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Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason

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**Freedom and Liberty**

When Immanuel Kant wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason,* he offered a paradigm shift in metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology. His place as the most modern and innovative philosopher of his time is enshrined in the history of philosophy. Kant’s contemporaries could perceive how his new transcendentalism signaled a significant contribution to Enlightenment thought, but they could not have realized that the man who coined the phrase, “Age of Enlightenment”[[1]](#footnote-1) would bring about the end of an era of Enlightenment thought. Taking a closer look at the first *Critique,* and its conversation with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy of freedom which proceeded it, demonstrates Kant’s advancement at its most significant, the proof of freedom.

“Man is born free; and is everywhere he in chains”[[2]](#footnote-2) This provocative introduction to *The Social Contract* is a brilliant hook to the work in which the conditions of our freedoms are investigated to create just laws for a political society. Freedom for Kant is much the same. The imagination is free and our will to legislate universal principles is free, but it is restricted by empirical chains which limit pure reason’s grounds for certainty. Kant, an admirer of Rousseau, saw a systematic metaphysical connection to Rousseau’s empirical observations regarding freedom. The most notable association of the concept of freedom is to be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason’s* antinomies, in which Kant demonstrates how two seemingly opposing viewpoints can at the same time be true through transcendental logic. This is radical in its time because unlike Rousseau, who finds freedom and the free will through God, or the natural law theorists who grounded freedom in nature, Kant grounded freedom in reason. This was necessary because in a political community like those Rousseau postulates, belief in God, Natural Law Theory or the Leibnitzian “best possible world” are too flimsy to ground laws and even more so with which to derive freedom. Kant found freedom as an *intrinsic* quality of all people. As Velkley characterizes it, “Central among these perplexities is the question of the place of philosophic reason in human life—the relation of such reason to the human good, social and individual. Kant’s foremost instructor and inspirer in this reflection is Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”[[3]](#footnote-3) From this basis, he founds his remaining project of moral philosophy.

This view of freedom is not the only place where Kant and Rousseau intersect with one another, nor is the fact that Kant kept a framed picture of Rousseau in his study[[4]](#footnote-4). Kant’s project of stripping away the false certainty provided by pure reason aims to demonstrate the power of the individual as a legislator. The laws set forth by a universalizing individual would be constant with a “common sense”[[5]](#footnote-5) in the transcendentally ideal model which will bring about agreement on certain moral principles with which to live, largely, the categorical imperative. Here, Kant’s “common sense” sounds remarkably similar to Rousseau’s “general will” and this is no coincidence. Rousseau binds law to the general will by saying “when the whole people decrees for the whole people, it is considering only itself; and if a relation is then formed, it is between two aspects of the entire object, without there being any division of the whole. In that case the matter about which the decree is made is, like the decreeing will, general. This act is what I call a law.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Practical, legal freedom then was an inspiration to Immanuel Kant’s project as a moral philosopher perhaps giving Kant a new relevance as a political philosopher. Afterall it is no coincidence that in both Rousseau’s “Discourses” and Kant’s “Toward Perpetual Peace” both thinkers determine a limited Republic to be the most ideal form of government.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Viewed in the light of Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?” it is strikingly clear why this quality of freedom is so instrumental to the developing age. Kant says in the first paragraph “Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding, that is the motto of Enlightenment.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Taking on the agency by thinking for yourself was a radical declaration of independence. Another Declaration of Independence, that of the United States of America, taken besides Kant’s projects of this era and reflective of Rousseau’s work in the years proceeding it, illuminates how freedom and autonomy and inextricably linked to this Kant-Rousseau connection. Here we must turn to the details of the third antinomy. Although it begins from cosmological and thus highly abstracted theoretical grounds, it establishes a practical allowance for the spontaneity of acts i.e., transcendental ideal freedom. This is brought about by an antinomy where the thesis and antithesis being compared are the following: “The causality according to laws of nature is not the only causality, from which the appearances of the world can thus one and all be derived. In order to explain these appearances, it is necessary to assume also a causality through freedom.”[[9]](#footnote-9) And “There is no freedom but everything in the world occurs solely according to laws of nature”[[10]](#footnote-10). Before reconciling these two theses it is worthwhile to point out that laws, be those natural, God given, or reason produced, are all connected in their ability to order events in time and space as a casual chain. The proof for freedom will require reference to a beginning of the causal chain. There is a tension of cause and beginning which is highlighted in the theoretical *Critique of Pure* Reason, making it an apt text to treat the inspiration of Rousseau on Kant more so than the more rational *Critique of Practical Reason.* If freedom is to have any basis at all, it must be as a condition *a priori* to make a spontaneous change due to the legislation in the agency of the will.

