

An Analysis of Two Interpretations of Freedom

The scientific worldview is one that people today take for granted. It is based on the assumption that natural laws exist which deterministically cause everything to happen in the external world. As science refines its causal account of the world, the concept of human free will becomes more anomalous. If we live in a world where everything is strictly determined, then how is it that freedom can operate? After all, the inner sensation of choosing one alternative over another seems anything but causally determined. It seems obvious to us that we could just as likely choose one alternative over another. Having chosen one alternative, it is rare that we would deny that we could have chosen otherwise. Both Peter Berger and Immanuel Kant speak about the notion of human freedom and its anomalous relationship to the scientific worldview. In a passage from *Invitation to Sociology*, Peter Berger states that “an object, or an event, that *is* its own cause lies outside the scientific universe of discourse. Yet freedom has precisely that character. For this reason, no amount of scientific search will ever uncover a phenomenon that can be designated as free.” (Berger, p. 122) In a similar vein, Kant says that “we can explain nothing but what we can reduce to laws whose object can be given in some possible experience. But freedom is a mere idea, whose objective reality can in no way be shown in accordance with laws of nature and consequently not in any possible experience.” (Kant, p. 58)

Superficially, both of these thinkers are espousing a similar point of view with respect to exactly how or where freedom fits into the scientific scheme of things; namely, that it doesn't fit at all. However, underneath this superficially similar outlook lay two quite different accounts of freedom. For Berger, freedom is a

sociological concept, and it finds its validity from within a sociological perspective. For Kant, freedom is a metaphysical concept used to explain the possibility of ethical choice. This paper will critically analyze both of these perspectives of freedom put forward by Berger and Kant, pointing out the ways in which they are similar and the ways in which they diverge.

Both Berger and Kant agree that the notions of freedom and causality maintain a problematic, although not necessarily contradictory relationship. Berger writes: "There is no way of perceiving freedom, either in oneself or in another human being, except through a subjective inner certainty that dissolves as soon as it is attacked with the tools of scientific analysis." (Berger, p. 124) Kant makes a similar claim. He writes: "where determination according to the laws of nature ceases, there likewise ceases all explanation and nothing remains but defense, i.e., refutation of the objections of those who profess to have seen deeper into the essence of things and thereupon boldly declare freedom to be impossible." (Kant, p. 59) In both of these passages, Berger and Kant are pointing out the difficulties in attempting to account for free will using the assumptions of science. Causal physical laws, according to a scientific world view, operate everywhere and upon everything, without exception. If the events of the world all arise as the inexorable play of unchanging causal laws, then the inner perception of our freedom should also be accountable in terms of these causal laws. However, it is the very same inner sensation of freedom that makes us realize this cannot be so. Given two alternatives, say going to a theatre and going to rent some movies, a person feels in no way compelled to choose one or

the other of these choices. Internally, we are able to deliberate and weigh up certain advantages and disadvantages of each choice. We might choose one option one day and the other on another day, dependent on numerous factors, including but not limited to mood, convenience, cost, and the opinions of others. Nevertheless, when we have finally made our choice, we feel in no way 'causally compelled' to have chosen one way over another. We feel somehow as if we could have chosen otherwise. We were equally free to choose the other alternative at the time we made the choice. While a scientist in a laboratory can predict with almost perfect certainty the trajectory of an object or the amounts of product created in a chemical reaction, she would still be unable to determine one's choice of the most mundane of daily activities. It is this tension between free will and causality that both Berger and Kant recognize, and they both come to similar conclusions about it: our subjective feelings of freedom cannot be adequately accounted for within the framework of causality, nor can they simply be explained away as being of no consequence.

While both of these thinkers start from this common ground, they end up with two different accounts of freedom. As a sociologist, it is no surprise that Berger believes freedom to be an irreducibly sociological concept. He advances an analysis of it that takes into account an individual's social constraints and the sociological spectrum of the possibilities available to them. As a philosopher, Kant's interest in the concept of freedom is motivated by metaphysical considerations. That is, given a world of appearances that are determined by the laws of causality, how is it that a person is able to make free ethical choices that

fly in the face of their self-interest and are essentially unpredictable from any outside observer. While Berger's examples of 'freedom in action' are related to the individual's attempt to 'stand outside' of the socially proscribed roles that people usually have in sub-cultures, revolutions, and deviance, Kant's examples of human freedom are related to our inner moral law and the possibility of making free ethical decisions.

