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Kant’s Humanism: A Loophole in the Principle of Sufficient Reason

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ABSTRACT

I consider the principle of sufficient reason (henceforth, PSR) as it functions in both Leibniz and Kant. The issue separating these thinkers is a modal status of absolute contingency, which is exempt from PSR insofar as it is neither logically necessary, nor does it necessarily follow from the given causal series. Leibniz’s ambitious metaphysics applies PSR even to God’s choices, which, since they must rest on a reason that makes sense of them, necessarily tend to the creation of the best of all possible worlds. Through PSR, the exercise of human freedom represents the unfolding of a concept God already has chosen, with an eye to the best possible world aligned with the universal intelligibility enjoined by PSR. PSR, in Kant’s critical period, is not a principle of being, but one of mere experience, since any extension of thought beyond possible experience can yield no knowledge. Human agency, for Kant, has an intelligible aspect that is beyond possible experience. Since PSR is only a principle of experience for Kant, the agent in its intelligible aspect is not subject to it. Human free will introduces a special modal category of absolute contingency. Kant provides impetus for a humanism that makes the absolute freedom of the human will a competitor with the sovereignty of God, and also liberates the human will from contemporary ideologies that would subordinate it to natural determinism or group dynamics.

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Introduction

I establish how Kant carves out a special modal category of absolute contingency, that is free from determination by both natural causality as well as God's creative activity. This space of absolute contingency is intolerable within the metaphysics of Leibniz, in which the principle of sufficient reason (PSR)¹ orients all of reality towards the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz 1965, 53). My stipulative definition for *absolute* contingency is a modal status that might be false in another possible world, so that what is absolutely contingent is not logically necessary. Moreover, what is absolutely contingent is underdetermined by the prior causal sequence in the actual world. We can only account for what is absolutely contingent, in virtue of its actuality, not its logical necessity that makes its contrary a contradiction, nor in terms of a deterministic sequence leading up to it. We find the modal category of absolute contingency in Kant's contemporary, Crusius, who maintained that we can account for certain events in terms of their actuality, without reference to any antecedent ground (Kant, 1996, 1:397). Kant rejects absolute contingency in the pre-critical period, maintaining instead that "nothing which exists contingently can be without a ground which determines its existence antecedently" (Kant, 1996, 1:396). Yet, in the critical period, Kant endorses the notion of Crusius, carving out a space for free will that is independent of determinism of natural causes, and of the sovereignty of God (Kant, 1998, A540/B568).

Kant's liberation of free will from antecedent causes is significant in the 21st century, as the impetus for a new humanism. Theological determinism, which subordinates human free will to the pre-determination of God, is still a viable ideology, but even more so is a denial of human agency emerging in the natural sciences. Natural sciences seek to account for human choices in terms of antecedent natural processes, and so deny the absolute contingency of the human will (Wegner, 2002). Contemporary political ideologies view the individual as a product of group identity and economic and political structures, and so presuppose an understanding of society that is irreducible to individuals capable of independent action (Durkheim, 1982).

I contrast absolute contingency with hypothetical contingency, in a way that parallels Leibniz's distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity (Leibniz, 1988). Absolute necessity entails existence in any possible world, since its non-existence is contradictory. Entities that are hypothetically necessary might not exist in another possible world, because their contraries do not imply a contradiction. Hypothetically necessary entities must exist, given the causal sequence in the actual world. I stipulate, as a parallel to hypothetical necessity, a hypothetical contingency that may not exist in other possible worlds, but must exist given the causal structure of the actual world. Hypothetical contingency is only contingent *on the condition that* we are not in the actual world with its causal sequence. Absolute contingency is contingent in *all* worlds, actual and possible, and

¹ *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Section 30. Leibniz, G.W. (1988) *Discourse on Metaphysics and Related Writings*. Edited and translated by R. Niall D. Martin and Stuart Brown. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

so even the actual sequence of causes in the world underdetermines that which is absolutely contingent.

The thesis of this paper is that Kant, in his critical system, carves out a space of absolute contingency that confers on the human will an absolute sovereignty over its actions that is competitive both with nature and with God. This space of absolute contingency would be anathema to Leibniz. “For it is necessary to analyze everything into some reason, and not to stop until we arrive at a first reason—or else it must be admitted that something can exist without a sufficient reason for its existence, and this admission destroys the demonstration of the existence of God and of many philosophical theorems.”¹ Leibniz is a precursor to contemporary thinkers, in both the natural and human sciences, that seek to explain human agency, not in terms of free choices, but in terms of external forces. In conferring on the human will an absolute sovereignty over its actions, independent of both natural and theological determinism, Kant introduces a new humanism that makes the human agent a locus of independent activity. For Leibniz, the human agent simply follows its individual concept pre-installed by God (Leibniz, 1988), participating in a universal harmony that God pre-established. “...Every single substance is a perpetual living mirror of the universe.” (Leibniz, 1965, 56)

In the first section, I will show how PSR in Leibniz serves to rebut both Spinozism and Cartesianism, insofar as both of the latter involve a contingency that threatens universal intelligibility according to God’s choice of the best of all possible worlds. I conduct this inquiry to show how Leibniz uses PSR to close any loopholes of incomprehensibility in his system. This aspiration to universal intelligibility is a precursor to contemporary philosophies that prefer a holistic order that strips human agency of any ability to stray from it. Human agency must not compromise the explicability and predictability of reality in natural or social terms.

In section two, I show how Leibniz subjects the human will to the order of things expressing PSR. Each choice follows from the complete concept of the individual already contained in the mind of God (Adams, 1994,12).