The argument given by Kant for the possibility of freedom of a spontaneous cause is a negative argument. A chain with no freedom for a spontaneous cause would be circular, looking back further and further for a cause that must have begun the chain, but needs a cause itself. This resembles Aristotle’s reasoning for the necessity of a prime mover[[11]](#footnote-11) and the key word here is “necessity.” The antinomy is resolved by allowing the possibility of freedom while accepting that natural law proceeds from spontaneous acts of freedom. Kant says here that, “Now, to be sure, we have in fact established this necessity of a first beginning, ensuing from freedom, only insofar as this is required for making comprehensible an origin of the world, whereas all subsequent states can be taken to be a succession according to mere natural laws. Yet, having once proved thereby (although not gained insight into) the power of beginning entirely spontaneously a series in time, we are now also permitted to let different series begin spontaneously, even in the midst of the course of the world, as regards [not time but] causality, and to attribute to their substances a power of acting from freedom.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For something to be *a priori* it must be necessary and universal. It is universal because the chain of events caused would be perceived as phenomena universally e.g., a billiard ball causing another to move via contact is a universally observable phenomenon. Henry Allison states this argument concisely in the following passage in which he demonstrates each step of Kant’s rejection of natural law as the sole legislator.

“4. Since the ‘causality of the cause through which something takes place is itself… something that has taken place,’ it ‘presupposes, in accordance with the law of nature’ its own antecedent cause, and so on. 5. Consequently, on the assumption that ‘everything takes place in accordance with mere laws of nature’, there will always be only a relative and never a first beginning, and consequently no completeness of the series on the side of the causes.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Therefore, the only solution to such a deduction is to apply the language of transcendental idealism. Kant is not only demonstrating the aptitude of this new logic for philosophical ponderances but is being a salesperson for its necessity in the framework of modern philosophy. This same necessity applies to the concept for freedom. Without it, we can go no further as philosophers. This is a direct reply to the German philosophers Wolff, Leibnitz, Spinoza, and Baumgarten who Kant feels have failed to make a modern turn in the possibility of the future philosophy by being trapped by a realist paradigm.

In the proof of the antithesis of freedom Kant illustrates that each effect must follow a cause necessarily and this can only be true in reference to time because Kant has previously demonstrated in the first *Critique* that subsequent moments cannot be compared independent of the faculty of time and must be connected in the same space. Otherwise, there would be a contradiction in the existence of two spaces as needing to exist in the same to be compared. A single space is the condition for any comparison to be intelligible.[[14]](#footnote-14) Kant concludes that, “Since the substances in the world have always been—or since at least the unity of experience makes such a presupposition necessary—there is no difficulty in also assuming that the variation by the states of these substances i.e., a series of their changes, has likewise always been, and that we therefor need not seek a first beginning, whether mathematical or dynamical. The possibility of such an infinite organization, without a first member in regard to which everything else is merely subsequent, cannot be made comprehensible.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Kant indicates here that while it is possible that most causes can be traced to a natural law, there is a possibility for freedom in a first cause. If there is transcendental freedom as a first cause, a spontaneous action undetermined by a natural law, then there is possibility of further spontaneous acts. These acts are freedom. In Kant’s own definition, Transcendental freedom is “the power of beginning a state spontaneously… in order to account adequately for any given appearance.”[[16]](#footnote-16) From the world dominated by religion and natural science, Kant has rescued a sliver of freedom from the wreckage of what he saw as philosophy’s shortcoming since the time of the ancient philosophers. With the possibility of freedom established it is necessary to look further into transcendental idealism to see show the opportunity for an act of freedom is possible.

