

# Practical Freedom

——“One from” or “One of” the Natural Causes?——

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## Abstract

The first section of the chapter “The canon of pure reason” in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is entitled: “On the ultimate end of the pure use of our reason”. In the last paragraph of this section Kant wrote: “Wir erkennen also die praktische Freiheit durch Erfahrung, als eine von den Naturursachen, nämlich eine Kausalität der Vernunft in Bestimmung des Willens”. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood translate the passage into English as follows: “We thus cognize practical freedom through experience, as one of the natural causes, namely a causality of reason in the determination of the will”. However, since Kant used an unhappy expression “eine von den Naturursachen”, it is inevitable that a controversy arises about its interpretation. Namely the phrase can also be translated as “(the) one from the natural causes”. Whether one cognizes practical freedom as “one of the natural causes” or as “the one from the natural causes” —that makes all the difference.

In this paper I study that phrase in respect of the probability of its interpretation. First, I make some grammatical examinations. Then I probe Kant’s argument in that section in order to understand the exact meaning of the phrase in its context. Although I find that each interpretation grammatically has both good points and bad points, I conclude from the contextual analysis that we should choose the interpretation “the one from the natural causes” as being justifiable. Then I argue that this interpretation raises no questions in regard to the understanding of Kant’s concept of freedom, because “practical freedom as the one from the natural causes” falls in line with the development of Kant’s philosophical thinking, if we only approve the provisional character of practical freedom. In contrast to this, if we should choose the interpretation “practical freedom as one of the natural causes”, some serious problems would arise in regard to the understanding of Kant’s concept of freedom. At the end of my argument, I also mention those problems which seem to me not to be resolved. Thus I make in conclusion a suggestion that researchers, who ground their argument about Kant’s philosophical thinking, especially his concept of freedom, on that interpretation, should find it worth reviewing.

Keywords: Kant, reason, practical freedom, transcendental freedom, imperative

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## 1. Kant's Text and its English Translation

The first section of the chapter “The canon of pure reason” in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is entitled: “On the ultimate end of the pure use of our reason”. Here Kant mentions three objects to which our reason in its transcendental use is directed in the end: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. However, as he states it, reason in the merely speculative regard is little interested in these objects, because it has in fact no hope of making any use of the discoveries about them, if such are attainable at all. So the importance of these cardinal objects doesn’t ultimately concern our reason for knowing, but for another purpose, that is, the practical. In this view Kant explains the concept of freedom, which he regards as most fundamental of the three, emphatically in its practical sense, differentiating this from its transcendental sense. The following are the two paragraphs with which he concludes that section:

Und da ist denn zuerst anzumerken, dass ich mich vorjetzt des Begriffs der Freiheit nur im praktischen Verstande bedienen werde, und den in transzendentaler Bedeutung, welcher nicht als ein Erklärungsgrund der Erscheinungen empirisch vorausgesetzt werden kann, sondern selbst ein Problem für die Vernunft ist, hier, als oben abgetan, bei Seite setze. Eine Willkür nämlich ist bloß **tierisch** (*arbitrium brutum*), die nicht anders als durch sinnliche Antriebe, d.i. **pathologisch** bestimmt werden kann. Diejenige aber, welche unabhängig von sinnlichen Antrieben, mithin durch Bewegursachen, welche nur von der Vernunft vorgestellt werden, bestimmt werden kann, heißt die **freie Willkür** (*arbitrium liberum*), und alles, was mit dieser, es sei als Grund oder Folge, zusammenhängt, wird **praktisch** genannt. Die praktische Freiheit kann durch Erfahrung bewiesen werden. Denn, nicht bloß das, was reizt, d.i. die Sinne unmittelbar affiziert, bestimmt die menschliche Willkür, sondern wir haben ein Vermögen, durch Vorstellungen von dem, was selbst auf entferntere Art nützlich oder schädlich ist, die Eindrücke auf unser sinnliches Begehrungsvermögen zu überwinden; diese Überlegungen aber von dem, was in Ansehung unseres ganzen Zustandes bekehrungswert, d.i. gut und nützlich ist, beruhen auf der Vernunft. Diese aber gibt daher auch Gesetze, welche Imperativen, d.i. objektive **Gesetze der Freiheit** sind, und welche sagen, **was geschehen soll**, ob es gleich vielleicht nie geschieht, und sich darin von **Naturgesetzen**, die nur von dem handeln, **was geschieht**, unterscheiden, weshalb sie auch praktische Gesetze genannt werden.

