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Buchbesprechungen

Book Reviews

Wolfgang Ertl: *Kants Auflösung der „dritten
Antinomie“. Zur Bedeutung des
Schöpfungskonzepts für die Freiheitslehre.*

Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber 1998 (Symposion Bd. 110)

Wolfgang Ertl wants to solve a puzzle. In the *Critique of Pure Reason's* Thesis to the Third Antinomy, Immanuel Kant offers an argument for causation through freedom as part of his strategy to defend human moral freedom. Yet the thesis argues not for human freedom but for a Thomistic first cause of the entire series of events in nature. Kant's subsequent solution to the Third Antinomy, however, makes no mention of God as first cause but instead centers on human agency. In fact Kant's sole stated link between God's creation and human freedom simply asserts rather than proves a connection:

Nun haben wir diese Notwendigkeit eines ersten Anfangs einer Reihe von Erscheinungen aus Freiheit, zwar nur eigentlich in so fern dargetan, als zur Begreiflichkeit eines Ursprungs der Welt erforderlich ist, indessen daß man alle nachfolgende Zustände für eine Abfolge nach bloßen Naturgesetzen nehmen kann. Weil aber dadurch doch einmal das Vermögen, eine Reihe in der Zeit ganz von selbst anzufangen, bewiesen (obzwar nicht eingesehen) ist, so ist es uns nunmehr auch erlaubt, mitten im Laufe der Welt verschiedene Reihen, der Kausalität nach, von selbst anfangen zu lassen, und den Substanzen derselben ein Vermögen beizulegen, aus Freiheit zu handeln. (A449-50/B477-78)

Why would Kant make such a claim?

Some commentators see this gap as a weak point in Kant's argument for human freedom. The relationship between the Thesis and the solution seems forced and insupportable. Humans are finite, sensuous beings whose acts follow prior events in time. God is an infinite, purely rational being whose act of creation follows from nothing except perhaps the divine reason itself. There seems to be no basis for Kant to claim that a proof of the freedom of the latter in creating the world allows him to attribute freedom to the former in moral action.

Ertl comes to Kant's defense in attempting to show that there is, in fact, a basis for such a move, and that Kant's Third Antinomy argument for freedom is dependent upon the results of the Thesis argument about God. Some other commentators have also tried to defend Kant's argument, but Ertl offers an original approach to the problem. He rejects a straightforward interpretation which equates God's freedom with human freedom and instead holds that God's freedom in creation is not equal to human moral freedom but rather merely grounds it.

To see how Ertl's argument works, consider first the view he opposes. This other way of interpreting Kant's view is to accept that human beings, like God,

actually partake somehow in the creation of their world. In this way God's power to create the world is, so to speak, also given to human beings as beings in themselves who can create the whole of their own phenomenal self, much in the way Plato's Myth of Er allows humans to choose their lives prior to birth. Kant himself offers plenty of reasons for taking this to be his view: his many suggestions of a "two-world" transcendental idealism in which things in themselves are the ground of their appearances, his discussion in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the entirety of one's phenomenal character, including all the past which determines it, is a consequence of human noumenal causality (5:98), and even the first chapter of the *Religion* where Kant postulates a single timeless disposition as underlying all of one's specific moral decisions (6:25). Needless to say some of those who take this to be Kant's approach also take it to be an implausible defense of human freedom.

Ertl rejects this approach quite emphatically. He argues that the two world view is metaphysically problematic in its own right. He also holds that humans, as sensible temporal creatures, could not possess the same power of creating that God, as eternal, has. Even if they did, he holds, such non-temporal power would be irrelevant to human moral practices in which humans make decisions in specific situations in time. In fact, Ertl even argues that God could not be transcendently free (although God does possess a different types of causality through freedom). At the same time Ertl argues that the key to a defense of human moral freedom lies in the concept of divine creation. The link between God's freedom in creation and human transcendental freedom in action is, to sum up Ertl's view in one word, indirect.

Ertl begins his argument by discussing the status of the causal principle in Kant's Second Analogy. Here Ertl makes three important claims. First, the causal principle is to be sharply distinguished from particular laws of nature so that the latter cannot be derived from the former. Second, complete determinism of events in nature is not directly proved in the Second Analogy; rather, Kant holds that such determinism involves the world-whole and can only arise when the idea of the world-whole is adopted. The thought of a world-whole is a regulative idea of reason not a constitutive concept of the understanding. And third, this deterministic, systematic unity of all things in this world-whole depends upon a further idea of reason, namely, God. The systematicity of nature can be assumed only if its creation by the divine being is assumed.

Turning to the nature of transcendental freedom, Ertl argues that it is limited to human beings with reason and understanding, that is, finite moral beings, and is not possessed by God. He notes that Kant does not equate transcendental freedom simply with any source of phenomena and the stuff of our experience – the filling of space by matter, for example, is not transcendently free – and thus God's creation of the world need not be seen as transcendently free, although it is of course free in another way because of the world's timeless dependence upon God. Transcendental freedom is attributed to humans only in moral contexts. Yet it is, in a way to be shown, still related to God's act of creation.