Time and Space are manifold; one cannot exist without the other. The manifold in harmony with the imagination is what makes understanding possible. Because we cannot experience objects outside of time and space, and cannot understand objects without the power of imagination, there is nothing that can be known outside of a transcendental idealism. It is an idealism rather than a realism because space and time and not facts of the world itself, but only powers with which rational beings can make sense of the impressions that phenomena leave on us. Kant adds to his critique of realism that “were we to yield to the illusion of transcendental realism, neither nature not freedom would remain.”[[17]](#footnote-17) If the turn to idealisms does not stand, there is no room for nature or freedom. Time and space as a unified manifold are important regarding how causes occur. We cannot observe change without these faculties. To understand the change that was observed, the power of imagination can be used to construe how the impressions can be impacted in different ways. The fact that we can conceptualize possible scenarios as intuitions demonstrates a free play of the imagination that is not fixed by natural laws and is a demonstration of practical reason’s capacity. “Reason does not…follow the order of things as they present themselves in appearance, but forms for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas…according to which it declares actions to be necessary, even though they have never taken place, and perhaps will never take place.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Freedom being possible in the imagination alone does not prove Kant’s belief that there is freedom and through which there is moral agency. But the freedom of the imagination combined with the possibility of a practical freedom gives a logical framework with which Rousseau can be understood.

Rousseau’s criticism of slavery is bolstered by Kant’s proof of an *a priori* freedom of the senses. We cannot give up experiencing freedom in the same way that we cannot give up our sensibility of time and space. When Rousseau writes, “To say that a man gives himself freely, is to say what is absurd and inconceivable; such an act is null and illegitimate, from the mere fact that he who does it is out of his mind.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Kant’s argument for the necessity of freedom shows how madness is the only thing that could make a man believe he has the ability to give up his freedom and thus, his autonomy. However, a new tension has arisen in Man’s inability to give up their freedom. Rousseau writes, “What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and an ultimate right to everything he tried to get and succeeds in getting; what he gains in civil liberty and the proprietorship of all he possesses.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The basis of the social contract is that we give up natural freedoms in service of civic freedom, but on the argument against slavery freedom cannot be given up. This could be reconciled by saying that one freedom is given up for another and thus freedom never ceases in the subject, and this would satisfy Rousseau’s account, but Kant’s transcendental freedom could not be given up in such a way. Further, Rousseau asserts that “men cannot engender new forces, but only unite and direct existing ones, they have no other means of preserving themselves than the formulation, by aggregation, of a sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance. These they have to bring into play by means of as single motive of power, and cause to act in concert.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This account recommends that all causes are already in a state of movement and that man can do little to engender a new force even through the force of the free will. The former passage could be dismissed as using the word liberty rather than freedom and thus, saving Rousseau from a disagreement with Kant, but the latter passage cannot demonstrate the same agreeableness. I assert here that Kant makes a radical departure from Rousseau while still integrating Rousseau’s method. The language of the human capacity to perceive a unity of “forces” is found in Kant’s unity of the manifold and imagination. This manifold allows the perception of forces at play to be recognized and understood by a rational being. Rousseau’s defense of freedom has been given room to stand metaphysically by Kant and has been furthered in argument. The conception of freedom that is discoverable in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is therefore the most solid case for the possibility of freedom.

