Kant on Freedom, Causality and Natural Disasters[1]

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I. Natural Disaster?

In his 1763 Essay "The Only Possible Argument for the Existence of God" Kant considers the possibility that catastrophic events in nature could be predestined by God as acts of divine punishment for the sins of humankind. The possibility that natural catastrophes are the result of divine wrath is not one that has altogether disappeared even in our modern era. Earthquakes in Pakistan, hurricanes in Louisiana as well as various and sundry other natural disasters have recently been blamed on sins such homosexuality, decadence, provocative dressing, etc. by prominent religious and political figures. Whether God does indeed punish our sins via acts of destruction and whether or not all catastrophes can be read as acts of punishment seems, for this reason, to be a question worth at least brief consideration.

The first question Kant considers in his analysis of this issue is whether or not these "natural" catastrophic acts should be considered supernatural. Kant begins by considering what it means for an act to be supernatural. He defines two different types of supernatural acts. The first, the "materially supernatural", takes place as the result of an "immediate efficient cause [which] is external to nature" (*Ak*. 2:104). Materially supernatural acts are those which cannot be attributed to any known natural cause, i.e. rocks floating upwards, fire raining from the clouds, rivers turning to blood, etc. As a result of their defiance of known physical laws these acts must result

[1] This paper was written in response to a concern about the similarity of the two arguments in question raised to me by Manfred Kuehn. I am grateful for his drawing my attention to this issue and for comments on an early draft of this paper.

directly from a supernatural source. Earthquakes, hurricanes, etc. clearly are not materially supernatural because they happen in accordance with rather than in opposition to known physical laws.

The second kind of supernatural act Kant names the "formally supernatural." The formally supernatural is so called because "the manner in which the forces of nature are directed to producing the effect is not itself subject to a rule of nature" (*Ak.* 2:104). Kant's conception of the formally supernatural is meant to strike a balance between two opposing views. On the one hand, there is no natural law which would allow the evilness of human beings to be the cause directly responsible for a natural disaster such as an earthquake or flood. There is no law, maxim or formula of physics which, given 'x' quantity of sin in one particular location as an input, will universally result in 'y' natural disaster as its output. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for natural catastrophes, when they occur in locations which are also the sites of cities or people considered to be wicked, to be thought of as divine punishment upon evil doing. An event which is *causally* the result of natural laws can still be "especially instituted by the Supreme Being" to serve as a punishment of evil (*Ak.* 2:104). This is what Kant calls the formally supernatural. The event is the direct result of causal laws, but simultaneously serves as the punishing hand of God. It seems then that Kant is, at least in this early stage of his career, willing to answer our initial query with a "yes." Natural disasters can be produced by God as acts of divine punishment. This is perhaps not the answer for which we hoped.

II. Philosophical Disaster?

There are two troubling aspects of this account of natural disasters. The first and more apparent problem is why Kant feels the need to attribute a supernatural element to natural disasters at all. Given the extensive lengths to which he goes later in the essay to show that

natural laws do in fact govern the motions of the universe (and that this need not be seen as a limitation of God's power), it seems oddly out of character for Kant to argue for large scale divine punishment through natural disasters. This is especially strange seeing that, as Kant points out, punishment for evil doing is often directly caused by the evil itself. The drunkard develops liver disease. The licentious person contracts syphilis, etc. Additionally, societies set up various legal and judicial systems to punish other offenses themselves. There does not seem to be a need for supernatural punishments in addition to those already established by laws of man or nature.

The second troubling aspect of Kant's account of natural disasters is less readily apparent but perhaps more concerning. The element of divine wrath in natural disasters does not follow necessarily from the disasters themselves, nor can it be logically deduced. In fact, concerning any particular natural disaster it would be impossible to say with certainty whether or not it serves as an outpouring of God's anger in addition to being the result of already known natural causes. Perhaps all natural disasters convey God's punishment. Perhaps it is only half or a third, but which half, which third? One can speculate as much as one likes, but given that the supernatural element of any occurrence is by definition not going to act in a law-like fashion one can never know for certain. Kant would of course claim that the laws of nature or logic do not preclude natural disasters from being a form of divine punishment. However, given that there is no deductive evidence to support this claim it has the potential to make the reader suspicious of Kant's intentions. Is Kant making allowances for divine punishment through natural disasters because reason compels him, or is he simply attempting to justify a previously held belief?