Ob aber die Vernunft selbst in diesen Handlungen, dadurch sie Gesetze vorschreibt, nicht wiederum durch anderweitige Einflüsse bestimmt sei, und das, was in Absicht auf sinnliche Antriebe Freiheit heißt, in Ansehung höherer und entfernterer wirkender Ursachen nicht wiederum Natur sein möge, das geht uns im Praktischen, da wir nur die Vernunft um die **Vorschrift** des Verhaltens zunächst befragen, nichts an, sondern ist eine bloß spekulative Frage, die wir, so lange als unsere Absicht aufs Tun oder Lassen gerichtet ist, bei Seite setzen können. Wir erkennen also die praktische Freiheit durch Erfahrung, als eine von den Naturursachen, nämlich eine Kausalität der Vernunft in Bestimmung des Willens, indessen dass die transzendente Freiheit eine Unabhängigkeit dieser Vernunft selbst (in Ansehung ihrer Kausalität, eine Reihe von Erscheinungen anzufangen) von allen bestimmenden Ursachen der Sinnenwelt fordert, und so fern dem Naturgesetze, mithin aller

möglichen Erfahrung, zuwider zu sein scheint, und also ein Problem bleibt. Allein für die Vernunft im praktischen Gebrauche gehört dieses Problem nicht, also haben wir es in einem Kanon der reinen Vernunft nur mit zwei Fragen zu tun, die das praktische Interesse der reinen Vernunft angehen, und in Ansehung deren ein Kanon ihres Gebrauchs möglich sein muss, nämlich: Ist ein Gott? Ist ein künftiges Leben? Die Frage wegen der transzendentalen Freiheit betrifft bloß das spekulative Wissen, welche wir als ganz gleichgültig bei Seite setzen können, wenn es um das Praktische zu tun ist, und worüber in der Antinomie der reinen Vernunft schon hinreichende Erörterung zu finden ist.

(A801–04 / B829–32)

(underlined by HIMI)

Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood translate the above paragraphs into English as follows:

And here the first thing to note is that for the present I will use the concept of freedom only in a practical sense and set aside, as having been dealt with above, the transcendental signification of the concept, which cannot be empirically presupposed as an explanatory ground of the appearances but is rather itself a problem for reason. A faculty of choice, that is, is merely **animal** (*arbitrium brutum*) which cannot be determined other than through sensible impulses, i.e., **pathologically**. However, one which can be determined independently of sensory impulses, thus through motives that can only be represented by reason, is called **free choice** (*arbitrium liberum*), and everything that is connected with this, whether as ground or consequence, is called **practical**. Practical freedom can be proved through experience. For it is not merely that which stimulates the senses, i.e., immediately affects them, that determines human choice, but we have a capacity to overcome impressions on our sensory faculty of desire by representations of that which is useful or injurious even in a more remote way, but these considerations about that which in regard to our whole condition is desirable, i.e., good and useful, depend on reason. Hence this also yields laws that are imperatives, i.e., objective **laws of freedom**, and that say **what ought to happen**, even though perhaps never does happen, and that are thereby distinguished from **laws of nature**, which deal only with that **which does happen**, on which account the former are also called practical laws.

But whether in these actions, through which it prescribes laws, reason is not itself determined by further influences, and whether that which with respect to sensory impulses is called freedom might not in turn with regard to higher and more remote efficient causes be nature—in the practical sphere this does not concern us, since in the first instance we ask of reason only a **precept** for conduct; it is rather a merely speculative question, which we can set aside as long as our aim is directed to action or omission. We thus cognize practical freedom through experience, as one of the natural causes, namely a causality of reason in the determination of the will, whereas transcendental freedom requires an independence of this reason itself (with regard to its causality for initiating a series of appearances) from all determining causes of the world of the senses, and to this extent seems to be contrary to the law of nature, thus to all possible experience, and so remains a problem. Yet this problem does not belong to reason in its practical use, so in a canon of pure reason we are concerned with only two questions that pertain to the practical interest of pure reason, and with regard to which a canon of its use must be possible, namely: Is there a God? Is there a future life?

