their acts are truly their own.

Insole, and much of the mediæval and early modern philosophy, find these options unattractive. Occasionalism would seem to completely strip us of any semblance of agency, while mere conservation would give us a worrisome degree of independence from God. Insole instead recommends some sort of concurrence view, where created beings truly act, but they can do so only through a concurrent act of God's. When I  $\phi$ , I am truly  $\phi$ -ing, but only because God is also  $\phi$ -ing with or through me. Insole thinks that some form of concurrence is the correct model of action, and notes that Kant may appear to subscribe to some version of it as well. However, Insole argues that Kant is really operating in a framework of mere conservation, with the result that his version of concurrence is not one any real concurrentist would accept.

Kant explicitly denies concurrence with respect to natural events, supposedly because such concurrence would indicate some insufficiency of God's power. Natural events, for Kant, are merely conserved. In the case of human action, however, Kant thinks that we make our best effort to do something, and God serves to provide the needed assistance or removal of internal obstacles for us to be successful. For Insole, this does not really count as concurrence at all, at least insofar as the view requires that it is the numerically same act that is willed both by a creature and by God. What Kant has done is broken down the idea of the act into various parts, some of which are wholly effected by the agent, and others of which are wholly effected by God. If Insole is right, this is really just a version of mere conservation in concurrentist dress. God does not directly will the act, but only that the agent has in this instance have effective powers of action.

Insole shows that Kant is either not a concurrentist at all, or at least a very heterodox one. This is a main conclusion of the book, and forms part of a warning that Insole offers to theologians who would hope to draw on Kant:

Kant's denial of concurrentism should be given a central place [...] in any theological reception of his thought. (p. 224)

Yet it is never entirely clear why Kant's view should be rejected, or even treated so warily. As Insole himself concedes, concurrentism has yet to come up with a "clear and intuitive analogy" for just what the relation between human and divine action is supposed to be. Supposedly, this should not surprise us, given how different God is from anything else we might hope to craft an analogy from. That Kant's view goes against a well-established consensus seems to be enough for Insole to reject it. Still, we might hope for some independent evaluation of Kant's view here that goes beyond marking its heterodoxy.

Insole claims that the shortcomings of Kant's approach reveal themselves when we consider the topics of grace and atonement, where God's activity and our action must be brought into focus simultaneously. Insole argues that Kant just has very little interesting to say about grace and vicarious atonement, a high price to pay for anyone operating in a Christian context:

[A] recurring problem for interpreters of *Religion* is that the conceptual space permitted for divine action is restricted at best, and incoherent at worst. (p. 240)

The charge is puzzling, insofar as Kant does in fact seem to have much to say about grace and atonement in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. For Kant, we are obligated to strive toward a kind of virtue that we can never reach in any finite span of time. We attain true holiness only in such an infinite progress in virtue taken as totality. Grace, for Kant, is God's crediting this totality to us at some point in time as if we had already attained it in full. The view is complicated and it may not ultimately be coherent, but it is not clear how it suffers from an excessively restricted conceptual space. (Insole does engage more thoroughly with Kant's peculiar account of vicarious atonement, where each of us, as the 'new man', suffers for the sake of the 'old man' that we are perpetually putting off.) Insole contends that the rejection of concurrentism was one of the motives behind the development of transcendental idealism:

Kant denies concurrentist accounts of the relationship between divine and creaturely action. God creates and conserves noumenal substances, but the phenomena that arise from the interaction of noumenal substances are not creations, and are not directly caused by God. This is, for Kant, an aspect of transcendental idealism, which makes possible human transcendental freedom and protects the divine nature from inappropriate spatialization and temporalization. (p. 240)

Insole maintains that Kant moved from his position of the 1750s that was compatibilist with respect to both divine freedom and natural causes to an incompatibilist with respect to God but not nature. However, Insole argues that had Kant been open to concurrentism, another option would have been available to him. Instead of taking a theologically incompatibilist position at all, Kant could have retained the compatibilism with respect to God's activity. A true concurrentism would have allowed him a way of understanding how our agency and God's do not stand in competition, but how each could be simultaneously realised in an act. If so, then the incompatibilism that required the metaphysics of transcendental idealism could have avoided.

Insole concludes by arguing that Kant never really needed to reject concurrentism at all. Insole notes that Kant sounds close to being a true concurrentist when he talks of how reason acts within us when we act—our awareness and necessarily sensitivity to the moral law could be the beginnings of a model of true *concursum* between the human and the divine. Kant also does not harbour one of the main reasons to object to concurrentism—that it would seem to make God complicit in every wrongful act. Insole argues that Kant has

already accepted that evil is profoundly incomprehensible, apparently in a way that would not be made any worse by adding God's cooperation in its performance.

There is no shortage of secondary works on Kant's conception of freedom, which he himself tells us is the central concern of his philosophy. However, there are relatively few works that examine Kant's pre-Critical understanding of freedom, or the motives behind his shift to the views we more traditionally associate with him. *Kant and the Creation of Freedom* is a welcome remedy to such neglect. Insole's work will be of interest not only to Kant scholars, but also to theologians and philosophers of religion, particularly those interested in the relation of Kant to mediæval and early modern thought. In addition to the central topic of Kant's changing views of freedom, Insole includes helpful discussions of the views of Aquinas, Leibniz, and Suárez, and well as a chapter devoted to whether Kant really defends belief in God and noumenal substances or holds some weaker or more voluntaristic attitude. The only major topic that seems to receive short shrift here is that of theodicy. One might have expected that some of the motivations behind Kant's shifting views of divine and human freedom might have had something to do with exonerating God from any complicity in evil. If Insole is right, though, such concerns never play a major role in Kant's pre-Critical thought. Instead, Kant is supposedly willing to just consign such issues to the general unintelligibility of evil. This claim may well be true, but it is surprising enough to merit more attention than it receives in *Kant and the Creation of Freedom*.

Insole tells us that he began his book with a certain suspicion that Kant was a pernicious influence in the philosophy of religion, in part because he seemed to deify or at least exaggerate the powers and significance of the human subject. Unlike more loyal Kantians, Insole does not see the need to defend every claim of Kant's, and he is willing to recognise where Kant's views lack support, plausibility, or contemporary interest. In so doing he shows how the Critical philosophy is continuous with more familiar theological concerns, while at the same time offering some important caveats for those who would hope to use it as a resource.

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**David Sussman** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA. He specialises in Ethics, Social & Political Philosophy, Moral Psychology, and Kant. His most recent paper, 'Above and Beneath Contempt', is forthcoming in the volume **The Moral Psychology of Contempt**.

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