Berger uses as a paradigmatic example of freedom Weber's theory of charismatic leaders and the revolutions that often occur in their wake. He writes that "charisma constitutes a tremendously passionate challenge to the power of predefinition. It substitutes new meanings for old and radically redefines the assumptions of human existence." (p. 127) For Berger, the possibility of a revolution within a society is one example of freedom in action. Because "each social situation is sustained by the fabric of meanings that are brought into it by the several participants," (p. 126) an individual is always able to change or subvert the meanings that are being used in any particular social situation. Freedom is thus the "possibility of breaking through the 'world-taken-for-granted' of a society." (p. 126) The charismatic leader represents one possible option for exercising individual freedom in the face of social conditioning and conformity. Furthermore, this sort of leader is always a novel and unpredictable force, not subsumable to laws of causality and predictability. Another example that Berger uses to illustrate his sociological conception of freedom is the existence of deviance in society. Deviance occurs "[w]hen an individual refuses to recognize the social definition of economic rights." (p. 130) This refusal to recognize the

norms of one's society is an individual's free choice, and to that degree is another example of Berger's concept of freedom.

In sharp contrast to Berger's sociological account of 'freedom in action' stands Kant's notion of freedom as an idea that grounds the 'categorical imperative,' i.e. the moral law that governs all human actions. This notion of Kant's is evident when he writes:

Thus the question as to how a categorical imperative is possible can be answered to the extent that there can be supplied the sole presupposition under which such an imperative is alone possible—namely, the idea of freedom.... on the presupposition of freedom of the will of an intelligence, there necessarily follows the will's autonomy as the formal condition under which alone the will can be determined. To presuppose this freedom of the will... is not only quite possible...but is without any further condition also necessary for a rational being conscious of his causality through reason and hence conscious of a will as he makes such freedom in practice... (Kant, p. 60)

The categorical imperative, for Kant, is the command given by the intelligible world to follow its laws, i.e. the laws of reason. It is the idea that we 'ought' to do the right thing in any given ethical situation, the right thing being that action which reason would be able to universally will without causing a contradiction. The 'ought' of the categorical imperative is the duty that we have as rational beings to choose what is rational. Actions are right or wrong for Kant, and free or not free respectively, to the degree that they can be willed universally without everything becoming chaotic and inconsistent. So, for example, it is right to tell the truth, because a world where everyone lied would break down—it would not be able to function at all. Similarly, it is right not to steal, because in a world where everyone stole, there could be no rational order. While we may be tempted to lie or to steal on different occasions, these temptations arise from the

sensual world, and are to that extent expressions of causality, or 'not freedom.' When we choose to do our duty, we are exercising the freedom of our intellect to the highest degree. This notion of free will is clearly at odds with Berger's. For Berger, instances of deviance or civil disobedience are examples of freedom. For Kant, on the other hand, these would be examples of not following the categorical imperative, and thus would be exemplars of a lack of freedom that arises from the sensible world. Berger sees examples of freedom in subversive or revolutionary behaviour, whereas Kant sees examples of freedom in behaviour that fully conforms to the categorical imperative.

Both of these thinkers, therefore, approach this concept from different angles, and the character of freedom looks different as a consequence. For Berger, the freedom of the will is most evident in rebellious behaviour. He uses the concept to discuss the phenomena of deviance and revolution in society. For Kant, freedom is given to the intelligible world inhabited by reason, and is most evident in ethical behaviour. Berger would most likely disagree with Kant's account because it does not pay enough attention to the social context of morality. Conversely, Kant would argue with Berger's interpretation of free will, stating that under no circumstances can behaviour that is 'deviant' be considered an expression of freedom, since it arises from motives located in the sensual world, the world ruled by causality.

REFERENCES

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