

Awareness of range of interpretations philosophy essay

[Philosophy](#)



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Normative Ethics Assessment 1

What is Kant's theory of freedom? Discuss Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant's notion of freedom and the categorical imperative in light of Williams' criticisms. In this essay I will begin by looking at Kant's theory of freedom, I will give a description of his theory in order to grant a sound understanding of how it functions. This shall then be followed by a definition and a brief outline of Kant's categorical imperative. After this I will provide an outline of Bernard Williams' criticisms of Kant's theory of freedom, then a discussion on Korsgaard's interpretation of both Kant's theory of freedom and his categorical imperative in light of the criticisms from Williams. So what is Kant's theory of freedom? For Kant, freedom is a form of causality, or a kind of causal power that is possessed by rational agents, or a will that is not only subject to causality but is also able to cause things independently from itself. That is to say that for a will to be described as free would be to say that it can act causally without being caused to do so by something other than itself.[1]Kant makes a distinction between the laws of nature and the laws of freedom or ethics. He highlights this distinction by separating things into two different categories, the rational and the non-rational being. In the case of non-rational beings Kant declares that they can only act causally in the sense that they are caused to do so by some external force or phenomenon; the actions of a non-rational being are always caused by something outside of that being. Kant describes this as natural necessity, something he considered to be the antithesis of freedom, to demonstrate his point he gives

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us an example of a billiard ball causing another to move. If one billiard ball causes another to move, it does so only because it has itself been caused to move by something else.[2] In this instance the objects and actions in question are bound by the laws of physics, they have no jurisdiction over how they behave, each causes the other to react and it could not have been otherwise. Rational beings are those who are capable of thought, and more importantly decision making. Although Kant maintains that these beings are free that is not to say that they are lawless, although these laws exist it must not be possible for such laws to be forced on it by anything other than itself. If it was the case that these laws were imposed on an agent then it could not be thought of as being free, as to be free requires one to possess the ability to have done otherwise. If we could not have done otherwise we would be subject to the laws of natural necessity, in other words the law established within freedom can be nothing other than self-imposed. Kant maintains that morality is something that stems from freedom and this freedom must be presupposed, he asserts that it is not in the realm of possibility that it be proved by any experience of human action, nor can it be proved at all from the point of view of philosophical theory.[3] However he considers it enough for a rational being to act merely under the presupposition of freedom, as if this is indeed the case then the moral laws bound up with freedom would be valid for him just as much as if he were known to be free.[4] Next we will look at the criticisms made by Williams regarding Kant's theory of freedom from his philosophical paper "Persons, Character and Morality. What criticisms does Williams make against Kant's theory of freedom? He emphasises that Kant believes that the moral point of view differs from the non-moral, and

more specifically that it differs from a point of view relating to self-interest. The moral point of view is specially characterised by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons, and that moral thought requires abstraction from particular circumstances and characteristics of the parties.[5] Here Williams is raising doubts about whether a moral code which endorses a single neutral form of morality and discards any phenomenological feeling can generate an accurate concept of freedom for human beings. He believes that freedom must take individuality into account and that Kant's concept does not acknowledge or accept that we derive individual meaning from life, stating that the Kantian approach fashions an impoverished and abstract character of persons as moral agents. [6] Williams asserts that our primary incentives throughout life, and what gives our lives meaning and value, are our personal ventures and projects. Williams believes that these phenomenological burdens are rejected by Kant and that he would perceive them as undermining an agent's freedom. However Williams disputes this, he claims that what makes us free individuals is in fact the variation within our personal ventures and our relationships with others. Williams thinks that instead of recognising humans as individuals Kant's view of freedom gives the appearance that we are ultimately machines operated and governed by moral law. Next Williams moves to discredit Kant's idea of the categorical imperative, here we are told by Kant to act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.[7] Williams again condemns this for failing to recognise what it is that makes us individuals, he doesn't think that we should consider ourselves disconnected moral agents and that we should

avoid becoming so as if we were we would be indicted to obey the unbiased laws of morality. As a consequence this would clearly challenge the idea that we are free thinking individuals, Kantian morality removes the meaning that we derive from life creating ultimately too slim a sense in which any projects are mine at all.[8]If we are to be considered completely free thinking autonomous agents we must be permitted to act selfishly in some instances. Kant demands that morality should always be objective; it is this stress on objectivity that results in the freedom of individuals being lost. We are morally motivated by their experiences. If Kant's view of freedom is sustained morality shows no consideration for the free thinking individual, it does not account for humanity and would therefore result in us being governed by one way of life, eventually resulting in us behaving in the same way as everyone else. Next we shall proceed to observe how Christine Korsgaard analyses Kant's idea of freedom in her essay " Morality as Freedom" given what we now understand from Williams.