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On “Freedom” in Allen Wood's 《Kantian Ethics》

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In this chapter, Allen Wood centers on the difficulty of “the identity of a self that is free with one that is admittedly unfree” (157). He thinks it is not possible that a single acceptance of Kant's theory of freedom “can be squared with all the texts” of Kant's (156). Sidgwik, quoted by Wood, points out that Kant in Groundwork holds that the self giving laws is purely “noumenal”, while the self obeying laws is “empirical”, added to which is that the acting self subjects to natural necessitation. At another situation, Kant in Religion holds moral agents act from an inclination only by incorporating (Allison) the inclination into a freely adopted maxim. Wood seems to suggest a difficulty that the stances of the former Kant, who persists in sharp separation between transcendental self and empirical self, and the latter Kant, who demands the the inclination (belonging to empirical self) must be incorporated with a maxim (empirically realized) which can be transformed in the free will into universal practical law (altered to the same direction as reason demands), cannot be well fused.

However, it is my difficulty understanding Wood's criticism; do the two stances not explain the same thing, pointing out the same difficulty how come transcendental condition is connected with experience and certain maxim can under that circumstance become practical law? If we regard the transcendental-methodological objects neither as objects graspable in space and time, e.g., to think that the noumenal-phenomenal distinction does not equal the distinction between America and China or the land and the air, nor as pre-critical metaphysical terms, e.g., to think it does not equal the distinction between heave and earth, or not to compare these objects with the naïvely assumed another kind of conscious state in the animals (161-164)[1], and if we appreciate enough the effort in Kant's epistemology, especially his notion of the causality of freedom, before hasting in the advanced issue, the “squaring” problem would resolve while the “gap” might be filled up.

If one cannot answer to the difficulty how the transcendental-methodological faculties must be incorporated to satisfy the condition of experience and thus how the condition of experience is linked transcendentally-methodologically with the experience, one is not ready to answer to the difficulty raised by Wood here. Kant's epistemology refuses the representational model of cognition. It is not the case that the a priori existents' effecting our cognitive powers so that our cognition happens, but the case that the a priori conditions, namely, certain powers incorporable, are satisfied so that our cognition appears as such in that incorporation. With the understanding, we should not understand the self giving laws, the self obeying laws and the acting self to be isolated conditions. If they are incorporable transcendentally-methodologically, their analysis in a fashion of method does not imply their “existing status” be “separated”. With the awareness of the notion of causality of freedom, knowing that the conformity between object of cognition and the cognition of the object of that cognition is only formal, the maxim accepted empirically can be universalized not as in a happening process. A cognized rule can be universalized only because it itself is universalizable in the condition: since every cognized happening object must be cognized with an understanding of its causal connection, the causation cognized there must be true for it comes from the cognitive condition – neither our empirical act of cognition nor the real happening object itself has any impact on the law at all; on the other hand, an object created by my concept belongs to me only because it meets the practical condition, i.e., the object is cognized with an understanding of necessary causal connection to my ideas, not because in pre-cognition state, my idea ideally effects me and my moves so that I come to cognize the result of that process.

Moreover, as the aware being, we are free in the sense that cognition itself is never effected by natural causal laws; however, we are also never free, because every experience via cognition must be conditioned by natural laws – we can only know phenomenal objects. Yet, it is only because the awareness is only allowed to know nature, including the self in that nature, while it still keeps a non-empirical causal connection to the cognized object, the cognition as such is possible; and of the same course, freedom and morality is possible.

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It is also owing to the lack of appreciation of Kant's effort in epistemology that Wood would use the randomness in

other animal kinds' actions (choices) or in natural development and quantum physics to blame Kant for his old-fashioned narrow knowledge of nature (158-161), and to further blame Kant's theory of freedom as a theoretical need based upon that narrow knowledge and his extravagant demand for freedom (162).

As for the complaint about other animal kind's choices, we just cannot mix up the investigation of conditions of experience (transcendental philosophy) with the interpretation of phenomena (science). The relation between the former and the latter is not simple correspondence. The behavior of imputability from one option to another is totally a different issue than making a choice in (self-)awareness. One is a study of the result of cognition, and the other is a reflection of its own condition.

As for the uncertainty in nature, I think, one could infer that all the future development must have been completely determined by the past, from the principle that everything happens must have its cause in the past, only insofar as he holds the assumption that things develop by itself as much as time and space are “out there” by itself. The scenario is, I think, that when something has not happened, there's no ground for any certainty with regard to a specific development; the ground for the specific certainty is only provided together with the completion of the cognition of that specific event. In a word, we can say, natural necessitations are given only through our experiencing them. And this is also why what we can never experience is necessarily impossible (the negative necessitation). Even further, the empirical ingredients which we may want to grant to “things themselves”, are exactly the source of randomness and contingency. Considering the condition of experience, on the other hand, I think we can accept uncertainty in nature with no difficulty, while the natural necessitation is still expressed in a sense that every random outcome must have its specific cause in a specific causal chain.

Note:
[1] “If we go by a common sense interpretation of everyday experience …. Animals do sometimes apparently hesitate between real possibilities and then make choices between them.” (159)

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