In the third section, I shift to Kant’s system, with the ultimate aim of showing how he establishes a modal space of absolute contingency. I begin by focusing on Kant’s modesty in metaphysics (de Jung 2013, 553), in contrast to the ambitious metaphysics of Leibniz in which there is a universal ontological order according to PSR. The analytic of the understanding, i.e. the articulation of the formal structure of possible experience, replaces the once proud discipline of ontology, the science of being in itself (Kant 1998, A247/B304). PSR becomes a principle establishing a causal law in experience rather than absolute being that, moreover, is not a teleological orientation towards the best of all possible worlds. Teleology shifts, in Kant, from an ontological principle organizing all things according to what is best, to a mere principle of the faculty of judgment that organizes cognition, not nature itself (Kant 2000, 20:236). In Kant’s critical philosophy, the unconditioned,

¹ From a letter to legal scholar Magnus Wedderkopf, cited in Adams (1994): 10.

which is supposed to provide ultimate satisfaction for PSR, permanently escapes our capacity for knowledge (Kant, 1998, A481/B509). Kant's epistemological modesty breaks down the architectonic of Leibniz in which all of reality finds its root in the will of God, and, by implication, challenges the contemporary ideologies that would explain human society in terms of natural causes or sociological forces.

In the fourth section, I will focus on how the modest metaphysics of Kant's critical period carves out a space for absolute contingency with respect to human free will. Kant achieves this special modal space through the distinction between the empirical and the intelligible characters. The intelligible character is not subject to the causal law characterizing experience (Kant, 1998, A540/B568). Since the intelligible character could choose differently than it does in other possible worlds, and since it is not subject to determination by antecedent causes, the intelligible character attains the special modal status of absolute contingency. The free will of the intelligible character in Kant represents a loophole to PSR.

At stake in this discussion of absolute contingency is the intelligibility and order of the world. Does our free will undermine, not only the natural order subject to law and so intelligible to science, but the sovereignty of God in virtue of which he has control over all events? Carving out a space for absolute contingency is a coup for humanism, since it imparts to human free will an ability to rise above the natural forces converging upon it, as well as any extension of the divine sovereignty over human actions. Kant, in *KU*, identifies the human being as the *final end* of nature, which requires no further condition to justify it (Kant, 2000, 20:432). Humanity is the final end in nature insofar as it is able, through its intelligible character, to exercise absolute freedom above any natural causes, in a supersensible way, according to an unconditional moral law that binds us regardless of our natural circumstances. "His existence contains the highest end in itself, to which...he can subject the whole of nature, or against which at least he need not hold himself to be subjected by any influence from nature..." (Kant 2000, 20:436). This humanism exalts the human individual above contemporary views that reduce human agency to expressions of natural causes, or to group dynamics that take on their own reality irreducible to individual decisions.

1. PSR in Leibniz

PSR's centrality to the metaphysical order in Leibniz prevents the realization of a world that "flouts and baffles the reason that is in man" (Lovejoy, 1936, 168). Without the universal application of PSR, there would be events in the world that lack a full explanation. Any expectations we might form, based on observed regularities in the world, would be subject to doubt, because anything can happen at any time, without reason.

Leibniz uses PSR to reject two philosophical systems, Spinozism and Cartesianism. I show Leibniz's rejection of these systems in order to show the predominance of PSR in his system, which accounts for everything in terms of God's choice of the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz 1965,55). First, Spinozism adopts a full necessitarianism that invokes PSR, but in a reductive way.

Spinoza maintains that “for each thing there must be a cause, or reason, both for why it exists and for why it does not exist” (Spinoza, 2018,10). God exists, according to Spinoza, not because of any external cause, but because of his nature as the supremely perfect and absolutely infinite being, and so God exists of himself (Spinoza, 2018,12). Spinoza goes on to argue that God is the only substance that exists, capable of existing on its own and not as an attribute or mode dependent on an underlying substance. “By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself...” (Spinoza, 2018, 3). An attribute, on the contrary, is the essence of a substance, and so is inconceivable without the substance underlying it, while a mode is an affection of a substance (Spinoza, 2018, 3). Since Spinoza maintains that God is the only substance, everything else must be either an attribute or a mode of God: “No substance can be or be conceived besides God” (Spinoza, 2018,14).

Spinoza approximates the universal intelligibility characteristic of PSR, insofar as everything is rooted in the single substance of God. “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be, or be conceived, without God.” (Spinoza, 2018, 15). Since everything exists as a feature of God’s unique substantiality, everything happens “solely by the laws of God’s infinite nature and follows from the necessity of his essence.” (Spinoza, 2018, 18). The idea that God’s activity depends on the laws having to do with a necessity of his essence, though, and all that happens follows from these laws, is the crucial point at which the version of PSR we see in Spinoza diverges from what Leibniz maintains as the correct version. The divine nature in Spinoza does not unfold its infinite attributes according to purpose and choice, but according to a necessity based on its essence. “There is no cause besides the perfection of his own nature which prompts God...to act.” (Spinoza, 2018, 19).

PSR in Spinoza, therefore, does not account for events in the world in terms of what is best, because events flow out of God’s nature, not from a choice of the best possible world, but from the necessity flowing from God’s perfection. We can use Kant’s distinction between mechanical and teleological causation, in the third *Critique*, to classify the version of PSR we find in Spinoza. In mechanical causation, “the idea of the effect must not be taken as the ground of the possibility of their cause, but *vice versa*...” An aspiration towards the idea of the ultimate effect of a mechanical process is not the sufficient reason that explains why the parts exist and act the way they do. In a mechanical process the parts account for the effect (Kant 2000, 20:236). In a teleological process, the idea of the whole, the final outcome of the process, constitutes an end that accounts for the existence and activity of the parts.

When God chooses the best of all possible worlds, there is teleological causation, because the idea of the best possible world constitutes an end that drives the existence and evolution of the parts of the forming world. When God exercises mechanical causation, not from purposes but from the necessity of his nature, the idea of the best possible world is not driving the process. The final outcome of a mechanical process does not account for the process, but the parts do in piecemeal fashion.