The question about transcendental freedom concerns merely speculative knowledge, which we can set aside as quite indifferent if we are concerned with what is practical, and about which there is already sufficient discussion in the Antinomy of Pure Reason.<sup>1)</sup> (underlined by HIMI)

## 2. The Point of Controversy

Although Guyer and Wood's translation is undoubtedly correct, it cannot escape being involved in a controversy because Kant's original text is equivocal in the passage which I underlined above. The phrase "eine von den Naturursachen", which Guyer and Wood translate as "one of the natural causes", can also be interpreted as "one from the natural causes". Whether one cognizes practical freedom as "one of the natural causes" or as "one, that is, a freedom from the natural causes"—that makes all the difference. So the question has perplexed interpreters. In Japan formerly many researchers favored the interpretation "one from the natural causes", because they supposed this passage, insofar as it is thus interpreted, to be consistent with the conception of freedom which Kant explicated in "Transcendental Dialectic". However, it seems that recently an increasing number of researchers regard the interpretation "one of the natural causes" as correct. According to them, the concept of practical freedom, explained here in "the Canon of Pure Reason", is obviously different from that in "Transcendental Dialectic", that is to say, two different, perhaps contradictory concepts of freedom coexist in *Critique of Pure Reason*. So in order to justify their position, they need to further investigate the transformation of the concept of freedom in the development of Kant's philosophical thinking.<sup>2)</sup>

## 3. Grammatical Examinations

I begin with some grammatical examinations. To speak frankly, Kant uses here an unhappy, grammatically even faulty expression. Therefore, whichever interpretation we choose, it inevitably leads to some moot points.

(1) Suppose we interpret "eine von den Naturursachen" as "one of the natural causes", as Guyer and Wood do. Then the preposition "von" puts a hard question to us. The most normal expression in German for "one of ~" is: ein(e) plus plural genitive. So Kant would have been able to say: "eine der Naturursachen". If he would have liked to use a preposition, his best choice would not have been "von", but "unter", that is, "among". But in reality, he wrote: "eine von den Naturursachen". It perplexes us above all that the preposition "von" in this phrase is easily associated with "frei von ~", that is, "free from ~". Could Kant knowingly use such a misleading expression? Or can we ascribe it just to his carelessness?

(2) Suppose we interpret "eine von den Naturursachen" as "one from the natural causes", or "the one from the natural causes". Then the use of "eine" puts a hard question to us. It must be taken this time not as a numeral, but as an indefinite demonstrative pronoun referring to the noun "Freiheit", that is, "freedom". Yet, if this is the case, Kant speaks here about "eine Freiheit", that is, "a freedom". Can we justly assume that Kant regards "Freiheit", "freedom", as a numerable noun? It is true that there can be variations of freedom by virtue of the modifiers added to it. However, since freedom itself is an abstract concept, it cannot be numerically multiplied. So, to be exact, the modified freedom should not be

characterized as a freedom, as if it were a numerical instance, but as “that kind of” or “that type of” freedom. In German it could be indicated with a definite demonstrative pronoun. Considering that, Kant should have properly written “die” or “diejenige”, that is, “the one”, instead of “eine”, that is, “one”.

Thus our grammatical examinations reveal the problem as just like the conflict called “antinomy of pure reason”. Neither the thesis nor the antithesis can prove itself to be exact. They can only find fault with each other. Yet, unlike the solution of the antinomy, we must suppose here that only one side gives the correct answer.

#### 4. Contextual Analysis

Now I examine the phrase in question in its context. As I stated it at the beginning, Kant mentions in that section “On the ultimate end of the pure use of our reason” three objects to which our reason in its transcendental use is directed in the end: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. But he states that, even if reason should make with difficulty some discoveries about these objects, they would only prove to be of no utility for its speculative use. So its striving for them must be regarded as grounded on another requirement, that is, its practical use. Kant directs our attention from the speculative to the practical interest of reason through the following statement:

If, then, these three cardinal propositions are not at all necessary for our **knowing**, and yet are insistently recommended to us by our reason, their importance must really concern only the **practical**. (A799–800 / B827–8)<sup>3</sup>

Although Kant’s argument seems to be convincing, we must notice that he continues with his statement as follows:

Everything is practical that is possible through freedom. (A800 / B828)<sup>4</sup>

Thus “the practical” is defined as “what is possible through freedom”. This betrays his argument to be a circular one. Kant claims that the question of the freedom of the will should be left to the practical interest of reason to decide, but “the practical” means just “what is possible through freedom”. Certainly, it is possible that reason should give a positive decision to the question of the immortality of the soul as well as that of the existence of God and then make good use of those concepts. But that is not the case with the question of the freedom of the will, because it is just the precondition for the practical itself. In other words, the possibility of the practical use of reason depends on the freedom of the will.

In the previous transcendental inquiries, that is, in the chapter concerning the resolution of the third antinomy, Kant has already pronounced freedom not to be provable.<sup>5</sup> Freedom in its transcendental signification means the faculty of beginning a series of successive things or states from itself. Insofar as the human being has reason and is of intelligent character, it is not impossible to attribute that faculty to him/her, because reason can perhaps determine his/her action independently of the sensuously perceived causation. However, such causality of reason can never be empirically confirmed. So we cannot explicate freedom in its possibility, let alone in its reality. Transcendental freedom remains a

“problematic” concept.

