

The Space of Reasons and the Realm of Freedom

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"The essential point", according to Wilfrid Sellars, "is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says". (Sellars 1997, 76) The traditional empiricism maintains that all of our knowledge rests basically on a foundation of truths about sensory experience, assuming that sense data is the junction at which external reality or the empirical world gets in touch with the epistemic world. Even Quine's attack on the dogmas of empiricism does not call this presupposition into question. What he pleads for is a holistic modification of the dogma: "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body" (Quine 1964, 41).

In the spirit of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Sellars points out that there is a categorical difference between sensing and knowing, i.e., between the so-called "space of causes" and the "space of reasons". At the heart of Sellars' well-known criticism of the "Myth of the Given" is the recognition of the irreducibly normative character of epistemic discourse. Experience is certainly not irrelevant to knowledge, it may be a necessary condition of empirical knowledge, but not one that is constitutive of it, since the relevance of experience is primarily of a causal sort instead of a justificatory one. Davidson makes it clear that "a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified" (Davidson 2001a, 143) and therefore "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (Davidson 2001a, 141). Telling a "justificatory story" is, in Wittgensteinian terms, a language-game on its own to which one can contribute nothing by introducing a "causal story" (Rorty 1991, 148).

Nevertheless, rejecting the myth of the given unavoidably gives rise to the question whether or in what way the space of reasons, which is then free from all constraints from outside, still has any bearing on external reality. In this paper, we approach the problem the other way round: what we are concerned with is the question whether it is justified to assume a "space of reasons" at all. The problem is that if we accept that we are living in the "space of causes" in which everything that happens is determined in a causal chain, it is hard to see where there is place for us to engage in cognitive activities. For "the space of reasons is", as McDowell remarks, "the realm of freedom" (McDowell 1994, 5).

The epistemic discourse is founded on the possibility of distinguishing between "true" and "false" beliefs, between "correct" and "incorrect" inferences and so on. However, it would not make sense at all to speak of "truth" or "correctness", if cognitive activities were not free from causal necessitation, since, in this case, every mental process would simply be a mechanical process which can neither be correct nor incorrect. Only where there is a possibility of disobeying a rule is there the possibility of being correct. Our epistemic discourse presupposes that we can be taken responsible for what we say and believe. Therefore, the possibility of holding true beliefs and making correct inferences depends on the capacity of our mind to use reason on our own, independent of the causal necessitation from outside. We human beings must be free in a way

that other objects are not, if it is justified to call ourselves rational beings. We must attribute to our mind a capacity of what Kant calls *spontaneity*.

In fact, Sellars' distinction between the "space of causes" and the "space of reasons" is anticipated by Kant. In response to Hume's challenge of the rationalistic conception of causality, Kant recognizes that the objectivity of knowledge claims cannot be based on what is given in sensation, but rather it is a matter of applying concepts in accordance with the normative principles derived from the categories of understanding. Knowing or thinking, therefore, must be regarded as an "achievement" of the spontaneity of our mind, which is governed by principles of reason instead of natural causes. This autonomous sphere is referred to by Kant as the "*realm of freedom*", the "*world of understanding*" or the "*intelligible world*", in contrast to the "*realm of nature*" or the "*world of sense*". Indeed Kant's framework seems to be particularly suitable for bringing the problem we are interested in to a head because of the particularly intractable form of the conflict he is confronted with, i.e., the so-called *antinomy* between causality and freedom (A 444 ff./B 472 ff.).¹

As far as the "realm of nature" is concerned, Kant endorses a strict version of causal determinism, maintaining that everything that happens is, without exception, determined by natural laws. "One can therefore grant that if it were possible for us to have such deep insight into a human being's cast of mind, ... we could calculate a human being's conduct for the future with as much certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse". (Kant 1996a, 219) Kant, however, believes on the other hand that "it is just as impossible for the most subtle philosophy as for the most common human reason to argue freedom away" (Kant 1996b, 102). Kant's main concern is that if human beings were not capable of acting freely it would make no sense to speak of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, Kant also recognizes that the problem of freedom is not only crucial for the possibility of moral imputation but also for that of epistemic claim. Kant's distinction between sensibility and understanding or between the faculty of receptivity and that of spontaneity is drawn based on the recognition that the objectivity of knowledge cannot be sought in what is given from the space of causes, but rather in the concepts "produced" by ourselves. In order to make sense of epistemic claims, the "world of understanding" must be presupposed as an autonomous realm in which causal determinations are out of place.

In the Third Antinomy of Pure Reason, Kant tries to show that there is no logical contradiction between taking something as determined and as free at the same time, insofar as a distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is accepted. Arguably, this distinction need not be understood as a metaphysical one, as if there were a world of things-in-themselves existing "behind" the world of appearance. Allison, for example, argues that the difference is rather a logical or methodological one, depending on whether something is *considered* as an object of experience or considered apart from the conditions of being an

¹ References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appearing in the text are to the standard pagination of the first and second editions, indicated as A and B, respectively. English translations are from P. Guyer and A. W. Wood's translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

empirical object (Allison 1983). Accordingly, causality and freedom refer to two different ways of viewing things. Under the “phenomenal perspective”, even our mental activities are determined by natural causes. However, to engage in cognitive activities means to consider ourselves no longer as “objects”, but as “subjects” of experience, i.e., to consider ourselves apart from the conditions to which all objects of experience are subject. Under this “noumenal perspective”, we regard ourselves as capable of using reason independently of non-cognitive causal factors.