Since “God acts by the laws of his own nature,” (Spinoza 2018,19) in Spinoza, and not from an idea of what is best, God in Spinoza exercises mechanical causation. God is not a free cause, in Spinoza, in virtue of an ability to select a particular possible world that serves as an aim driving processes forward. Spinoza denies to God both intellect and will, by which God might choose his idea of what is best (Spinoza 2018, 19). Instead of portraying God as sovereign over an array of possible realizations, choosing one with deliberate purpose, God acts with the same non-purposive necessity as we find in geometrical deductions. “...Just as from eternity to eternity it follows from the nature of a triangle its three angles are equal to two rights angles,” (Spinoza 2018, 20). the necessity of God’s nature dictates the processes that flow from him.

In Spinoza, we have a kind of satisfaction of PSR, insofar as we can account for everything in terms of the necessity of God’s nature, and so there are no gaps in nature involving unaccountable swerves. But universal causation does not mean that things have a *reason*. A series of events linked causally, driven by the laws of the nature of a necessary being, still has an element of arbitrariness because we do not know *why* this series of events is proceeding as it does. Leibniz maintains that universal causation, without a reason that assigns an end to it indicating an ultimate purpose, is still arbitrary.

To truly satisfy PSR, we must complement the series of causes with an overarching reason identifying a purpose driving the series of causes. Leibniz seeks an understanding of the grounds of the laws of mechanics in terms of the wisdom of the Author of nature (Leibniz, 1969, 478). Leibniz unites both final and efficient causation in his understanding of nature. We can understand the “skill of the workman,” i.e. God, in terms both of his purposive designs (final causation), but also in terms of the tools he uses to achieve his designs (efficient causation) (Leibniz, 1988, 22). Spinoza severs efficient causation from final causation, since he denies that effects flow from God’s nature according to a purpose. Instead, they flow from God’s nature with the same blind necessity that dictates the essential properties of triangles, which do not purposively elect to have their properties.

Explanations that appeal only to efficient causes, without an appeal to an end, operate in the “realm of power,” which appeals only to blind forces to account for things, without any appeal to purposes (Leibniz 1969, 479). In the realm of wisdom, we integrate things into an architectonic that explains them in terms of a purpose-oriented drive towards the realization of a whole. Instead of operating in the realm of power, which can give us only antecedent causes that have no ultimate purpose, Leibniz provides us with an ambitious metaphysics that orients everything according to a purposive wisdom. The architecture of nature perfectly expresses God’s just judgments, not mere blind necessity. “God as the architect satisfies in all respects God as the legislator.”(Leibniz 1965, 89). Instead of the *only* possible world, necessitated by the laws of God’s nature, we find in Leibniz the *best* of all possible worlds, chosen freely in the wise design of God. The laws of nature “originate in the wisdom of their Author...” (Leibniz 1969, 478).

We can sum up Leibniz's position, *vis-à-vis* Spinozism, in the following quote: "Spinoza... appears to have explicitly taught a blind necessity, having denied to the author of things understanding and will, and imagining that good and perfection relate only to us and not to him..." (Leibniz 1952, 173). Spinoza's God only mechanically follows the principles of his own nature, in complete indifference to the categories of good and bad. This indifference to questions of value cannot satisfy PSR.

Critique of Cartesian Voluntarism. In the Cartesian philosophy, we find the notion that God is sovereign creator of necessary truths regarding essential natures, like the properties of triangles. The truth value of propositions depends on the will of God, since God is omnipotent. Truth is not an order of being that God must respect, like we must, since truth is something we discover, and do not create. Our ideas are not true when we invent them, but in virtue of a correspondence with a reality independent of us. So, Leibniz insisted that no act of will, human or divine, can play a part in determining truth (Leibniz, 1981, 66). *Theological voluntarism* is the view that aspects of reality, which we might consider to be independent of the will of God, such as truth and goodness, are actually products of God's will. God, in the view of theological voluntarism, does not act in light of knowledge of what is good and what is true, receiving knowledge of an objective order independent of him. Instead, God creates the orders of goodness and truth *ex nihilo*, beginning from a position of complete indifference (Descartes, 1964,151-2). God chooses the norms of perfection, instead of accepting them as the external constraints of a moral order that pre-exists God's choice. God also chooses the norms of logic, even retaining sovereignty over the principle of non-contradiction (Descartes, 1964,151-2).

If God's will is sovereign even over the principle of non-contradiction, then the will of God is incomprehensible. Theological voluntarism means that God's will could completely invert the moral and intellectual order, making contradictories co-exist and turning what is good into what is evil. We cannot establish why God made certain things good and true, because there is no order of goodness and truth prior to God's creation of the moral and intellectual order by which we might account for it. Universal intelligibility in Leibniz means that PSR constrains God's most fundamental choices about the creation of the order of things. But, if God's will generates even PSR, there is no way to place limits on God's sovereignty according to PSR. God's sovereign power of choice can withdraw endorsement from PSR, and then the entire intelligible order would collapse, leaving nothing but arbitrary occurrences that happen for no reason. If God creates the principle requiring him to choose what is best, he can redefine what is best, or generate a new fundamental principle permitting arbitrary choices.

Leibniz rejects voluntarism, claiming that "the choice made by God must have a sufficient reason which determines him to the one rather than to another [possible universe]." (Leibniz, 1965, 53). It is the order established by PSR that determines God, not God who determines the order of PSR. God's wisdom discloses the rational order of PSR, and his goodness determines his choice

of the best possible world (Leibniz, 1965, 53). This is a very different direction of causality than what we find in voluntarism, which maintains that God determines what is good and creates, rather than receives a disclosure of, what is true.

