# Henry E. Allison. *Kant's Conception of Freedom: A Developmental and Critical Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 531. Cloth, $140.00.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of freedom in Kant’s critical philosophy, and there are few scholars whose expertise on this subject could rival Henry E. Allison’s. In this magisterial commentary, Allison meticulously chronicles the development of Kant’s theory of freedom from his earliest pre-critical works all the way through the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Great care is taken to explain how and why Kant’s views changed over time, and Allison provides compelling, sympathetic interpretations at every turn.

The first four chapters deal with Kant’s pre-critical writings and his lectures on metaphysics and ethics from the 1760s. The general narrative here is likely to be a familiar one for the target audience, but Allison’s reconstruction of this development is rich in illuminating details. For instance, most readers will already know that Kant initially held a position akin to Wolff’s compatibilism, but Allison carefully explains how Kant modified the account in response to criticisms from Crusius. In these chapters Allison also discusses Kant’s famous encounter with Rousseau and his brief (but influential) attraction to Hutchesonian sentimentalism.

In addition to drawing on Kant’s published works and lectures, Allison combs through *Reflexionen* from the “silent decade” to explain what motivated Kant’s critical view of freedom. It is here that Kant begins to articulate many of the central tenets of transcendental freedom that emerge in the first *Critique*. The departure from Wolff becomes very clear as Kant abandons the compatibilist concept of “relative spontaneity” in favor of “absolute spontaneity” — a first beginning that begets a new causal series from itself (*von selbst*), independent of any external determining grounds. Of course, Kant cannot account for such an idea without the critical distinction between things in themselves and appearances.

Thus, Allison turns to the first *Critique* in chapter 6, where he explains Kant’s resolution of the apparent conflict between freedom and determinism in the Third Antinomy. So it is here, for the first time, that readers will encounter Allison’s interpretation of transcendental idealism according to which things in themselves are to be understood as “things considered in abstraction from the temporal relations in which they stand as objects of possible experience” (254). But readers who hold a different view of transcendental idealism will still find a great deal of common ground in Allison’s compelling reconstruction of Kant’s resolution of the antinomy.

Toward the end of the chapter, Allison wrestles with the alleged inconsistency between Kant’s discussions of practical freedom in the Canon and the Dialectic. In the Canon, practical freedom looks like an empirically knowable, compatibilist concept, but in the Dialectic it seems more like an incompatibilist notion that requires transcendental freedom as a necessary condition. Allison rejects the uncharitable “patchwork” reading, which suggests that the inconsistency is the result of Kant sloppily patching his notes together when writing these sections of the first *Critique*. I am inclined to agree with Allison that we should avoid the patchwork reading if we can, but I was not entirely convinced by his resolution. It remained unclear to me how, on Allison’s view, Kant can suggest that transcendental freedom cannot be proven by any experience while also claiming that practical freedom (which requires transcendental freedom) is cognized through experience.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with freedom as it arises in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. There is far too much in these hundred and ten pages to summarize comprehensively here, so I will highlight what I take to be the most important point. Allison once again endorses the “great reversal” interpretation, according to which Kant recognized the deduction of *Groundwork* III as a total failure and reversed the order of the argument in the second *Critique* with his infamous “fact of reason.” Many commentators have adopted this interpretation, but I tend to agree with dissenters like Allen Wood and Sergio Tenenbaum, who argue that the two texts are actually consistent. It has always seemed mysterious to me that Kant would undergo such a radical shift and never bother mentioning it in a single note, letter, or published work.

Allison concludes in chapters 9 and 10 with discussions of Kant’s last major works from the 1790s. He offers an interesting account of what “incalculable gulf” remained to be bridged between nature and freedom in the third *Critique*, and the discussions of aesthetics and teleology lead naturally to Kant’s conclusion that we can view the human being as nature’s ultimate end. He responds to the Reinhold/Sidgwick objection about the imputability of immoral actions by invoking the *Wille/Willkür* distinction, and he closes the book with a sympathetic reconstruction of Kant’s account of “radical evil.”

Allison’s book is astounding in both breadth and depth. It is a fantastic resource that will likely prove to be essential reading for anyone who wants a deep understanding of Kant’s theory of freedom.

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