What makes this last point of particular interest is the similarities between the move made here to make allowance for divine punishment and the move Kant will make later on in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to allow for human freedom. For just as both natural law and divine will

are at work in certain natural disasters, so too both freedom and causality "each in a different relation, might be able to take place simultaneously in one and the same occurrence" (A536/B564). Kant claims that the intelligible cause of an effect (i.e. "that in an object of sense which is not itself appearance," A538/B566) can be thought of as free, while the cause with respect to the effect's appearance is thought of as the result of necessity (A537/B565).[2] In both instances, Kant has argued for a way in which two instigating factors (natural law and divine will, or freedom and causality) can be at work in the same event without contradiction. If, in the first instance, we attribute Kant's motivation to justification of a previously held belief, then what keeps us from making this assertion with regard to the second and more crucial case? Perhaps Kant's claim that we can consider ourselves as having free will without contradicting the laws of nature, a claim upon which the efficacy of his entire moral teaching hinges, is unjustified.[3]

While little can be said to one who wishes to question Kant's rational sincerity and motivation, it is possible to argue that, rather than misguided departures from Kant's normal mode of operation, these discussions of causality contain logical conclusions which work well within the broader picture of Kant's thought. Recognizing the consistency of these two discussions with the wider scope of Kant's philosophy rests on acknowledging the relationship between two key features found in both discussions. The first key feature is the speculative nature of the assertions about non-standard causality; the second is the fact that both claims concern the moral rather than the physical or metaphysical realms. If one keeps these two things in mind, the similarity in structure between the two arguments and their place within Kant's philosophy becomes more natural.

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[2] There is much more to be said regarding this issue, but the characterization provided should be sufficient for our present purposes.

[3] P.F. Strawson, for example, certainly thinks so. See the chapter on the Antinomy of Pure Reason in *The Bounds of Sense*.

III. First Key Feature: Mere Speculation

In both the discussion of divine punishment and the discussion of freedom, Kant never claims that this alternative mode of causality *must* be at stake in any given event. In our consideration of natural disasters we concluded that one can never know if or when God's wrath comes into play. Kant, in fact, does not claim that divine punishment or freedom ever have to be the root source of any event at all. What is at stake here is not that divine wrath or freedom do serve as instigating factors but that they *could* without contradiction to laws of nature or causality. The crux of the argument rests on the assumption that it is possible for more than one causal factor or instigating force to contribute to the occurrence of an event. Putting aside the specific nature of the forces currently under consideration, this is hardly a controversial claim. We often attribute more than one cause to a given event. For example, think of a talented and successful athlete. What is the source of her success? We might say it is good genes from her mother or the fact that her father instilled in her a love of sports. We might also say hard work, practice, intelligence, skill, financial motivation, determination, physical fitness, proper instruction, luck, expensive equipment, performance enhancing drugs, proper diet, mental focus or a dozen other things. All of these things can be causes and causes at the same time, but they are not all causes in the same way. There seems to be little difference between saying that a woman is a good athlete because she loves the sport and because she has the proper physique to excel at it and saying that the cause of an earthquake was shifting of the earth's tectonic plates and God's desire to punish a wicked city. Or, to take the moral example, my not stealing cars could result from my proper upbringing and moral conditioning as well as my freely chosen desire to spend my time in other ways. Regardless of the *actual* cause or causes of any given

event (something which we can never deductively know) we are free to speculate about possible causes or the lack thereof without making claims which are contrary to reason.

If I assert that the Lisbon earthquake was an act of punishment by God upon sinful people I have not in any way interfered with the explanation of the earthquake as being the result of the shifting of tectonic plates. It seems, likewise, to not create a contradiction when I claim that though human actions in the phenomenal sphere, i.e. only insofar as they are appearances, seem to work in accordance with causal laws, in the noumenal sphere they are freely chosen. Here it becomes apparent that there is in fact a dis-analogy between the natural disaster argument and the argument concerning free will. The natural disaster argument deals with attributing two separate causes to the same event (namely God's wrath and natural laws) while in the case of causal laws and freedom what is at stake is not two types of causality but causality as opposed to non-causality or freedom. Rather than two causes at work in different ways on the same event we have two "instigating factors" (and incompatible ones at that) at work in two different realms- the noumenal and phenomenal. On the one hand, we have solved the original problem through showing a fundamental dis-analogy between the two cases but this at the expense of raising a much larger problem.[4] On the other hand, the point still stands – Kant's attribution of freedom is merely speculation and speculation in a manner that does not affect the status of whatever causal explanation we posit to explain a particular event or predicate in appearance. An attribution of freedom to my moral actions does not interfere with my view of all things in appearance as happening in accordance with causal laws. I have not posited freedom within my experience but as a possible factor outside of it.