If we allow the order of what is true to be subject to the will of God, so that it is manipulable, then PSR collapses. We will not be able to establish a sufficient reason for the existence of things, because reality will be subject to constant incursions by arbitrary choices of the divine will. Theological voluntarism is unacceptable, in Leibniz's view, because it makes what is true a malleable order, and so it collapses the stable comprehensibility that is the hallmark of Leibniz's metaphysics.

In this section, I have shown how PSR constitutes grounds for rejection in Leibniz, of both the mechanistic necessitarianism without final causes, as well as the *ex-nihilo* generation of goodness and truth in theological voluntarism. The employment of PSR in Leibniz amounts to a war on the absolutely contingent. Events in the Spinozistic universe have absolute contingency in the sense that there is no fully sufficient reason, in the order of value at least, for them. We find absolute contingency in Descartes, in the initial choice of God to found the moral and intellectual orders in *ex nihilo* fashion, without need to pay respects to a pre-existing moral and intellectual order independent from God's will. Leibniz demands that God's choices have a fully sufficient reason, and so are purposive instead of necessitarian, and also be answerable to an objective order it does not arbitrarily create.

2. Human Volition in Leibniz

Leibniz's ambition for universal intelligibility encompasses human volition. Each human action follows from the individual notion that God has of the individual. God is able to see, in *a priori* fashion through this individual notion, all the actions a person will ever perform (Leibniz 1988, Section 13). God does not have to experience, in *a posteriori* fashion, the actions a person takes. The individual notion of a person contains all the actions of the person, with the same *a priori* rational necessity with which we can derive properties from the definition of a circle (Leibniz, 1988, Section 13). The scripted individual concept of a person follows from God's plan of the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz, 1988, Section 13).

Leibniz, while conceding that all the actions of a human are implicit in his or her *a priori* concept, still seeks to carve out a space for freedom. Leibniz seeks to allay the fear that, by making all human actions follow with *a priori* necessity from the individual notion of the human agent, "the difference between necessary and contingent truths will be destroyed [and] the fate of the Stoics will take the place of liberty..." (Leibniz, 1988, Section 13).

Leibniz's rebuttal to the fear of the fatalism of the Stoics, smothering any options for the human will in light of infallible divine foreknowledge, is to differentiate between "what is certain and what is necessary." (Leibniz, 1988, Section 13)

Future actions, implicit in the individual concept, are *certain* to happen, insofar as God can deduce them in *a priori* fashion with certainty. Yet, future actions are contingent, not necessary, because God's choice of the best of all possible worlds, in which the future actions figure, is itself contingent. God has the prerogative of "free decrees," i.e. he could have chosen otherwise than to actualize the best of all possible worlds. The certainty of the future actions of a human being are based on their participation in the causal sequence characteristic of the best of all possible worlds. But, the certainty of these future actions is not necessity, because the initial choice of the best of all possible worlds is contingent.

Another way of separating the certainty of human action, from a necessity characteristic of Stoic fatalism, is the distinction between absolute necessity, and hypothetical necessity (Leibniz, 1988, section 13). Absolute necessity is a logical necessity that exists because its contrary is a contradiction. Hypothetical necessity is not necessary by logic, but only on the condition of existing within a certain causal sequence. The contrary of what is hypothetically necessary is possible in itself, apart from a given causal series.

Human actions are only hypothetically necessary because, though God's choice of the best of all possible worlds necessitates them, their contrary is not a contradiction. It is possible for human actions to have been different, though not so long as we remain within the causal sequence established by God's choice. The idea of an individual concept containing *a priori* all the future actions of an agent does not usher in full Stoic fatalism, because future actions are still contingent, insofar as their contraries are not a contradiction, and they depend on the *free* decree of God.

But, establishing human actions as hypothetically necessary is a narrow space for human freedom. A logical conceivability of a different action that is not a contradiction does not change the fact of God's pre-determination of each individual concept according to his choice of the best of all possible worlds. The notion of Julius Caesar contains his action of becoming a perpetual dictator, so that he cannot escape this fate. The fact that another action is logically conceivable, apart from the precondition of God's decree, does not alleviate the fact that it is necessary for Caesar to conform to God's imposition (Leibniz, 1988, Section, 13). A thinker like Crusius maintains that even if we can establish the contrary of our individual concept as possible, the individual concept is still necessary in the actual causal structure of the world. "For of what avail is it if the opposite of an event, which is precisely determined by antecedent grounds, can be conceived when it is regarded in itself, since the opposite still cannot occur in reality..." (Kant, 1996, 1:339).

This unsatisfactory state of affairs for human freedom motivates the project of carving out a space for *absolute* contingency. The category of the absolutely contingent is able to escape both logical necessitations, since its contrary is conceivable, and determination by antecedent grounds, so that these grounds provide space for agents like Julius Caesar to choose otherwise than some pre-determined fact imposed by God. In the following section, I will show how Kant moves away

from the ambitious architectonic of Leibniz, in which all of reality has intelligibility in terms of the choice of the best of all possible worlds. Kant's philosophical system permits unintelligibility at its limits, and this facilitates the creation of a space of absolute contingency that eludes PSR. By carving out a space of absolute contingency, Kant avoids an anthropology in which human beings are nothing more than marionettes acting out a pre-determined plan of God (Kant, 1996, 5:101).