*The Social Contract* is primarily a piece of political philosophy. It aims to demonstrate how society functions as a community and how freedom is what makes that possible. It was discussed above how the imagination and the manifold create the circumstances for understanding. For them to prove a political end it must be seen how legislation is possible. It was mentioned above, with the quote from Velkley, that Kant and Rousseau pursue a similar project in making laws that apply to a community. For Rousseau, these laws can be found in the general will of the subjects which legitimates its right over the adherents of the contract, in Rousseau’s words, “when the whole people decree for the whole people, it is considering only itself; and if a relation is then formed, it is between two aspects of the entire object, without there being any division of the whole. In that case the matter about which the decree is made is, like the decreeing will, general. This act is what I call a law.”[[22]](#footnote-22) For Kant, the laws are found in a universalization of the individual will. The very fact that a law is universalizable makes it viable for consideration. Universal legislation is the only basis with which a practical law is possible. Taken in the context of a State, Kant would say that laws must be provided for by each individual’s practical reason. Hence, practical reason could lead to an understanding of the ability to exercise certain freedoms from within a social contract. This is a point with which Kant and Rousseau can agree upon. Both thinkers want to say that law can come from reason and people are unable to give up freedom (either totally for Kant or a version of freedom either natural or civic in Rousseau) these laws should be minimal in number and obvious upon contemplation. However, Kant has yet to show why that which is universalizable is legislative, which above is part of the condition of practical reason. Deleuze clarifies this point in saying that “imagination is not itself a legislative faculty. The imagination embodies the mediation, brings about the synthesis which relates phenomena to the understanding as the only faculty which legislates in the interest of knowledge.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Because the imagination needs the manifold in order begin legislating, so long as freedom is possible and Kant’s transcendental idealism is to be believed, people can legislate using their own practical reason.

Kant will provide a proof of the individual’s ability to legislate by use of the imagination to picture a universalized law applying to all others being free and equal to ourselves (otherwise formulated as the Categorical Imperative) in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Groundwork.[[24]](#footnote-24)* These texts are the turn of Kant’s theoretical proof of freedom into a practical proof of freedom, which are relevant to the first *Critique* in that “Kant is there concerned to provide a transcendental framework for a unified theory of rational agency, one that includes but is not limited to moral agency.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Moral agency then will give man the possibility to legislate and answer for Deleuze’s question about the capacity of imagination to legislate. However, this relies on the acceptance that the transcendental freedom proves the capacity of a free will and thus moral agency which goes on to prove practical freedom. This is essential for Kant because, as Allison explains, Kant writes in the Dialectic that “the practical concept of freedom is based…on this transcendental idea’ and that ‘the denial of transcendental freedom must…involve the elimination of all practical freedom.”[[26]](#footnote-26) This is the reason that the present paper is focused on the transcendental idea of freedom, because without it, Kant and Rousseau’s robust defense of freedom fails.

Turning back to Rousseau’s conception of freedom, *Emile* furthers this argument as an educational one because the perfect education is one in which reason is taught to be perfectly exercised.[[27]](#footnote-27) In Emile, Velkley argues that “Rousseau provides Kant with insights into the nature of reason of a twofold character: (1) reason, in a profounder fashion than Kant previously thought, is the source of obstacles to justifying the moral view; (2) at the same time, reason is as its core ’freedom‘ so a non-theoretical form of reason exists that can justify the moral understanding of the order of the world.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Kant says this himself in his lectures published in the *Remarks[[29]](#footnote-29)* by saying of Rousseau that, “‘The chief aim of Rousseau is for education to have the character of freedom and to produce a free human being.’”[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, Rousseau prompted Kant’s conviction that reason can justify freedom and thus ground the practical freedom that he argues for in his works of Moral philosophy. The question of “what ought I do?” in the practical philosophy is a question of freedom in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* in which it is apt to ask, “What can I hope for?” Given the transcendental proof of freedom, what can be hoped for is the possibility of spontaneous action brought about by the free will.