Being so uncertain of the freedom of the will, yet Kant intends to direct now his inquiries to the realm of the practical. He must anticipate all the fears that the whole realm should prove not to be sustainable. His strategy is to propose a provisional concept of freedom which can be empirically confirmed. This concept is called practical freedom in distinction to transcendental.

In the quoted paragraphs Kant decisively excludes transcendental freedom from consideration, as it has “been dealt with above”. Then he proposes the concept of the faculty of choice (*Willkür*) as the clue to what practical freedom is. A faculty of choice, which can be determined only through sensuous impulses, that is, pathologically, is called animal and is not free. But a faculty of choice, which can also be determined through motives that can only be represented by reason, is characterized as free. Everything that is connected with this faculty of choice or such determination is called practical. Freedom in this practical signification can be empirically proved, because we are distinctly conscious of it. Our faculty of choice is namely determined into action not merely through sensuous impulses, but also reason motivates us independently from them on the basis of its own considerations about the good in regard to our whole condition. And we surely have a capacity to overcome the impressions of the former by the motivation of reason.

Thus reason prescribes to our faculty of choice laws of freedom in the form of the imperatives that tell what ought to happen, in distinction to the laws of nature (mechanism) that deal only with what does happen. Insofar as our faculty of choice complies with the imperatives of reason, our actions are regarded as actualizing practical freedom. There remains the question whether reason, prescribing its laws, is even in these actions itself determined by some further influences and can no more be called free with regard to those higher and more remote causes. But Kant excludes this question, since “it is rather a merely speculative one”. For his present argumentation it is sufficient to confirm that reason gives its precept for conduct to our faculty of choice independently from sensuous impulses. On the basis of that he claims that we “cognize practical freedom through experience”.

## 5. Which interpretation is justifiable?

Whether we cognize practical freedom as “one of the natural causes” or as “the one from the natural causes”? —Seemingly our contextual analysis backs up the former. Kant insists that he doesn’t deal here with freedom in its transcendental signification. Transcendental freedom as the faculty of beginning a series of successive things or states from itself apparently contradicts the causality of nature and is therefore not provable, as has been already explicated. In contrast to this, Kant means by practical freedom the freedom insofar as it can be empirically proved. So we seem to be justified in supposing that Kant counts practical freedom, that is, the motive by reason, among the natural causes to an action.<sup>6)</sup>

Yet we must be reminded that haste often misleads us. Can practical freedom justly be regarded as belonging in the natural causes merely on the grounds that it is contrasted with transcendental freedom and that we are empirically conscious of it? Rather we should recognize that the word “freedom” in Kant’s use basically implies the independence from the natural causality, that is, the laws of nature. Then we must concede that “practical freedom as one of the natural causes” is a self-contradiction. Probably the fact is, Kant means by practical freedom the motivating activity of reason independent of the

sensuous impulses. Insofar as we are conscious of that activity in the form of the imperatives of reason by which we can overcome the sensuous impulses, we can empirically confirm freedom in practical respect. Thus, according to him, we cognize practical freedom through experience, as the one from the natural causes, namely a causality of reason in the determination of the will.

Practical freedom is distinguished from transcendental freedom, not because it belongs among the natural causes, but because it is not yet decided whether or not the law giving reason is itself determined by some further influences. In order to confirm transcendental freedom, reason requires the absolute independence from sensuous impulses and all other natural causes. In practical freedom reason is only recognized as giving the laws in the form of the imperatives and thus proposing the motive for an action to the faculty of choice. To this extent it is regarded as free. Of course, reason itself may be determined just in regard to this action by some other higher and remote causes. If it should be proved that reason does not depend on any other causes more, then practical freedom would be identified with transcendental. But Kant declares that the question does not concern him here in this context, since it is a merely speculative one. Kant asserts that it suffices for us to admit that reason motivates actions giving its laws in the form of the imperatives, in order to proceed from the speculative to the practical realm.

## 6. Practical freedom and transcendental freedom

As has become clear, in consequence of the contextual analysis I choose the interpretation “the one from the natural causes” as being justifiable, although each interpretation seems to have both good points and bad points. It seems that this interpretation raises no questions in regard to the understanding of Kant’s concept of freedom, because “practical freedom as the one from the natural causes” falls in line with the development of Kant’s philosophical thinking. We have only to approve the provisional character of practical freedom. If the pending question, whether reason is determined by some other causes, should be answered with “no”, then practical freedom would get rid of its provisional character and be in the end incorporated with transcendental freedom. But according to Kant, the question is rather a speculative one and it is not the place to investigate it.