3. Kant's Modesty

Kant's system curtails the universal intelligibility of Leibniz's system. Kant imports PSR into his critical system, but not as an ontological principle, and not as a teleological version of PSR in which purposive final causes provide adequate explanations. Instead of an ontological principle, Kant limits PSR to a principle of possible experience. The discipline of ontology, which provides an account of being in itself, is no longer possible under the epistemological restrictions in Kant's system. To do ontology requires using metaphysical concepts, like substance and causation, to describe things *in general*, "without taking regard of the way in which we might intuit them." (Kant, 1998, A247/B303). But, in the critical philosophy, it is illegitimate to apply metaphysical concepts to being in itself, beyond possible experience¹. Experience provides the only manner in which the understanding can make contact with objects. Any pure use of the understanding, extended beyond possible experience to being in itself, lacks epistemic grounding. "...The pure concepts of the understanding can never be of transcendental, but always only of empirical use..." (Kant, 1998, A247/B303).

Kant's epistemological restrictions transform the role of metaphysical categories. The metaphysical categories, in Aristotle, constitute the highest kinds into which we can divide being (Aristotle 1984, 25). Instead of articulating the structure of being in itself, as metaphysical categories, the categories in Kant become the *a priori* form of possible experience. The pure understanding cannot articulate the basic structure of being, but can only "anticipate the form of a possible experience in general..." (Kant, 1998, A247/B303).

Since the *a priori* use of the categories can only give us the form of possible experience, and not the structure of being, ontology as a discipline dies in the critical philosophy. The modest discipline of the "analytic of the understanding," i.e. the articulation of the basic structures of experience, replaces ontology (Kant, 1998, A247/B304). Ontology is supposed to provide "*a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine (e.g., the principle of causality) ...," (Kant, 1998, A247/B304) not things as they appear to us. This systematic doctrine of being in general includes a role for the principle of causality, i.e. the PSR by which nothing happens without a sufficient reason. Leibniz uses the category of causation as a metaphysical category to articulate the structure of being in general, not just in terms of how we experience it.

¹ *KrV* A539/B567. Kant, Immanuel (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This sort of ontological ambition is not possible in the critical philosophy. What reality is like in general, apart from any experiential context associated with our sensibility, is unknown. “What may be the case with objects in themselves...remains entirely unknown to us.” (Kant, 1998, A42/B59). We have to remain agnostic about the ultimate metaphysical structure of things. The structure of causality in experience does not necessarily transfer over to the structure of being, and so Kant permits some gaps in the universally intelligible architectonic of Leibniz.

The categories in Kant constitute a *transcendental logic*, which has to do with the most general structures in virtue of which can provide categorical classification of the manifold given by sensibility, i.e. the diverse packet of intuitions prior to mental synthesis (Kant, 1998, A77/B102). Transcendental logic underlying the content sensibility provides is distinct from a transcendental ontology that classifies structures of being. Kant also inverts the transcendentals of scholastics (Kant, 1998, B113). The transcendentals in scholasticism were supposed to be features that pertained to every category of being, bridging even the distinction between finite and infinite being (de Boer 2020, 82-3). The transcendentals of medieval scholasticism, like the metaphysical categories of ancient philosophy, become, in Kant, structures of the cognition of things, rather than structures of things in general, apart from cognition. “These supposedly transcendental predicates of things are nothing other than logical requisites and criteria of all cognition of things in general...” (Kant, 1998, B114).

PSR, rather than a metaphysical principle bridging the gap between finite and infinite being, constraining even God himself, as PSR does in Leibniz, becomes in Kant an analogy of experience. An analogy of experience provides a necessary relational structure in experience, but does not provide specific determination, in terms of the content and quantity of phenomena in experience (Kant, 1998, B223). The second analogy of experience maintains that “all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect.” (Kant, 1998, A188/B233). Nothing can arise, apart from a law connecting it to an antecedent ground, according to the second analogy of experience, and this principle at least approximates PSR. But, an analogy of experience pertains to “empirical consciousness (of perception),” (Kant, 1998, A177/B220) not to being in itself.

Second Analogy Prevents Full Realization of PSR. The second analogy of experience, though it is a form of PSR, actually prevents the full realization of PSR that we see in Leibniz, in the form of an ontological architectonic of the best of all possible worlds. The second analogy (hereafter, 2A) forbids the occurrence of an event in experience that lacks a cause. An unconditioned event, that lacks an antecedent ground, “conflicts with the dynamic law of the determination of all appearances in time...” (Kant, 1998, A453/B481).

2A precludes what is unconditioned in experience, because what is unconditioned does not follow from an antecedent event according to a causal law (Kant 1998, A533/B559, fn). Yet, Kant is aware that PSR cannot continue infinitely with a series of entities, arising from a causal law from an antecedent ground, forever. An infinite series cannot constitute a total explanation, because an

infinite series is never completed. PSR, in Kant, requires, for every conditioned thing, an ultimate grounding in what is *unconditioned*, so as to prevent an infinite regress. “If the conditioned is given, then the whole series of all conditions for it is also given...” (Kant, 1998, A497/B525).

The demand for the unconditioned, to avoid the infinite regress, exists also in Leibniz’s metaphysics. “The ultimate reason of all things must subsist in a necessary substance...” (Leibniz, 1965, 38). The necessary substance, containing the reason for its own existence within itself, is an unconditioned entity that does not rest on anything external to itself.

Yet, PSR in Kant, in its demand both for continuity within experience, which precludes anything unconditioned in experience, and the demand for an unconditioned that avoids an infinite regress, creates a tension. The demand for continuity in experience, enjoined by 2A, precludes the demand for completeness in PSR, since experience cannot include what is unconditioned, only what follows from a prior ground. “For the understanding does not permit among appearances any condition that is itself empirically unconditioned” (Kant, 1998, A531/B559). 2A, in its application of PSR, precludes the very unconditioned ground necessary to fully satisfy PSR by avoiding an infinite regress. PSR’s demand for completeness, then, necessarily exceeds experience, and so, in the critical philosophy, PSR’s demand for completeness can never be an object of knowledge. The necessary being cannot figure in experience, because the necessary being is an unconditioned reality that clashes with the structure of experience based on 2A. By extending the necessary being beyond possible experience, Kant removes it from any experiential validation. Experiential validation is the only way in the critical philosophy to establish existence of objects. “If I take all thinking...away from an empirical cognition, then no cognition of any object at all remains...” (Kant, 1998, A253/B309). The necessary being, since it cannot figure in any experience, is an empty idea, not associated with any object. “...If one searches for the unconditioned among conditioned things, then one will seek forever and always in vain, since no law of any empirical synthesis will ever give an example of such a thing...” (Kant, 1998, A621/B649).

