

# From Possibility to Reality – A Sketch of Reinhold’s Critique of Kant’s Metaphysics of Moral

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## § 1. Aim and Scope

The aim of this paper is modest. It does not intend to debate the justifiability of Reinhold’s interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy, nor does it seek to defend Kant against Reinhold’s criticisms, as many Kantian scholars have already addressed these issues.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this paper aims to highlight a significant yet *underemphasized historical transition* in early critical idealism: **the shift from the metaphysics of morals to the theory of action**, precipitated by the publication of Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785. This transition became more apparent in 1792 with Karl Leonhard Reinhold’s publication of his second volume of *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (Henceforth: *Briefe II*). Reinhold argues that freedom is manifested via the *possibility of doing otherwise*, and he asserts the indispensability of distinguishing *practical reason* from the *will* (Wille).

I focus on Reinhold’s eighth letter, “*Explication of the Concept of the Freedom of Will*” (Erörterung des Begriffes von der Freyheit des Willens), to reconstruct his critique of Kant’s metaphysics of morals. Like those popular philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, Reinhold advocates for public enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Reinhold insists that philosophy must situate in context instead of letting itself suffer from the

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there exists numerous secondary literature debating whether Reinhold misunderstood Kant’s moral philosophy or whether Kant has clarified his position in the second *Critique* by distinguishing between *ratio cognoscendi* and *ratio essendi*. It appears that morality and freedom, while not identical, are closely linked, with the former being a cognition of the latter. Additionally, in his discussions on religion, Kant addresses the impurity of the will as a factor causing an agent to act immorally. However, the primary aim of this paper is to highlight the overlooked “*action-turn*” in early transcendental idealism, rather than to debate the defensibility of Kant’s moral philosophy through his other texts. While it is certainly possible to defend Kant using his other writings, that is not the focus of this paper. For defending Kant against the Reinhold: Bojanowski, 2007, Wuerth, 2013 and Baum, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gerten wrote an excellent paper addressing the correlation between the enlightenment of philosophers and the public. For Reinhold, philosophy is not merely a metaphysical fantasy or wordplay but aims to educate the public. Reinhold’s philosophical ambition is to make speculation and life consistent. As a neo-rationalist, he never thinks that one should abandon rationality for common sense, nor should common sense be sacrificed for rationality, but they cannot exist without each other. See Gerten, 2010.

“metaphysical influenza”. [Reinhold, 1792: 7] I conclude with a brief discussion of Reinhold’s *indirect* contributions to contemporary ethics and the potential for diverse reinterpretations of Kantian ethics.

## § 2. Kant’s Moral Grounding and Intelligible Fatalism

Kant’s analytic thesis in his *Groundwork III* that *free will* and a *will under the moral law* are the *same (einerlei)* sparked considerable debate among his contemporaries. [GMS, AA 04:447] Kant’s identification of *free will* with the *moral law* implies that an agent cannot *freely* choose to act immorally. Consequently, immoral actions are attributable solely to our desires or inclinations, and any action conditioned by such influences cannot be said free, thereby challenging the concept of moral accountability. C. C. E. Schmid was the first to critique Kant’s moral philosophy as “intelligible fatalism”. He argued that while Kant tried to define freedom through reason, this approach ultimately undermines freedom by making us a slave to *reason*.

Schmid agrees with Kant that moral freedom entails independence from *natural necessity*, allowing reason to determine actions without interference from nature. Although moral freedom is not subject to the laws of nature, it is not *without law*. Grounding freedom in reason itself subjects it to a certain degree of “necessity,” as it operates according to specific laws or rules i.e., the *causality of freedom*, and is still “full of necessity” (überall Nothwendigkeit). [Schmid, 1790: 209] Kant’s moral grounding shifts us from “natural necessity” to “intelligible necessity”. [Schmid, 1790: 211] Consequently, an agent is not truly free as he has no *choice* but to obey the laws of reason and thus cannot be blamed for his immoral actions. However, an action is either guided by reason or desire, but in either case, freedom is unattainable, leading to determinism. Kant’s grounding of morality in reason, Schmid argues, ultimately renders reason irrational and morality illusory. [Schmid, 1790: 219]

Reinhold acknowledged the significance of Schmid’s argument, yet he rejected its conclusion. According to Reinhold, Kant has successfully demonstrated the “possibility” of freedom. Nevertheless, he does not elucidate how *metaphysical freedom* translates into empirical reality; such a transition is absent in the *Groundwork III* since the applicability of categorical imperative is inexplicable for Kant. [GMS, AA 04:459; Schönecker and Wood, 2011:172-173.] This omission troubled Reinhold, who believed that freedom should not be merely a practical possibility, but must also have a basis in “reality.” [Reinhold, 1792: 283] In other words, Reinhold sought to render freedom tangible so that every individual, not just philosophers, could effectively *utilize* it. The shift from *metaphysics to a theory of action*, therefore, becomes indispensable to save freedom from determinism. While Reinhold agreed with Schmid on the “necessity of reason,” he disagreed with the conclusion that this necessity inevitably leads to determinism.

