

The Difficulty of Deriving Autonomy from Pure Self-Activity: On Kant's Solution of the Circularity between Freedom and Morality

Digital Kant Lecture by Kang Qian

Abstract: In the third chapter of the Groundwork, Kant refers to a suspicion of a circular argument concerning freedom and morality. Kant attempts to resolve this circularity by deriving the concept of autonomy from a pure self-activity in the third subsection of this chapter; however, many Kant scholars have pointed out that there are several argumentative problems regarding this attempt. In response to these criticisms, Heiko Puls argues that Kant could overcome the suspicion of circularity through an intuitionistic reading of moral interest. After a critical analysis of these views, I argue that we do not need such a radical reading to be able to provide a coherent interpretation of the third chapter of the Groundwork. I demonstrate that Kant still provides a suitable solution for the circularity problem by considering his deduction of the idea of freedom in the fifth subsection as part of his systematic argument for the relationship between freedom and morality.