We cannot infer from conditioned realities in experience, to an unconditioned reality, because “all laws of transition from effects to causes...are directed to nothing other than possible experience...” (Kant, 1998, A622/B650). The only significant application of the transition from effects to causes is within experience, and so the transition to an unconditioned being that surpasses experience is without significance.

PSR, in Kant, contains a *universality* requirement, expressed in the second analogy of experience that all events must follow an antecedent ground according to a causal law (Kant, 1998, A188/B233). At the same time, PSR expresses a *completeness* requirement, requiring a total explanation terminating in what is unconditioned that avoids an infinite regress that never establishes a sufficient reason. The completeness requirement, in Kant, clashes with the universality requirement, because the unconditioned reality demanded by the completeness requirement exceeds the universality requirement that is the formal structure of experience in Kant

(Allison, 1990, 22). The only way the unconditioned reality can exist is as an intelligible object, beyond possible experience, but there can be no knowledge of an intelligible object¹. “If...one would separate it [the highest being] from this chain, and, as a merely intelligible being, not include it within the series of natural causes, then what bridge can reason build so as to reach it?” (Kant, 1998, A621/B649).

Kant breaks down the architectonic that Leibniz constructed using PSR. Within experience, we only seek the unconditioned as a problem, and not as something given (Kant, 1998, A499/B527). As for the existence of an unconditioned reality, we can only remain agnostic, not knowing for sure of its existence, because we cannot have knowledge apart from experience.

Non-Teleological PSR in Kant. There is a diminishment of PSR in Kant, in the sense that it is merely mechanical, not teleological. The universality requirement for possible experience contained in 2A, that “all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect,” (Kant, 1998, A188/B233) does not include any teleology. The fact that an event follows an antecedent cause does not include the idea of the effect as the ground of the cause, animating the cause an end (Kant, 2000, 20:236). A rule of causal relationships, established in 2A, is separable from a value-driven orientation to what is best.

Teleology, in the critical philosophy, is the prerogative of reflecting, not determining judgment. We posit the idea of an end driving causation as a principle guiding investigation, not as a property of an object. Reflecting judgment posits teleology merely for its own behalf, as a convenient tool for classification, and not as some objective structure of being guiding all things towards what is best (Kant, 2000, 20:236). Reflecting judgment presupposes an order in nature such that it lends itself to an orderly classification under species and genera. Without this presupposition of order, we would face the possibility of a nature of such diversity that we could find no continuity of classes. But, this presupposition of order does not arise from a cognition of nature in itself. Instead, the presupposition of order that guides reflecting judgment is “its own subjective law, in accordance with its need...” (Kant, 2000, 20:214). As Neiman points out, “The point of Kant’s appeal to teleology can only be understood if his insistence that it does not give us knowledge of the world is fully appreciated” (Neiman, 1994, 82). Teleology in Kant is not constitutive, i.e. an objective feature of the world, but a subjective principle of our cognitive faculties.

Whereas Leibniz’s metaphysics gives us a full architectonic in which everything has its place in the best of all possible worlds, Kant’s system is incomplete, forcing us to search for the unconditioned without ever being able to find it, and only posits teleology as a subjective guide. I explain, in the fourth section, how the limited application of PSR in Kant allows him to carve out a space of absolute contingency, which has no sufficient explanation either through logical necessity or in terms of the actual causal structure of the world.

¹ *KrV* A42/B59. Kant, Immanuel (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4. Absolute Contingency

Kant creates a space of absolute contingency by limiting PSR to a principle of experience. If PSR is a principle of experience, then PSR need not apply to things in themselves. An unconditioned reality, occupying a space of absolute contingency that is independent of any antecedent cause, is possible at the PSR-exempt level of things in themselves.

A candidate for such an unconditioned reality is libertarian free will. Libertarians in the free will debate believe that free will exists, and that free will is incompatible with a deterministic series (Pereboom & McKenna, 2016, 31). Libertarian free will challenges the contemporary denials of free will in the natural sciences, which present it as a mere illusion¹, or in politics, which view individuals in terms of social structures. Since libertarian free will is independent of a deterministic series, it has the potential to figure in the modal category of absolute contingency. Instead of being subject to external causation that forces free will towards a specific outcome, we can account for libertarian freedom solely in terms of its exercise, and not in terms of antecedent grounds. We find this sort of libertarian freedom, independent of any causal network, in Crusius. “He [Crusius] thinks that the free will is actually determined by its existence, not antecedently by grounds...” (Kant, 1996, 1:397).

In his engagement with Crusius early on, Kant rejected the idea of a self-determining libertarian freedom, that excludes alternate realizations solely in terms of its own actuality. Kant committed to the principle that “a contingent thing is never sufficiently determined, if you abandon the antecedently determining ground...” (Kant, 1996, 1:397). One of the innovations of the critical period is a rapprochement with Crusius, in the form of Kant’s commitment to a libertarian conception of freedom that arises independently of any antecedent ground. In the first *Critique*, Kant presents freedom as distinct from the causality of nature. The causality of nature is subject to laws of nature, in virtue of which events unfold from a previous state according to a deterministic rule (Kant, 1998, A444/B472). The causality of freedom is distinct from the causality of nature, insofar as the causality of freedom is “an absolute causal spontaneity beginning from itself...” (Kant, 1998, A446/B474). Causality of freedom exists through its own actuality, without any antecedent ground.

