

'freedom is an
illusion'



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Brief 106213

' Freedom is an illusion.' Discuss.

Roger Scruton once remarked that there are ' two sources of the metaphysical conundrum of human existence: one is consciousness, the other one is freedom.' (Scruton: 227). Philosophers have long been perplexed by questions of freedom and necessity in human life. This essay will focus on Enlightenment philosophy which has given a formidable response to those who maintained that freedom in the social domain is a chimera. Amongst Enlightenment philosophers Immanuel Kant has probably formulated the most consistent and compelling argument for the existence of human freedom and it is his notion of the intricate connection between liberty and autonomy that will receive most attention in this essay.

Philosophers have often approached the issue of human freedom from two different angles. First, they often conceptualised freedom under the rubrics of the absence or presence of constraints in the social sphere. Political philosophers have mainly engaged in this version of theorising freedom. The question they asked is most poignantly captured by Rousseau who notes that the real mystery of freedom is how we can be in chains and still regard ourselves as free (Rousseau: 181).

While Thomas Hobbes considered freedom a matter of external impediments to an intended action, Rousseau extended this notion of impediment by querying whether social practices and laws should consequently be perceived as constraints and how we could possibly justify the existence of such laws and rules. Rousseau accepted that rules may facilitate the varied

co-operative schemes amongst strangers. Yet, he argued any laws of society clearly required some justification, one that was rooted not in tradition but in reason. He writes:

‘ the problem is to find a form of association... in which each [individual], while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.’ (Rousseau: 191)

The second, and arguably more philosophical perspective which philosophers formulated however takes a more fundamental view of human life. It does not concentrate on the various external constraints which may act as obstacles in our multifarious pursuits of life, but whether we have the capacity to act freely at all.

David Hume framed this viewpoint when he explored the relationship between reason, passion and action in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature* . In an insightful passage he notes that reason may be instrumental in identifying the connections between causes and effects, but must inevitably fail to contribute to the objects of our will. He thereby sets the tone of the argument which Immanuel Kant took up only decades later with such analytic precision. Hume notes:

‘ Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse...We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’ (Hume: 415)

And in a famous sentence, Hume draws the radical conclusion:

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.' (Hume: 416)

But if Hume's radical scepticism as to the influence of reason on individual volition was correct, are we condemned to go wherever our passions and impulses take us? Kant was at pains to point out that human life possesses an ethical quality which cannot be grounded in the manifold desires and urges that individuals happen to find themselves in. Any viable notion of moral conduct must presuppose a capacity to reason and, critically, assumes a notion of freedom that we cannot deny anybody else. Freedom is a prerequisite of ethical behaviour. Kant thought that Hume had overlooked an essential dimension of the relationship between passions and human action. Although he granted that desires and impulses that are contingent upon circumstances may generate the goals of human conduct whether or not we pursue a once identified object of desire or a certain course of action crucially depends on its compatibility with the most fundamental moral law, the categorical imperative, which is

'... the principle to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as an object itself as a universal law.' (Kant: 63)

This leads Kant to conclude that freedom is the most fundamental category of social existence for those that are capable of rationality. As Scruton notes, for Kant 'freedom is the presupposition for the applicability of the moral law' (Scruton: 234). However, if this was all there is to Kant's argument he would

only have presented us with another reason why we ought to assume that individuals act freely when they behave morally.

First of all, Kant reminds us that as humans we are at once part of the world of nature and of the world of reason. As to our impulses and desires that we happen to have, we are part of the animal world. We understand them in terms of necessity, generated by physical circumstances. No moral standards apply. It matters little whether we approve of being hungry or sleepy; ethical maxims cannot alter our state of affairs in any remarkable way. As such, human beings are subject to the natural laws that govern the domain of nature. We cannot suspend these laws even if we disapprove of them.

On the other hand, however, man is a creature that is capable of rational thought and as such he has given himself laws to live by. These laws are often arbitrary, but Kant intends to show that there is at least one law that regulates human life which possesses universal applicability. The issue Kant has to confront is one that echoes Rousseau's dilemma of how to reconcile laws and freedom. For Kant, his question is under which conditions individual agency can impose norms and rules onto itself while still remaining to be unfettered by extraneous circumstances. For Rousseau it was the question of identifying those laws of society that would accommodate individual (external) freedom with legal constraints.

Kant challenges us first of all to consider under which conditions we can speak of a free will. He argues that human volition must be self-determined to be plausibly considered as free. If the will is subject to extraneous

circumstances or influences if ceases to express itself freely in our actions. In this scheme of things, freedom can only be preserved if the moral laws that individuals endorse and accept as their guidance are such that they can accept them voluntarily (Kant: 57-58).

Kant notes that man may come to approve of various rules of social co-operation for a variety of reasons, some of them ethically more obscure than others. What may appear to be actions done out of benevolence may turn out to be done with a personal benefit in mind. Kant is adamant that we cannot accept any rules for spurious or ethically nebulous reasons. Accepting a maxim out of selfishness does not produce a good, but a morally flawed norm. Equally, adopting a morally hazy rule even with best intentions cannot lay the foundations of a just society.

In a brilliant analytical sequence Kant guides us to the solution of this problem: The only truly good entity, he argues, is a good will (Kant: 14-15). It is only determined by itself and so accepts no other authority than itself. In fact, it produces true authenticity of human conduct. Now, any inherently good will must recognise that there is only one maxim that reflects accurately the notion of an ethical norm; Kant writes:

‘ Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ (Kant: 38)

Kant’s argument provides us with a formidable justification for assuming that freedom is the necessary and indispensable condition of human existence given that man has the capacity to act upon the commands of reason: that is the categorical imperative. He writes:

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' Now I affirm that we must attribute to every rational being which has a will that it has also the idea of freedom and acts entirely under this idea. ... (The individual) must regard itself as the author of its principles independent on foreign influences. Consequently, [any individual] must regard itself as free.'
(Kant: 65)

For Kant, being human is tantamount to being free. Only freedom guarantees that we can plausibly speak about moral responsibility. And although Kant's argument in favour of the categorical imperative has attracted much criticism, his idea of freedom and individual autonomy still offers us a remarkable benchmark in normative ethical theory.

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