

Freedom as a Problem

Ingo Werner Gerhartz² is a doctoral candidate at the department of philosophy in Mainz and a member of the Gutenberg Academy since 2013. He obtained his M.A. of philosophy and hellenistic studies at Johannes-Gutenberg University in 2008. His research focuses on the concept of guilt in classical greek tragedy, myth and practical philosophy.

²i.gerhartz@gmx.de

Philosophy, one might argue, primarily concerns itself with unsolved questions. Out of these, the question of freedom has certainly proven to be one of the most difficult. This is not so much owed to a lack of empirical data or it being such a lofty endeavor of academic interest that it eludes rational solution. Rather, we will see that by nature of its subject, the very act of asking the question itself creates the difficulties it struggles to overcome.

Nevertheless, we have to ask, because freedom is such an integral part of our everyday life. Not a single conscious choice – be it trivial, political or personal – could be made that does not rely on it as a presumption at least. Without it, we would not even be held accountable for our actions before a court, since judgment regarding moral and legal responsibility is passed based on whether or not we had a choice and if it really was ours to make. In our western culture, freedom is held aloft as one of our greatest values. Where it is suppressed or neglected, we passionately strive to reclaim it and go to great lengths to defend it.

Perhaps this is why the meaning of the words “freedom” or “liberty” is generally defined in negatory terms: the absence of compulsion or restraint, self-legislation (autonomy) as opposed to slavery, independence from outside forces. Positive definitions of what freedom is seem to pale in comparison to the assertions of what it is not.

No wonder then, from an historical perspective, that freedom first became a problem around the time when the notion of a universe governed by a singular abstract principle (logos or “reason”) was formulated by philosophers of the ancient greek Stoa, reducing human decision to compliance with a predetermined fate (synkatathesis). Fueled by more recent discoveries in neurosciences, the ongoing modern debate of free will versus various forms of causal determinism² still revolves intimately around these same basic concepts.

Today, we face a multitude of arguments for or against the compatibility of freedom (and thus moral obligation) with deterministic positions in science, probably best known for its expression as “Laplace’s demon”:^[2] an omniscient intelligence able to comprehend all past and future states of the universe only by analyzing the data of the present. While there are theories that assume less strict forms of causality, or even propose the existence of absolute indetermination, these do not touch the intrinsic problem of freedom at all.

The more we learn to understand ourselves and the universe around us, the more connections we find that seem to defy this sense of liberty. How can we be free if we are sub-

ject to genetic predetermination or are the products of our upbringing? The persistent recurrence of this conundrum indicates that the answer to it might not lie with what we are or what we cannot do, but how we perceive it – it is a matter of human understanding.

Whether we examine a chemical process, the logic of an argument or a piece of art, a good part of the effort to systematically interpret and explain it is to identify a set of factors or causes of which the presented phenomenon is an effect. We cannot be said to understand anything otherwise, which is why this relation, commonly referred to as “causality”, is part of what makes knowledge of objects in general possible in the first place. It is an *a priori* (meaning before and independent of all experience) “category of the faculty of understanding”,^[3] as eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant put it.

We can easily see how this applies to the scientific method of investigation in particular. Science seeks to explain natural phenomena by putting forward hypotheses and testing them through observation and experiment to ensure intersubjective verifiability. A theory that fails to establish a causal relationship cannot make any predictions (whether false or correct) and thus must be considered conjecture at best. While this is not really a bias, but simply the way scientific understanding works, it does create a problem:

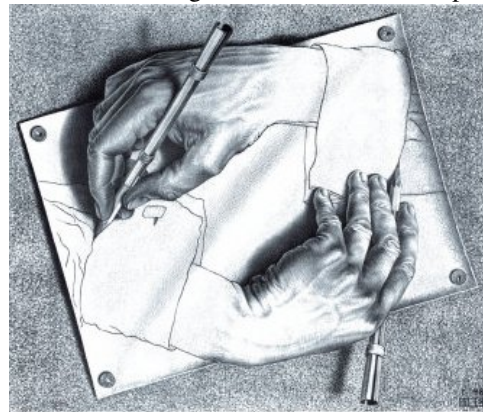


Figure 1: **Freehand drawing?** ”Zeichnende Hände” by M. C. Escher ©M. C. Escher Heirs c/o Cordon Art - Baarn, Holland

