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ACTION AND REASON;
ARISTOTLE VS. KANT

The title of my paper, 'Action and Reason' is intended to call attention to one of the main problems, if not the main problem of practical philosophy. The subtitle, 'Aristotle vs. Kant' places the theme in the context of a fictitious controversy in the history of philosophy. I want to discuss a question which is so fundamental that the very possibility of a practical philosophy as such would seem to depend upon its resolution. But I hope to become clearer about just what difficulties are involved in the problem of action and reason, with the help of some historical background.

The Kantian theses that I shall be concerned with are not those which Kant himself thought essential. Kant has stressed the concept of a moral law as characterized by absolute necessity and yet which functions as a determining principle of the will of human agents. In other words: Kant's aim was to get at a practical rule independent of empirical conditions, allowing of no exceptions, and requiring in itself universal obedience. Now my interest here is not the concept of a moral law, but the way Kant gets at it. For the means Kant uses to arrive at this goal are not analysed with the same intensity, even though they represent the foundation of practical philosophy. In opposition to Kant Aristotle has put his ethics completely on the basis of a practical philosophy. Consequently in this matter of a critical review of Kant, it would make good sense to have Aristotle's arguments at one's disposal.

The project of a moral law arises systematically from the third antinomy of the Transcendental Dialectic in the Critique of Pure Reason. The antinomy, of course, goes as follows. Nature, when taken as the unity of all objects of possible experience, is governed as a whole by laws. These are the laws of causality, which decisively explain the existence of an effect as the consequence of the existence of a cause. Reason then as the capacity of ideas or of the totality of conditions thinks the law of causality in unlimited generality. Thereby it is clear that every cause in its turn comes under the sway of the law of causality. For if one does not want to
stop arbitrarily at the immediate cause then each cause is again the effect of an antecedent cause which itself refers back to a prior cause and so on ad infinitum. But if the categorical explanation of natural phenomena taken altogether is to remain consistent, then a beginning of the chain of effects must be found which is no longer conditioned. Were the case otherwise the necessary totality of conditions would disappear in a pervasive determination.

However, Kant is able to think of an absolute beginning for the chain of determinations only with the help of the principle of freedom. And freedom on its side is construed as the special origin of a sequence of effects according to the law of causality. The freedom to act is the spontaneity to set in motion a series of appearances in the empirical world.

This conception now burdens ethics. The prejudice which arises out of the theoretical transcendental philosophy distorts the genuine concept of action which obviously must be the point of departure for a practical philosophy. Action now means causality springing from freedom. The paradox in all of this Kant has already reflected upon in his doctrine of the difference of phenomenon and noumenon. Moreover he has made use of this paradox for the thesis of concerning the strictly imperative character of all ethical obligations which do not contain an ‘Is’ but a pure ‘Ought’.

The question, however, is whether the authentic point at issue is properly described while Kant is straining to articulate an immanent systematic organization and a positive resolution and overcoming of the antinomies and contradictions he has to face. Up to this time the constitutive concept of action is nothing other than a means for mediating both aspects of the antinomy of the Transcendental Dialectic, that is the theoretical and the practical one, and correspondingly relating both parts of the system, the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason.

Action, construed as causality arising out of freedom, is considered according to its empirical character as completely inseparable from the mechanical processes of nature (A 538). Action is distinguished by the specific empirically unconditioned and nondeducible form of causing. But if the essence of action consists in the purely spontaneous causation of a series of phenomena according to the law of causality, then action