

Remembering *Groundwork* III

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There is much to admire in Bernd Ludwig's treatment of *Groundwork* III. He seeks to show that we should, as he puts it "forget *Groundwork* III," because, in a diagnosis of fundamental problem, problem both for Kant's practical philosophy in particular, and for the broader framework of transcendental idealism in which he embeds it. The fundamental problem to which he points is that *Groundwork* III works with two very different, indeed inconsistent accounts of freedom. One of these is, on Bernd's reading, taken from the Canon of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the other relies on *Groundwork* II. The first formulation sees freedom is pure spontaneity, something of which, on Bernd's interpretation, Kant supposes that we have theoretical knowledge. This makes the problem of imputation easy, at the cost of making the broader project of transcendental idealism incoherent. The second, by contrast, identifies freedom with the moral law, but fails to explain how we could ever be entitled to suppose ourselves to be free, and so how we could be entitled to suppose ourselves to be subject to the moral law.

In this brief comment, I would like to try to offer a different interpretation of Kant's argument in *Groundwork* III. I am not entirely certain whether this reveals a major disagreement with Bernd, or only a minor quibble about when Kant changed his mind about the nature of freedom. It seems to me that many of the pieces of Bernd's argument rests on textual interpretations that saddle Kant with theoretical commitments that he already repudiated by the time he wrote the first *Critique* in 1781. Indeed, Bernd usefully draws attention to the way in which Kant relies upon a Leibnizian analysis of obligation in that Canon, according to which obligation is to be analyzed in terms of a command backed up by the threat of a sanction. This is, as he points out, a clear sign that Kant had not yet fully

arrived at the idea of obligation through self-imposed law. From this, Bernd concludes that the treatment of freedom and its relation to morality in the first *Critique* is inadequate. Yet at the same time, it's worth noting that this piece of Leibniziana is sometimes thought of as "Exhibit A" in favour of the so-called "patchwork" theory of the First *Critique*, and of the Canon in particular. It seems to be a residual view of the pre-critical Kant, and so provides limited support for reading even of the treatment of freedom in the first *Critique* as a whole.

Now I will suggest that Bernd has offered us a "Patchwork" theory of *Groundwork* III, but that patchwork interpretations are, as a general matter, to be avoided.

Let me begin by noting the difficulty with the argument as Bernd proposes to reconstruct it. The first part of the argument starts with a premise according to which we know ourselves to be free through theoretical reason; there are quotes from the First *Critique* that give some indication that Kant once held this view; and then, there is the appeal to passages in the *Groundwork* in which Kant appeals explicitly to the idea of being aware of our own spontaneity through ideas. Now if this is taken to be an argument of theoretical reason, then, it seems, whenever I think about an idea – put God, freedom, and immortality to one side, and focus exclusively on such things as the idea of a living thing such as a plant or animal – Kant seems to be saying that it is through our ability to think such thoughts, to which no empirical particular can ever be entirely adequate, that we are theoretically aware of ourselves as free.

Now I do not think that Kant actually should be read in this way, but, I want to draw attention to the structure of the argument which Bernd seeks to attribute to him. It seems to be an argument that says that we know ourselves to be free in this way, a way which has nothing to do with morality. The next step of the argument then takes the idea of morality and freedom as identical, as established in *Groundwork* II, and says that since we have

established by an independent argument that we are free and this other sense, we therefore also establish that we are bound by the moral law.

I agree with Bernd that this argument does not actually succeed. Indeed, it fails so spectacularly, that I am nervous about attributing to Kant. So what I want to do first is to point out what is wrong with it, and then to develop an alternative. Most notably, its problem seems to be a problem of which Kant is well aware. Or rather, it has two problems the first step has one problem the second step another. The first step, according to which I know myself to be free because of my ability to experience the pure spontaneity of ideas, does not seem like an argument that we should be eager to attribute to Kant. Instead, it seems very much like the rationalist arguments one in counters in Descartes; the Meditation Three proof of God's existence turns on the thought that I find in idea in my mind that cannot have had a source other than something with a particular nature. Kant is critical of Leibniz's use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason but the Cartesian version of the same principle seems, if anything, more troubling. Simply as an interpretive matter, it seems to me a mistake to read Kant's reference to the spontaneity of ideas in this way.

The situation is actually slightly worse than that, since even if it were Kant's argument, it does not seem to actually give us the kind of freedom of indifference that is supposed to be relevant to imputation or potentially relevant to the rest of the argument. Indeed, the main evidence that Bernd provides of the Kantian commitment to freedom as indifference in the First *Critique* is the claim that Kant considers something of that sort in the third conflict in the Antinomy, an attribution that is supported with a quote from the antithesis. But although Kant says that both thesis and antithesis can be shown to be in an important sense jointly acceptable, he never says that the *arguments* for each can be accepted. To suppose that the antithesis in the third conflict shows us Kant's 1781 theory of freedom

is like supposing that the thesis in the third conflict is to be identified with the Second Analogy. But that is not it at all; the second analogy does not have the generality that the thesis of the third conflict claims. So too, the argument of the antithesis is not Kant's theory of freedom, but rather the transcendental realist's version of freedom, a version that is subject to a *reductio* in the thesis.