Unfortunately, the same holds true when we try to understand ourselves. If freedom is the absence of a determining cause, but understanding is achieved by means of establishing causality, things we understand can never be free and things that are free can never be truly understood. Mutually

²i.e. “the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature”.^[1]

exclusive, understanding freedom would seem an exercise in futility.

But is this really the freedom we seek? Dismissing any kind of determination, we would also have to include our own motives and personality, leaving nothing but pure, random chance. Having no effect whatsoever on the outcome, our decisions would merely happen to us and we would not be the authors of our actions. Obviously, this absolute freedom isn't freedom at all. A positive definition would have to allow us to be our own masters.

"Freedom is slavery",^[4] George Orwell might say. But can there be a freedom that is not only compatible with causal determination, but in fact only possible because of it? At long last, a narrow path to solve this problem might lie between the alleged antipodes: a reflexive freedom that is the determination by oneself. After all is said and done, we can always choose to either consent or object – and consequently configure that which configures us in turn, expanding what limits us, nurturing what sustains us.

In doing so, we practice freedom – one such as Escher's hands drawing each other illustrate – a relation where there is no distinction between active agent and passive object, where each part is simultaneously being determined and determining that which determines it. There is no moral dichotomy either, as we are responsible for everything caused by us and even have to stand in for our decisions by suffering the consequences directly. If we had no choice, it's our

own fault, because it is up to us to render them possible.

Of course, this requires us to first understand who we are, what we want (and sometimes: what we rather should want), as well as the many determinants we are subject to. The extent to which we are able to do this is the extent of our freedom, or in other words: knowledge makes us free.

Now, what does this say about liberty in academics, where knowledge is produced on a daily basis? Most of all, it should encourage us to go out and actively seek out freedom ourselves instead of waiting for it to be granted to us. This opens up a new means to interact with the various obstacles we encounter along the way, too – treating them not as hindrances, but as opportunities for personal growth. By learning how they affect us, we comprehend our own position in relation to them and can use this knowledge to change the rules of the game. After all, freedom indeed is what we make of it.

—Ingo Gerhartz

[1] Hofer, Carl "Causal Determinism" In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.): The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 edition)

[2] Laplace, Pierre Simon *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* London 1902 [1814], p. 4.

[3] Kant, Immanuel *Critique of pure Reason* translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge Univ. Press 1998, A80/B106.

[4] Orwell, George *1984 - a novel. Signet Classic*, New York 2010 [1950], p. 4.

Research Funding in Germany

Interview with Dr. Robert Paul Königs¹



¹Robert-Paul.Koenigs@dfg.de

Every research project begins with an idea. But for an idea to be put into practice another resource is generally required, which is scarce: money. While the allocation of money to research takes place in different ways, it is probably fair to say that research funding organizations play a crucial and ever-growing role in this regard.

In Germany, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), a membership association under private law with its members being mainly universities, is the most important organization of this kind. We talked to Dr. Robert Paul Königs, head of the department of scientific affairs at the DFG, about the role of third-party funds for science and the humanities, the characteristics of the German funding system, and the principles of DFG funding.



JUnQ: The DFG is the largest research funding organization in Germany. What share of scientists in Germany is applying to the DFG? Is third-party funding indispensable?

Königs: A competition for funding based on scientific criteria is an efficient way to allocate scarce resources in the

interest of the best research. So, yes, third-party funding is an essential factor in maintaining a first-class research base. However, it can only work in this way if there is sufficient basic funding at universities, e.g., to test new ideas, prepare projects, and tide over funding gaps. We estimate that more