This way is connected with Kant's concept of the intelligible and empirical characters. Character is, for Kant, a principle of causality. The Second Analogy had provided a principle of causality for event-event relations, such as those which constitute the empirical character. A moral agent's empirical character is the set of grounds (not specific laws) used in empirical psychology to explain an individual's behavior. (These provisional, revisable grounds cannot be specific empirical laws because Kant prohibits empirical psychology from having such laws.) The intelligible character is another different principle of causality which likewise consists of grounds, but grounds of imputation not explanation concerning person-event, not event-event, relations. Each individual human being possesses a unique intelligible character which consists of the maxims upon which that person normally acts. These maxims are not to be understood as psychological grounds of explanation of behavior but as moral grounds of justification of behavior for purposes of imputation. Yet they still conform to the principle of causality for person-event relations, that is, they describe a way in which persons are considered causes in a non-deterministic way. Further, the intelligible character provides an ultimate account not requiring any infinite or indefinite regress of causes. That is because an individual's maxims are all ultimately based upon one's disposition, as Kant argues in the *Religion*.

This reading of the intelligible character relates back to the idea of God's free creation of the world in two interrelated ways. First, humans do in some sense "create" their world, although not in the way God creates the world. Humans create only in their attempts to actualize the highest good, that is, to make the world conform to an idea of reason. Each individual's intelligible character concerns that person's moral relation to this project. Kant here transfers to human beings what previous philosophers had attributed to God – the responsibility for making this world good. Second, the idea of God's creation of the world means that all phenomenal events can be seen from the divine perspective of eternity. From God's perspective, phenomenal events "happen" all at once, not in any causal series. Any causal determinism of phenomenal events is only a regulative idea dependent upon the belief that God has created them all together in a systematic whole. Since this is only an idea of reason, the empirical character, which consists of empirical causal explanations as part of that systematic whole, is non-constitutive. This allows the intelligible character to take a place alongside the empirical character as an alternative account of human action independent of causation according to any natural laws (or grounds). And independence from natural causation is transcendental freedom, so humans can be seen as transcendently free. These two aspects are interrelated because the dependence of the world's moral condition on human beings is possible only if the totality of the world-whole is a merely regulative idea and not actually given.

Ertl's account, which I have only sketched above, contains much more important detail than I have provided here on such matters as the nature of God's eternity, Kant's own pre-critical account of the relation between God and human freedom, the difference between causal principles and causal laws, and other topics. Ertl is to be commended for his detailed critiques of many

commentators, living and dead, English, American, and German. There is much to recommend in this book as revealing new approaches to an old problem. As food for thought, I want to offer some possible objections to some of Ertl's interpretations and arguments.

One objection concerns Ertl's idea that the intelligible character consists of maxims when restated in the third person. He construes these maxims as related to imputation not explanation. But what is to stop anyone from considering the maxims to be descriptive? Why can't empirical psychology use maxims as grounds of explanation of human action? If used in this way, however, the intelligible character is no longer transcendently free since such empirical explanation of behavior using maxims would be part of empirical psychology not morality. Consider also that in the Third Antinomy Kant seems to apply intelligible character not to individuals but to reason itself (for example, A553-4/B581-2). This suggests that the intelligible character ought not be construed as the actual maxims an individual uses but only as reason itself and its pure moral law, which indeed, Kant holds, have the power to motivate actions. Attributing transcendental freedom only to the faculty of (pure practical) reason is quite different from attributing it to each individual in each and every morally relevant act, as Ertl does. Kant's text is, unfortunately but not uncharacteristically, somewhat ambiguous on this matter.

Another difficulty with Ertl's approach concerns his claim that determinism is a regulative hypothesis rather than a constitutive concept. He is correct to note that the Second Analogy does not apply to any specific set of causal laws in nature. Humans do postulate various sets of causal laws, each revisable and each flawed. The completion of science is only set as a goal but can never be reached. But the second analogy is, as a principle of the understanding, constitutive for our experience. The causal principle itself is constitutive even if a complete set of unified specific causal laws is only a regulative idea. Further, if the regulative nature of determinism is to affect its role in the Third Antinomy, one must hold an epistemological rather than ontological interpretation of the Antinomies. Human freedom, however, is not threatened by the fact that humans might *know* the actual natural causes of behavior, but by the fact that there *are* such determining causes whether we know them or not. The latter ontological claim seems closer to Kant's intentions but further from Ertl's. If Kant does not intend for causal principle of the Second Antinomy to be constitutive, then the Third Antinomy cannot even arise: determinism according to some set of laws of nature or other must be true of the objects of human experience for the Antithesis argument against freedom to even be plausible.

Finally, one might object that, despite all of Ertl's efforts, the role of God is redundant. If causal determinism of the world-whole of nature is a regulative idea rather than a constitutive concept, then determinism actually depends not upon God but upon human reason. After all, for Kant God is also a regulative idea of reason (as well as a postulate of practical reason) not an actual being! God and determinism would both possess the same regulative status. Since the demotion of only one of those to the regulative level would open a conceptual space independent of causation in nature, God is not needed to allow human

actions to be considered transcendentally free. An atheistic Kant who held the world to be eternal and uncreated could, if determinism were merely regulative, still allow for human freedom.

These three objections merely extend the debate Ertl begins in his book. Ertl's work ought to be judged not on the basis of this short reconstruction and evaluation but only in its entirety on its own merits. He certainly does a service to all Kant scholars by pointing the Third Antinomy debate in fresh directions.

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