Unconditioned causality through freedom is “contrary to the causal law, and is a combination between the successive states of effective causes in accordance with which no unity of experience is possible...” (Kant, 1998, A447/B475). The unconditioned causality of freedom disrupts the causal sequence without which we cannot have any experience at all. But, PSR in the critical period is a principle of experience, not an ontological principle, and so PSR does not exclude the possibility of an unconditioned causality of freedom. Kant’s doctrine of transcendental idealism, whereby the conditions of possible experience pertaining to all categories of experience (hence,

¹ The latest installment is Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*, (Penguin: 2023).

transcendental), are features of the mind (hence, idealism), permits the possibility of causality through freedom in the domain of things in themselves, apart from the categories of experience (Kant, 1998, A491/B519).

Transcendental idealism means that appearances participate in *a priori* structures of the mind, and so appearances are mind-dependent and not part of reality in itself (Kant, 1998, A491/B519).

Transcendental *realism* posits the spatiotemporal framework as an ontological structure existing in its own right, apart from experience. “The realist, in the transcendental signification, makes these modifications of our sensibility into things subsisting in themselves...” (Kant, 1998, A491/B519).

The adoption of transcendental idealism allows Kant to limit the causal law of PSR to experience. Transcendental idealism means that the causal law connecting events in space and time is only a feature of the mind, not necessarily a feature of things in themselves. Transcendental idealism is part of the epistemological modesty that prevents Kant from establishing the architectonic we find in Leibniz, which upholds PSR as a principle governing all of being. This epistemological modesty allows Kant to permit the possibility of an unconditioned libertarian freedom in the domain of things in themselves, apart from experience. If the causal law is only a function of the mind’s cognition of reality, i.e. of appearances and not necessarily of things in themselves, then reality in itself may be exempt from it. Exemption from the causal law permits the possibility of libertarian freedom that is incompatible with determinism.

Kant identifies two characters, or laws of causality (Kant, 1998, A539/B567) pertaining to the human agent. The empirical character of the human agent participates in experience, and so partakes of the causal law characteristic of experience. “...In the temporal succession all actions of natural causes are themselves in turn effects, which likewise presuppose their causes in the time-series” (Kant, 1998, A544/B572). There can be no unconditioned libertarian freedom exercised by the empirical character, because the empirical character is subject to the universality requirement of the causal law, i.e. *every* event in the empirical domain must follow by a causal law from a previous event. The empirical character forms the horizon for contemporary denials of human agency, which account for our choices entirely in terms of external forces, e.g. biology, neurochemistry, group dynamics, etc.

In order to establish freedom at the empirical level, we could develop a compatibilist account of freedom that accepts determination by an antecedent ground, but nevertheless permits freedom from the fact that one’s actions come from conscious reflection instead of impulse (Pereboom & McKenna, 2016, 50). Kant discusses a compatibilist form of freedom that accepts external determination, but maintains freedom in virtue of the fact that the marionette is at least a self-conscious one (Kant, 1998, 5:101).

But, the recognition that the proximate cause of an action has to do with what is internal to an individual’s psychology, rather than some insensate process, does not change the fact that the action is the inevitable byproduct of a prior cause independent of the agent’s control. The self-conscious

agent is only self-conscious of what he *must* do in virtue of pre-determined causal sequences over which he has no control (Kant, 1998, 5:101).

With the adoption of transcendental idealism, the empirical character subject to determinism is a mere appearance, and so is a function of mental structures, not a thing in itself. By making the empirical character a mere appearance, Kant is able to limit the ontological application of the deterministic causal law characterizing experience. As a result of this limitation, unconditioned freedom, which is incompatible with a deterministic causal law, is possible for the agent as he is in himself, independently of the way he appears.

The *intelligible* character represents that aspect of our agency which is independent of the way it appears (Kant, 1998, A538/B566). The intelligible character has potential for a completely different law of causality than what characterizes the empirical character. Since the intelligible character is not an appearance, it is not even subject to temporal succession in the way that appearances are. “This acting subject, in its intelligible character, would not stand under any conditions of time, for time is only the condition of appearances but not of things in themselves.” (Kant, 1998, A540/B568). As something independent of temporal succession, the intelligible character is independent of the causal law that connects, in experience, events occurring in temporal succession. Independent of the causal law, the intelligible character is capable of unconditioned freedom: “Of it [the intelligible character] one would say quite correctly that it begins its effects in the sensible world from itself...” (Kant, 1998, A541/B569).

The unconditioned freedom of the intelligible character is absolutely contingent. It is possible for it to be different in other possible worlds, since its contrary is not a contradictory. Also, the unconditioned freedom of the intelligible character is independent of any prior causal series. The intelligible character rises above the temporal succession, subject to a causal law, that characterizes experience.

Nicholas Stang, in his work on Kant’s modal metaphysics, identifies a form of possibility as *noumenal-causal possibility*, that helps us account for the absolute contingency of human freedom in its intelligible aspect. Noumenal-causal possibility refers to the possibility that the grounds of experience, themselves not possible experiences, can generate a different experience (Stang, 2016, 224). A different experience is noumenally-causally possible insofar as its noumenal ground can generate a different one. With respect to free will, an agent’s actions are necessary with respect to the causal series in the empirical character. But there is a noumenal-causal possibility to change these actions, insofar as, the intelligible character, which is the ground of the empirical character, can generate a different deterministic causal series in the empirical character. So, though events characterizing the empirical character may be necessary, there is a noumenal-causal possibility not subject to this necessity, that can change the character of the necessity at the empirical level. The causal law at the empirical level does not constrain the intelligible character, which is not in

experience, but is the ground of experience. “The empirical character is...determined in the intelligible character.” (Kant, 1998, A551/B579).