As a matter of fact, Kant assumed that he could neglect the question, because the whole argument concerning the practical could be founded on the concept of practical freedom. So, to be exact, Kant himself would not regard practical freedom as provisional. His intention is represented in the next section, where he outlines a three-stage-plan for his philosophical thinking. He says:

All interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions:

**What can I know?**

**What should I do?**

**What may I hope?**

(A805–6 / B833–4)<sup>7)</sup>

And his following statement is the most interesting to us:

The second question is merely practical. As such, to be sure, it can belong to pure reason, but in that

case it is not transcendental, but moral, and thus it cannot be in itself a subject for our critique.

(A806 /B834)<sup>8)</sup>

Kant means that, because we can manage in the realm of the practical without transcendental freedom, there will be no need for transcendental inquiries, nor should he write the second critique.

Of course, we know that in reality Kant had to conduct his study of the practical realm on a larger scale than he had planned and to write eventually *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). His crucial step was made already in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Namely he divided in that book the imperatives of reason into two types: hypothetical and categorical. Hypothetical imperatives indicate mere practical freedom, where the law giving reason is determined by some other causes. Categorical imperatives indicate practical freedom that is to be identified with transcendental freedom, because the law giving reason is here no more determined by any other causes, but is acknowledged as beginning a series of successive things or states from itself. This absolutely spontaneous mode of law-giving by reason is called autonomy of will, that is, of practical reason and the law is called moral law. Thus practical freedom is incorporated with transcendental freedom as the absolute spontaneity of pure reason through the medium of categorical imperatives, autonomy as well as moral law. Now the treatment of the realm of the practical based on “moral” freedom requires the elaboration of the second critique.<sup>9)</sup>

Now, at the end of our argument, I also mention the problems that would arise in regard to the understanding of Kant’s concept of freedom when we should choose the interpretation “practical freedom as one of the natural causes”. “Freedom as a natural cause” —this concept cannot be obviously incorporated into the development of Kant’s philosophical thinking afterwards and contradicts even the argument that Kant puts in the part of “Transcendental Dialectic”. It seems to be a hangover from the previous period, that is to say, 1770’s, when Kant still counted the motives from reason among natural causes. Interpreters offer a plausible explanation for this disorder, presuming that Kant wrote the chapter “the Canon of Pure Reason” earlier than other parts of *Critique of Pure Reason*. According to them, Kant could identify practical freedom with a natural cause in “the Canon of Pure Reason”, because his thinking was not yet mature for his “critical philosophy”. Yet, after that, he exactly explored the problem of freedom in “Transcendental Dialectic” and came to separate freedom strictly from the natural causality.

However, I wonder how they explain the fact that the context of the controversial section is constructed on the basis of the clear distinction of practical freedom from transcendental. The conception of freedom as the faculty of beginning a series of successive things or states from itself, which should be the result of the later exploration, is in fact presupposed there. Moreover, supposing that the phrase “practical freedom as one of the natural causes” had been put there as a hangover from the previous period, Kant could have revised and corrected it by the completion of *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to remove the disorder. But in fact, he left it intact even in the second edition of the book, 1787.

At present day, it seems that most English speaking researchers choose the interpretation “practical freedom as one of the natural causes” and the number of Japanese researchers who choose it increases. Yet I must pose a question about the justifiability of that interpretation. So I would like to make a suggestion that researchers, who ground their argument about Kant’s philosophical thinking, especially his concept of freedom, on that interpretation, should find it worth reviewing.



I am much obliged to Mr. Jean-Pierre ANTONIO, my respected colleague, for his kindness to correct my manuscripts.

### Notes

- 1) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1998, pp. 675–676.
- 2) Atsuhiko HORO squarely meets this problem in his recent laborious work. His lucid analysis is very instructive to me, although I ultimately don't share his choice. Cf. *Kant no Dotokutetsugaku Kenkyu Josetsu — Jiyu to Dotokusei— (Introduction to the Study of Kant's Moral Philosophy —Freedom and Morality—)*, Koyo Shobo, Kyoto, 2001.
- 3) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 674.
- 4) *ibid.*
- 5) Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially pp. 532–546.
- 6) Atsuhiko HORO argues that the contextual analysis should convince us of the truth of the interpretation “practical freedom as one of the natural causes”.
- 7) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 677.
- 8) *ibid.*
- 9) In regard to this development I argued in part in my previous article: “Immanuel Kant's Four Questions and His Plan for Anthropology”, in: *Suzuka International University Journal No.10*, Japan, 2004, pp 71–78.

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