The concept of freedom ... is the keystone of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even of speculative reason.

—Kant

Human freedom is at the core of Kant’s thought. We cannot adequately explain any particular aspect of his legacy without ultimately viewing it in relation to this concept—what Kant claims is the “keystone” of his critical philosophy. The present chapter reconstructs and interprets the central place of freedom in shaping Kant’s theory of justice and thereby develops a conceptual framework. This framework will explain the place of sovereignty in Kant’s vision of justice. It is because freedom is the ground, and therefore the justification, for Kant’s vision of political reform that this mode of analysis is justified.

Kant’s concept of freedom is affected deeply by the ontological division of morals and politics that has been identified. The gulf between morals and politics is ostensibly reconciled by the supremacy of the categorical imperative. However, individuals remain ever divided by a radical difference between the noumenal world of pure morality and the phenomenal world in which politics occurs. For this reason, Kant’s conception of justice is shaped by two distinct types of freedom, the “internal” and the “external.” The distinction that Kant makes between these two sides of individual freedom constitutes his most profound statement on the
relationship between an autonomous morality and political practice. By reconstructing Kant’s arguments in favor of their distinction, we see the dynamics behind his theory of justice: The pure practical reason of morality (inner freedom) informs—and thereby subordinates—the structure of outer freedom and the political reality with which it is associated.

Nonetheless, this conceptual framework reveals that there is profound ethico-political ambivalence within this internal/external division. Kant’s distinction between the two sides of freedom does not merely indicate that morality must subordinate and determine the political world. The differentiation is also predicated upon a great limitation on the extent to which politics can (and therefore ought) to be subordinated to morality. In actuality, Kant argues that the morality of internal freedom only legislates the basic universal form of external freedom and politics. Morality cannot, however, legitimately legislate the ends that are essential to the categorical imperative of internal freedom into the external realm of just political relations among individuals. But I show that this relationship between the two sides of Kantian freedom produces ambiguity, for it is not at all clear that moral ends can possibly be, or ought to be, completely abstracted from politics in the manner that Kant sometimes seems to suggest. Indeed, there is evidence from Kant’s own texts that he is uncertain about the stricture against moral ends as the incentive for political practice and reform. I claim that Kant’s multifarious concept of freedom is the key to explaining the shape of his theory of justice generally. As will be shown, the ambiguities produced by his peculiar division of freedom account for the paradoxical stance he adopts on state sovereignty and the vision of international reform that he propounds.

There are three sections in this chapter. In the first, I situate Kant’s reputation as a political philosopher within differing contemporary depictions of his view of the nature of freedom. Although there have been attempts to characterize him as a proponent of either “positive” or “negative” freedom alone, Kant’s theory of justice is far more complicated than the terms of this distinction (famously posited by Isaiah Berlin). The second section outlines a framework to explain why justice takes the form that it does in Kant’s thought. In separating internal from external freedom, Kant articulates his view of the proper relationship between morality and politics and the fundamental logic of all political reform. The realization of justice is how politics is to be subordinated to, and informed by, the same formal principles found in morality. The third section shows the limits and ambiguities of the Kantian vision of reform in relation to his conception of justice. This is done by demonstrating how the basic autonomy of morals that is a foundation of his philosophy dictates that politics be concerned primarily with formal principles of justice alone, and then only indirectly with the realization of moral purposes.