IV. Second Key Feature: the Metaphysical vs. the Moral

[4] The larger problem raised (namely the distinction between noumena and phenomena) is well outside the scope of this paper. However, despite the dis-analogy between the arguments at stake I feel that the forms of the arguments are analogous enough that the topic is worth pursuing.

The second key feature of both passages under discussion is that the speculative cause or factor introduced is one of moral rather than physical or metaphysical causality. This is significant for two reasons. First, Kant does not seem to, and it fact cannot, require the same deductive certainty of moral arguments that he does of ones relating to the physical world. One can hypothesize and speculate and at best show that a particular moral claim does not contradict known natural laws or rules of logic, but one can violate a moral claim in the way that one can never violate a law of nature. The moral law may be certain and determined by a metaphysical deduction, but it still remains the case that a moral law will never hold the status of a physical law. A moral "fact of the matter" (i.e. lying is immoral) does not have the same status as a physical fact of the matter (i.e. an object in motion will remain in motion until acted upon by an outside force). I can lie. I cannot break the law of inertia. One has facts of the matter about physical laws and we can at least hope that there are metaphysical facts of the matter (they are there whether or not we can know them), but what constitutes a moral fact? Let us assume that for Kant the categorical imperative constitutes a moral fact. I should only act on a maxim that is universalizable. The claim is certainly not that I *cannot* act on a maxim which I cannot will to be a universal law simply that I *should* not. Lying is the classic example of a nonuniversalizable law and yet I can lie anytime that I wish. The earth is flat. My hair is green. Since moral claims cannot be granted the same certainty that physical or metaphysical claims can hold then it is perfectly sensible of Kant to merely speculate concerning them.

Second, the speculative causal claims do no damage to our physical/metaphysical picture of the empirical world. If we assume the pre-critical Kant is correct about the possible role of divine punishment in natural disasters it poses no threat to the tectonic plate explanation of earthquakes or tsunamis. Likewise, if we assume Kant is correct about noumenal freedom it

poses no threat to the claim that biological or environmental factors can fully explain why certain people become serial killers. My assertions of divine punishment and freedom do not require me to fundamentally alter my view of the world in a way which is incompatible with scientific fact.

Moreover, it shows a consistency in Kant's work that freedom is the result of an argument which is similar in form to that which justifies divine punishment. Rather than make the reader suspicious of Kant's motivation, the similarities between the two discussion should further convince the reader of the great lengths to which Kant goes to maintain consistency and not overstep the bounds of what reason can teach us. What should be noted here is the seriousness with which Kant takes the laws of nature and causality and his unwillingness to simply say that at certain times they do not apply. Within our experience, natural law and causality must apply universally. Kant is unwilling to bend the law even for as upright and benevolent a trespasser as the Almighty himself.

However, Kant's commitment to upholding the natural law does not keep him from ignoring its moral counterpart. Without freedom there is no potential for human beings to choose to reform and improve their behavior. Without fear of punishment there is little motivation for them to desire reform. Though the move made to justify freedom and divine punishment is certainly a controversial one, it is necessary if one desires to attribute absolute authority to natural law while leaving open the possibility of leading a moral life.

V. Conclusion

What the preceding argument was designed to show is that the similarities between Kant's pre-critical argument to justify the attribution of divine punishment to natural disasters and Kant's argument in favor of moral freedom in the *Critique of Pure Reason* do not pose a fundamental problem for the latter. However, the similarity between the two arguments still

points to the strangeness of Kant's notion of freedom. The two arguments, the one concerning moral freedom and the one concerning divine punishment, do seem to work together in the sense that the validity of either argument entails the validity of the other. If I have moral freedom then it must also be the case that God can dole out punishment via tsunami should he so choose. I am free in the same way and to the same degree that God is able to punish human beings through natural disasters.

The troubling aspect of this is not the power which God now has to lord over me as he chooses but the very limited nature of my freedom. According to the critical Kant, the existence of God is the sort of metaphysical question of which we are prevented from having knowledge. If knowledge of God's existence is beyond my rational powers, how much more so his particular acts. It seems unreasonable for me to claim that the God whose existence I am not sure of certainly intended a particular disaster as punishment for a particular sin. Religious leaders may want to claim that a particular set of sins led to a particular natural disaster, but Kant provides them with nothing to verify such a claim.

On the other hand, it seems to follow that my knowledge of my own freedom is likewise limited. Freedom, or the source of any action which lies outside the causal chain, is as black and mysterious to me as the machinations of an unseen God. This is somehow both unsettling and exactly what one would expect. For any given human action I can point to a chain of causes that led to the particular outcome which arrived, but about any contributing factor outside of this chain I can say or know nothing.