Rousseau’s views on freedom also impacted Kant through the “state of nature” explored in the *Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract.* The Hobbesian state of nature[[31]](#footnote-31) and formulation of the social contract is not wholly incompatible with that of Rousseau, the point of departure is that Rousseau sees that peace can only be archived through the exercise of freedom brought about by a society governed by laws determined by the general will rather than laws to maintain order imposed by a monarch. Kant sees these depictions as a point of interest not in anthropology, which he regards as a science, but as a theoretical standpoint in philosophy. The necessity of a free will in legislating, no matter the state of nature “in fact,” is a thought experiment in the use of the free play of the imagination which further proves the rejection of the necessity of empirical conditions to provide a basis of freedom. “’Freedom’ as ‘the state of nature’ seems now to be an answer to his questions, because ‘the state of nature’ is only an idea, not an empirical condition.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The distrust of empiricism and the criticism of enlightenment from Rousseau made them allies of sorts against a dogmatic realism which ignited Kant’s philosophical quest. If freedom requires the shedding of dogmatism, both rational and empirical, then it is a worthwhile project for these most modern of thinkers. The answer to “what can I hope for?” turns out to be a revolution in philosophical thought where human agency provides the basis for a political community, a moral individual, and a cosmological metaphysics that are consistent with the spirit of the age and the scientific progress of Isaac Newton.

The state of nature also impacts on Kant’s theory of freedom in the language of agency in individuals. Rousseau’s natural man is perfectly free as an agent and uses his own agency to establish a community with others who have the same power and agency. As Cassirer says, “All parts of Rousseau’s philosophy hold together…and express the central doctrine of Rousseau’s vision—the belief that man, by nature good, can transform himself into a good citizen in a good society.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Kant as an individualist in his moral philosophy can be seen in connection with the individual agency of free man. Transcendentally speaking, the unity of the manifold and imagination are also natural powers which autonomous man uses to understand the world and their place in it. That place includes a location within a cosmological, moral, and political community.

The final connection between the two Enlightenment critics is the legacy of their conception of freedom. The relevance of their arguments of freedom are those which the modern idea of liberal democracy, human rights, and civil justice assume. By assigning agency to all humans and rejecting the notion of nullifying one’s freedom, modern citizens are assumed to have certain inalienable rights. These rights, despite the opening language of the U.S. Declaration of Independence[[34]](#footnote-34), are not granted by God or nature, but by reason. The critical project of Kant gives Rousseau’s concept of freedom a base with which all humans rights can be built. In the crafting of modern representative governments, Rousseau’s criticisms and advice are recognized globally as influences by liberal and conservative democrats alike. Further, Kant’s ethics, metaphysics, and most importantly, the concept of the free will have permeated into social and political society in a profound way. The language of modern freedom is that which Kant found in Rousseau and gave to the modern world. The inhabitants of their world and the rational agents in question, although slavery is not still present in the sense of the 18th and 19th Centuries, were in search of relief from oppression and the “ought” of Kant’s practical freedom and the “what we can hope for” in his theoretical philosophy are still being realized even today.

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1. Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” 1886, Berlin [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1787, France [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Velkley*, Freedom and the End of Reason,* xi [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe,* pp. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* Ak §21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* pp. 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant, “Toward Perpetual Peace” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kant, “What is Enlightenment,” pp.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A444/B472 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A445/B473 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* Book XI [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A450/B478 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom,”* pp. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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18. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A548/B576 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* pp. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* pp. 191 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, pp. 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* pp. 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy,* pp. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom,* pp. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Allison & Kant, *Theory of Freedom,* pp. 55-56 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rousseau, *Emilé* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Velkley*, Freedom and the End of Reason,* pp. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Shell, *Kant’s Remarks and Observations* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Velkley*, Freedom and the End of Reason,* pp. 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Hobbes, *Leviathan,* Book 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Velkley*, Freedom and the End of Reason,* pp. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* pp.18 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jefferson, Et Al, Declaration of Independence [↑](#footnote-ref-34)