Kant's permission of an unconditioned power of freedom, independent of any antecedent ground, is the impetus for a new humanism that is scandalous for the absoluteness of divine sovereignty, as well as for modern ideologies that deny human agency in the name of science or politics. An absolutely contingent human will gives human agency a sovereignty over itself that is competitive with God. God might have a will for the best possible outcome, but the human will is independent, and so might undermine the achievement of this outcome. Kant limits teleology to a mere subjective guide for our investigation of nature, and so teleology need not be an objective determination of the structure of nature (Kant 2000, 20:237). In refraining from making teleology an objective structure of nature, Kant allows the teleology associated with the *human* will to become a competitor with any teleology associated with God. A teleology of the human will that is absolutely contingent, moreover, can individuate itself from natural forces or group dynamics.

In Leibniz, human choices follow from the individual concept God already has of each person. In Kant, the human agent has access, in its intelligible character, to a modality of absolute contingency by which it exercises causality in a way entirely independent of antecedent causes. The absolute contingency of the intelligible character is independent of a theological determinism in which the actions of an agent are a product of God's preliminary choice. The human will is the absolute sovereign over its own actions, and is able to remake the world according to its own judgment. Nor is the idea of the human agent a mere extension of nature or group dynamics, since the absolutely contingent intelligible character determines itself, independently of any antecedent ground.

Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty. We see Kant's humanistic endorsement of a world made in our image, rather than one subject to the individual concepts chosen by divine wisdom, in his meditation on the threat posed to human freedom by God's creation of the human substance. Kant worries that, if God's creative activity, as the being of beings, accounts for the existence of human substances, then all our actions will have an ultimate ground in what is beyond our control, i.e. the “causality of a supreme being...” (Kant, 1998, 5:101).

Human agency subject to divine predetermination is what we find in Leibniz. But, the distinction between the empirical and intelligible characters means that the causal series, driven by PSR, characterizes the agent only as an appearance, and not necessarily as a thing in itself. The exemption of the intelligible character from PSR permits the agent a space independent from theological determinism. “If a human being's actions insofar as they belong to his determinations in time were not merely determinations of him as appearance but as a thing in itself, freedom could not be saved” (Kant, 1998, 5:101). If, that is, the temporal series of events connected by causal law characterized the agent in itself, and not merely as an appearance, the temporal series of events

would connect the agent in himself, not merely as an appearance, back to the all-sufficient will of God, making him an expression of God's ultimate control.

But, the deterministic causal series, characterizing the agent's empirical character, is an appearance in time, whereas the divine action, occurring in eternity occupied by an infinite and independent being outside of time, pertains to reality in itself. This distinction prevents the determinism characterizing the agent's empirical character from following necessarily from the action of God. The action of God does not control the causal succession at the empirical level, given the fact that the action of the infinite and independent God is above time, and so pertains to the intelligible level. "...It is quite easy for us to distinguish between the determination of the divine existence as independent of all temporal conditions and that of a being of the sensible world, the distinction being that between *the existence of a being in itself* and that of a *thing in appearance*" (Kant, 1998, 5:102).

God acts in the domain of things in themselves, but the fallout of this action does not flow into the causal series structured by PSR, because this causal series is an appearance characterizing only the structure of experience. If we renounce epistemological modesty, and attribute the causal series structured by PSR to reality in itself, then we connect the causal series to the divine activity at the level of things in themselves, and this creates a pervasive theological determinism. Epistemological modesty means that God's creative activity, and the deterministic appearance of the agent, occupy different domains of reality. "...Creation [of the human agent by God] has to do with their intelligible but not their sensible existence," since God's creative activity is beyond the spatiotemporal structure characterizing experience. Attributing God's creative activity to the intelligible domain beyond experience means that we cannot regard this activity as "the determining ground of appearances..." (Kant, 1998, 5:102). On the contrary, if we attribute the causal series governed by PSR to the intelligible character, i.e. to the human agent in himself, this causal series shares the same level of reality as the divine creative activity, and so becomes subject to it.

We have a noumenal-causal possibility, in our intelligible character, to ground a distinct causal series in appearances. Since we have this capacity in our intelligible characters, we are able to be independent of God's creative power. A causal series might characterize us empirically, but we can opt out of it, in virtue of our grounding of this causal series at the intelligible level. God's creative power also has access to noumenal-causal possibility, since he can ground, through his will, a different kind of world in space and time. Yet, we are not subject to the structure of the world that God creates, because we have access to noumenal-causal possibility in the intelligible aspect of our wills, by which we can change, as a ground, the empirical world in space and time. If we did not have access to noumenal-causal possibility, the causal series would characterize us absolutely, in our intelligible selves, and this causal series would link us up directly to the creative power of God, also at the intelligible level.

Exercising its power in a space of absolute contingency, the human agent in Kant is a co-creator with God, able to introduce a new causal series with freedom that is unconditioned. Neither natural causes nor group dynamics can make the human agent their passive expression. The absolute contingency associated with the human will gives it an ability to change the course of events that we cannot find in the architectonic of the best of all possible worlds in Leibniz, in which all events follow according to the pre-established individual concept God has of each creature (Leibniz, 1988, section 13).

Conclusion

I established how Kant carved out a space of absolute contingency, which forms a loophole to the causal structure based on PSR. The modal category of absolute contingency gives to the human agent a sovereignty over its own actions that contends with, and is not a mere expression of, divine sovereignty. Leibniz used PSR to reject absolute contingency in Spinoza, who presents only necessitarian efficient causes without orientation to a purpose, and Descartes, who permits to God's will a sovereignty over truth itself. Kant's limitation of PSR to experience means that the intelligible character of the human agent has sovereignty over itself in a way that eludes the contemporary ideologies that deny human agency.

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