However, it is doubtful whether it is justified to view ourselves from the noumenal perspective. Obviously, it does not follow from the fact that we are compelled to regard ourselves as free for the sake of the epistemic discourse that we are really so. Although we believe ourselves to be capable of cognitive activities, this belief may be wrong. The whole story of spontaneity may be an illusion. As Sellars suggests, “we can conceive Kant to argue that although we are conscious of ourselves as *spontaneous* in the synthesizing of empirical objects, this spontaneity is still only a *relative* spontaneity, a spontaneity ‘set in motion’ by ‘foreign causes’” (Sellars 1974, 79). What Sellars means by “relative spontaneity” is the idea of an “*automaton spirituale*, a mind which conceptualizes, but only in response to challenges from without, and in ways which, however varied, realize set dispositions.” (Sellars 1974, 81) For such a thinking machine, all cognitive activities are nothing but causal processes which are initiated by perceptive inputs and the result of which are generated according to the dispositions programmed in the machine.

Nevertheless, the idea of “relative spontaneity” does not undermine the assumption of freedom. The crucial point in Kant’s idea is that how we *consider* ourselves under noumenal perspective has nothing to do with what we *are* under the phenomenal perspective. One may object that if we regard ourselves as free, but we, *in fact*, are not, then this is nothing but a mere phantom. This objection, however, would only stand if freedom were a “matter of fact” that could either “be the case or not the case”. But, as shown in the resolution of the Third Antinomy, freedom *ex hypothesi* does not belong to the phenomenal or factual world at all. Therefore, whether *there is* freedom or not is the wrong question to ask. Admitting a realm of freedom or a world of understanding says nothing about what the empirical world is like. Kant makes it clear that “the concept of a world of understanding is ... only a *standpoint* that reason sees itself constrained to take outside appearances *in order to think of itself as practical*”. (Kant 1996b, 104)

In re-interpreting Kant’s ideas, Brandom tries to reinforce the crucial point by introducing another pair of concepts, namely “objective” and “social”. With the objective/social distinction, Brandom succeeds in figuring out positively what it means by saying that freedom is not a matter of fact. “The social/objective distinction is social rather than objective. If we now transfer this account of the distinction between the Realm of Nature (fact, description, cause) and the Realm of Freedom (norm, evaluation, practice) back to Kant’s original suggestion that freedom consists in constraint by norms rather than simply by causes, the difference between being free and not being free becomes a social rather than an objective difference.” (Brandom 1979, 192)² For Brandom, it is up to a social community to decide on the matter of freedom. An unwelcome conse-

quence of this interpretation, however, is that the distinction becomes more or less arbitrary. As Brandom himself concedes, even “a tree or a rock can become subject to norms insofar as we consider it as engaging in social practices.” (Brandom 1979, 192)³

Nevertheless, we need not follow Brandom up to this point. We can distinguish between the *Positive* and the *Negative Thesis* of Brandom’s interpretation, i.e., between the thesis that the distinction between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom *is* a social practice and that the distinction *is not* objective or factual. Indeed the negative thesis makes good sense within Kant’s framework, for it is just another way to say that the difference between the two realms is not an ontological one. Lacking an “objective” ground, however, by no means implies that the distinction can be arbitrarily decided by a community. Indeed, according to Kant, freedom is *necessary* because it cannot be coherently argued away. For the price of rejecting freedom would be the price of abandoning the possibility of epistemic claims and cognitive activities at the same time. In this connection, someone who tries to argue against it would have to deny that he is engaging in the cognitive activity of reasoning. He would have to deny the very condition on the basis of which his argumentation operates, or, so to speak, to erode the very ground on which he stands. Therefore, we cannot coherently deny that we are capable of reasoning and operating in the space of reasons. Such a self-referential argumentation strategy is called “transcendental argument” (Strawson 1959, 40).

Moreover, even the space of causes would not make sense without presupposing the space of reasons. By saying that the social/objective distinction is social rather than objective, Brandom brings up another crucial point that is implicit in Kant’s idea: the spaces of reasons is a “*meta-space*” in respect to the space of causes. Where the space of causes begins and ends is itself not an objective matter. Instead it lies in the hands of reason to determine what objective is and what the space of causes is like. According to Kant, the categories that constitute the objectivity of the phenomenal world are “products” of our understanding. The world would not be a causally connected whole, if we did not presuppose a space of reasons which determines what causality means. The causal order of phenomena would have no objectivity, if we were not capable for applying the concept of causality independently of non-cognitive causal factors. In this respect, we must regard ourselves as free not only in order to make sense of ourselves as rational beings, but also to account for the facticity of the causally determined world.

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² Brandom believes that the objective/social distinction is superior to the traditional one between fact and norm with which the possibility of such a new perspective would hardly come readily to mind, since it seems unintelligible to say that the fact/norm distinction is itself not factual, but normative (Brandom 1979, 192).

³ It might be inconvenient to develop the appropriate measures to include such things in our social practices, but this would be, for Brandom, “just the sort of issue that the community could not coherently be claimed to be wrong about.” (Brandom 1979, 191)

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