### § 3. Reinhold's Theory of Faculty of Choice and Absolute Freedom

The solution to the Kantian paradox, according to Reinhold, is to develop a theory of the "faculty of choice" that determines satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the *drives* (Trieb). [Reinhold, 1792: 267] Reinhold characterizes the faculty of choice as the standpoint of "*absolute freedom*" (Absolute Freyheit), which is an agent's capacity to choose to act according to the moral or pure will or to act according to the empirical will. In other words, absolute freedom can be expressed through the agent's pure or empirical willing. The pure will and empirical will are conceptualized as *unselfish* (uneigennütigen) and *selfish drives* (eigennütigen Trieb) respectively, with the former being moral and free. However, unlike Kant, Reinhold asserts that an action driven by desire is not necessarily unfree; the selfish drive also represents a free choice. [Reinhold, 1792: 273] Reinhold cautions against the misconception that there are two separate wills in his system, clarifying that they are "*one and the same will*" (ein und derselbe Wille) that can be viewed from "*different perspectives*" (verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten). [Reinhold, 1792: 274]

Reinhold considers Kant's dichotomization of the will as highly problematic, arguing a will ceases to be a will if considered only in a single perspective. He posits that a will ceases to be free if it is driven by either a selfish or an unselfish motif, excluding the possibility that an agent might find *both types of drives equally compelling*. [Reinhold, 1792: 275] Reinhold identifies a critical oversight in Kant's philosophy: The "*practical reason is not a will*" and is not used to determine our actions. [Reinhold, 1792: 293] Instead, Reinhold asserts that the practical reason must *operate through the will*, which in turn renders the practical reason either *involuntary* (unwillkürlich) or *voluntary* (willkürlich). That is to say, the will decides to act following or against the moral law. Thus, it is this "faculty of choice" that undertakes this task, rather than the practical reason itself:

"[T]his cannot be emphasized enough for the friends of Kantian philosophy that *practical reason is not a will* [die praktische Vernunft ist kein Wille] even though it is essentially connected to the will and manifests itself with every genuine *willing* [Wollen]. The action of practical reason is merely *involuntary* [unwillkürlich]. The action of the will [Willen], whether in accordance with or contrary to practical reason, is *voluntary* [willkürlich]...The person [Person] is conscious of what is incumbent upon it or not, what it should or should not do, but indeed to will or not to will, which is not in the realm of *obligation* [Sollen] and *non-obligation* [Nichtsollen], but in *volition* [Wollen] and *non-volition* [Nichtwollen] that is free; nor in what *unselfish* [uneigennützig] or *selfish* [eigennützig] *drive* demands of it, but in what it grants to one and denies to the other. It is indeed the same person [Person] who imparts to itself and follows the moral law, but not the same faculty [Vermögen] within the person." [Reinhold, 1792: 293-294, My translation]

If we fail to distinguish practical reason from the will, we confront the dilemma of rescuing freedom from the "slavery of instincts" (Sklaverei des Instinktes), only to subject ourselves to the "slavery of mental force" (Sklaverei der Denkkraft). Our actions will not be free in this sense since we are *forced* to follow the laws bounded by

reason and cannot act against them. Reinhold emphasized that it is a mistake of Kant and his defenders to insist that practical reason can serve as the determining ground of morality. As the metaphysical ground of morality, the practical reason must remain indifferent: *it is neither free nor unfree*. Only the will can be described as free or unfree, depending on which drive it adopts. Practical reason itself is the function of the *constituting principle*, and it is misleading to ascribe the property of freedom to this principle. When a person employs this principle as a law for action-guiding, it is the will and the action can be characterized as free or unfree, not the practical reason itself.

However, one might question the validity of Reinhold's critique, considering that Kant distinguishes two levels of freedom: (1) *negative* freedom – wherein an agent must be independent of natural necessity; (2) *positive* freedom – wherein an agent must *spontaneously* act on the laws imposed by practical reason. However, Reinhold's opinion is that neither of them is possible. First, he argues that an agent must be independent of the natural necessity. But the natural necessity belongs to "obstacles" (Hindernisse) that the agent itself cannot control, so the independence of "outer coercion" (äußerm Zwang) cannot be a possible task. [Reinhold, 1792: 296-297] Second, positive freedom is also impossible because, as previously discussed, the practical reason is full of constraints, leaving the agent unable to evade them. Consequently, the agent's action is either entirely *determined* or *contingent*. Thus, the problem of freedom is effectively dissolved:

"[T]he *ground* [Grund] for moral action would by no means be found only in the mere *self-activity* [Selbstthätigkeit] of the practical reason, but also in the absence of those obstacles [Hindernisse] entirely independent of this reason. The entire freedom of this [practical] reason, and thereby of the person [Person], restricted to some instances, would thus consist only in a *contingent* [zufälligen] independence from external compulsion, which would by no means lie within the person's *power* [Gewalt]. Moral action would inevitably occur through a completely *involuntary* [unwillkührliche] effect of practical reason, as long as no obstacle were present, and only the presence or absence of the latter would thus have to be attributed to both moral and immoral action." [Reinhold, 1792: 296-297, My translation]

Therefore, the solution to preserving Kant's freedom must rest on the agent's *capacity to do otherwise*. This constitutes Reinhold's transition from Kant's *possibility* of metaphysical freedom to the *reality* of freedom. Like other popular philosophers of his time, Reinhold believed philosophy should serve as a guide for life. Any philosophical theory must be integrated with practical application. In his later writings, he even critiqued philosophers' confusion with theory and practice. Philosophers have the duty to discern the "difference" (Unterschied) between various concepts while constructing philosophical arguments. However, they must not "separate" (trennen) philosophical theory from practical application, and vice versa. [Reinhold, 1812: 1-40]

#### § 4. Reinhold's Indirect and Neglected Contribution

Approximately a century later, Henry Sidgwick offered a critique of Kant's theory of freedom similar to Reinhold's. Sidgwick argued that Kant failed to adequately distinguish "*Neutral Freedom*" from "*Good Freedom*." In his view, the (pure) practical reason is not accountable for choosing actions; instead, this responsibility lies with the *will*. Kant's conflation of practical reason with the will renders the issue of moral accountability impossible. [Sidgwick, 1888: 405-412] Like Reinhold, Sidgwick maintained that one should not attribute the capacity of choice to practical reason. Rather, it is the *will* that is assigned to determine whether the agent's action is free, unfree, moral, or immoral. Sidgwick's has had a significant impact on contemporary Kantian, especially on Rawlsian constructivism. I want to point out that contemporary Kantians did owe a considerable intellectual debt to Reinhold.

Firstly, Kant's refusal to define morality by acting contrary to it, as expressed in the "*Metaphysics of Morals*" (1797), marks his departure from Reinhold: "[F]reedom of choice cannot be defined - as some have tried to define it - as the ability to make a choice for or against the law (*libertas indifferentiae*), even though choice as a phenomenon provides frequent examples of this in experience" [MS, AA 6:226] The endeavor to base morality on the potentiality of actions is deemed a Reinholdian approach. Recent scholarship draws attention to Kant's moral psychology and practical agency, arguing that *sensible desire*, *inclination*, or *happiness* plays a crucial role in Kant's theory of action. [Tizzard, 2021:1-28; Wuerth 2013: 1-36; and McCarty, 2009]

<sup>4</sup>Both reason and desire present us with an attractive proposal to take it as the determining ground. However, the pursuit of textual evidence in Kant's works to support this notion may prove less convincing, as he consistently rejected the idea that freedom can be defined via *libertas indifferentiae*. Freedom can only start from a *metaphysical* standpoint, and explaining freedom through phenomena is doomed to fail since nothing in empirical reality can tell us about moral duty. Morality is not based on any empirical psychology.

Secondly, instead of seeing Reinhold's critique of Kant's identification of practical reason with the will as a shortcoming, moral constructivists such as Korsgaard take it as an advantage. Suppose the practical reason is proven to have the power to determine our actions and to ground our practical agency; then, in that case, the operation of the practical reason cannot violate the moral law since, if it does, it will cause a *performative contradiction*. Korsgaard, though *indirectly*, accepts Reinhold's interpretation of Kant but proceeds to develop a *constructivist* framework carrying the

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Wuerth's defense of Kant's practical agency against Korsgaard and Sidgwick, perhaps inadvertently, adopts a Reinholdian approach. This is particularly evident in his concluding remarks: "In our complex moral lives, therefore, if we choose to act on moral incentives, we often do so not because we, as noumenal beings understanding our situation clearly, lack immoral incentives, as Korsgaard argues, but in spite of these immoral incentives. And, oppositely, if we choose to act instead on immoral incentives, we often do so not because we have no moral incentives, or because we are confused, but because our immoral incentives are attractive, to us."

Reinholdian spirit. The practical agency defines itself through a theory of action, and one should *choose* its maxim only when it corresponds to the moral law, i.e., *humanity*. [Korsgaard, 1996: 121-123] When the agent considers humanity as its moral principle, it is rational and morally valuable. Korsgaard believes it is the only way to make one's life *consistent*, and one is not acting at all if one is not acting morally. Accordingly, it creates a community where the agent always treats other agents as an end, never merely as a means. In Reinhold's wording, it means that the *faculty of choice* decides to act according to the unselfish drive that corresponds to the moral principles issued by practical reason. One must *choose* to act on reason despite the temptation of desire. Morality means resisting the evil temptation and choosing the counteract, which rests on the possibility of actions, both for Korsgaard and Reinhold.<sup>5</sup>

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