Now I might be thought to be moving too quickly, since it might be thought that there is at least some conception of freedom in the third conflict of the antinomy is available, and is consistent with a Leibnizian perfectionism, and so, neutral between autonomous and heteronomous systems of morality. Putting to one side the difficult question of whether that is in fact true, it is worth noting that even if such neutrality about the difference between autonomy and heteronomy could be found in the first *Critique*, it hardly a mark in favour of a reading of *Groundwork* III that it concludes that such neutrality survives Kant's formulation of the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy.

Having raised potential interpretive problems for each premise that Bernd has attributed to Kant, I would like to point out that the other difficulty with the argument is that it seems to have the exact difficulty that Kant, already in the A Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, identifies in each of the paralogisms; it is what he calls a *sophisma figurae dictionis*,¹ an equivocation on the middle term in a syllogism. If the first step in the argument were successful, establishing that we are free, the sense in which it establishes freedom is fundamentally different from the sense in which freedom is identical with the moral law. As my colleague Sergio Tenenbaum once put it, it seems very odd to think that, simply by

¹ A week after hearing Bernd's lecture, I attended a talk by Béatrice Longuenesse in which she argued that Kant falls into a paralogism even in the "fact of reason" argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In addition to some textual difficulties, her argument, required rejecting Kant's identification of freedom with the moral law.

deciding what to order in a restaurant, or by thinking about invertebrate zoology, I thereby commit myself to developing my talents.

But I think there's a better way of reading the relevant passages; in particular, I think the best way to read them is to understand Kant's appeal, in the *Groundwork* to the spontaneity of which I am aware through ideas not as a claim of theoretical reason, but rather is a claim that he made having already established the identity of freedom and the moral law in *Groundwork* II. If we read it in light of Kant's argument in the pages that immediately precede it, then we get a more plausible explanation of the structure of the entire argument. First of all, we are entitled to conclude that the past two freedom through the ideas turns on a feature that the ideas have, as discovered and discussed already in the introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic. Kant's initial discussion of ideas begins with the example of the Stoic sage; he then gives the example of the Platonic Republic. He warns against Plato's mistake of reifying ideas into objects of theoretical cognition. There are, no doubt, the plant and animal examples to be considered; but, in the first instance, our access to ideas is, as he says, practical.

Returning to *Groundwork* III, Kant's reference to knowing myself as free through ideas comes immediately after what appears to be an extremely abstract abstract of the argument of the third antinomy. The *Groundwork* claims not to rely on the results already established in the first *Critique*; the summary that he provides of transcendental idealism essentially says that we have to suppose that something other than the world of experience lies behind it. He then he draws the reader's attention to what he took for granted from the beginning of his career to the end, namely that everyone is aware of what morality requires of us. So when we have this awareness of freedom through ideas, we find, in compressed form, the same thought that receives fuller development in the "fact of reason" passage in

the *Critique of Practical Reason*: we know ourselves as free when we think of ourselves under the idea of obligation. This is hardly an anachronistic reading of the passage; there is no attempt to break out of the circle that Kant worries the reader will detect in the identification of freedom with the moral law by giving us theoretical access to one element of it; instead there is the reminder that we already have access to our freedom through our ready access to the claim that the moral law asserts on us.

There is another way of putting the point that I think is getting at; on Bernd's reading, *Groundwork* III really has nothing to do. Either the conception of freedom is the mature 1787 account, in which case, *Groundwork* III merely restates *Groundwork* II; alternatively, it is a vestige of an earlier conception, and it is in conflict with the rest of the *Groundwork*.

It seems to me that a better reading is the one on which there is no vestige. On this better reading, the task of *Groundwork* III is to explain how it is, now that we have identified freedom with the moral law, we can understand how such a thing could apply to us at all. And here, the answer is, that we think of ourselves as free – we, each of us ourselves – when we think about morality, and so, the moral law applies to us. There is no objectionable circularity because the worry about circularity was not about the identity of freedom and morality but rather with our access to it. How do we have access to our freedom? Simply by recognizing – by means of ideas – that we are subject to the moral law.

Let me make this point by coming back to the question of imputation for immoral acts. If we think of the moral law as an idea – something that is suggested to us already in the opening passages *Groundwork* I, in which Kant shows that the good will is good without qualification by showing that if it meets its own appropriate standard, it is fully good, combined with the discussion of the Stoic sage and the Platonic Republic in the introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic. In both of these discussions, Kant starts with the

characterization of the pure case. It is indeed mysterious how Stoic sage could ever do anything wrong, and no less mysterious how the pure Platonic Republic could ever be defective in its lawgiving. But of course that doesn't show that there aren't defective examples of virtue or of government, let alone that there couldn't be such examples. Now I want to suggest that the puzzle about imputation comes from the thought that imputation of wrongdoing must work on some other kind of model. But the easiest model for Kant to use is the one that says that you are responsible for what you do, and your deeds are imputable to you, because you act under the idea of freedom. You may fail to live up to the standard that applies to you, because you participate in both the sensible and intelligible worlds. But that is just to say that it applies to us as a law, that categorical imperative is indeed possible. That is why as Kant puts it at the end of *Groundwork* III: common human reason can confirm the correctness of the deduction of the categorical imperative. The argument shows us that we think of ourselves as morally bound then and only then can we think of ourselves also as free. That is the lesson of *Groundwork* III, and it should not be forgotten.