

Introduction

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The concept of moral autonomy is one of Kant's central legacies for contemporary moral thought. Today autonomy – understood as individual independence from coercion in making decisions – is variously considered to be a capacity all normal adults have, a goal one should strive for, and especially a moral right one can claim from others (cf. Hill 1991: 44–51). To violate a person's autonomy is considered to be a serious moral offence. Autonomy is put forth as a fundamental principle of medical ethics (cf. Beauchamp and Childress 2008), and sometimes even as the justification for human rights (cf. Griffin 2008: 151–52.). For an explanation and justification of this idea, scholars commonly refer to Immanuel Kant, the “inventor” of moral autonomy (cf. Schneewind 1998: 3).

But how does Kant conceive of autonomy? What is the relation of Kant's conception to contemporary notions of autonomy? And what exactly is the significance of Kantian autonomy for morality? These three questions are at the heart of this volume, which brings together new contributions from many distinguished experts on Kantian autonomy. In their thoughtful engagement with these important questions, the fifteen essays in this volume shed light both on the history of an important contemporary idea, and on the philosophic grounds for taking autonomy seriously.

The essays in the first part of this volume focus on clarifying Kant's conception of autonomy. Given the complex and multi-faceted character of his conception, it is not surprising that the contributors' answers to these questions do not always agree. For while Kant presents moral autonomy not merely as individual independence but literally as self-legislation (*Selbstgesetzgebung*), it is far from simple to pin down precisely which ‘self’ and which ‘legislation’ Kant designates with this term, and what is the precise relation between these two components of autonomy.

For instance, in the context of autonomy, does Kant use ‘self’ to refer to an empirical self, the way we know ourselves in deliberating and making

decisions? Does he refer, in other words, to a conscious decision to adopt a particular moral rule? This is one way of interpreting ‘self’ in the literature, but the challenge for this interpretation is to explain how a law that is legislated by an empirical self could be binding, since “the one imposing obligation ... could always release the one put under obligation” (*TL* 6:417). Indeed this obvious problem tends to make the very idea of self-legislation sound paradoxical. Second, then, perhaps in speaking of self-legislation Kant refers to legislation not by an empirical self, the self one knows through introspection, but a transcendental or noumenal self; perhaps it is one’s own pure reason that legislates a law independently of one’s desires and inclinations. However, this interpretation faces the challenge that it is not clear how this self is to be understood metaphysically. Is this a plausible understanding of ‘self,’ or merely ‘panicky metaphysics’ (Strawson) to rescue moral obligation? As a third candidate, perhaps there is a way to understand ‘self’ that can avoid both of the challenges facing the previous two readings: The ‘self’ in self-legislation might refer not to a person – whether empirical or noumenal – but to ‘legislation.’ It might specify that the law to which Kant is referring is not conditioned upon something else, but is its own legislation. ‘Self’ would then qualify principles, not persons (cf. O’Neill 2003: 11–19).

In short, one can reformulate the question about Kant’s usage of ‘self’ in self-legislation by asking: the autonomy *of what*? Does Kant’s conception refer to the legislation of empirical persons, of pure reason, or of a specific kind of principles?

To shed light on this question, one might seek to clarify how Kant uses ‘legislation’ in connection with autonomy. But here too there is controversy in the literature. In other contexts Kant distinguishes two aspects of legislation: the formulation of the content of a law, and the authority or bindingness of the law. For instance, a parliament can formulate a law, but it is the head of state who signs it into law and thereby makes it authoritative (cf. *RL* 6:313). In which sense does Kant speak about self-legislation? The contributions to the first part of this volume explore different answers to this question.

The essays in the second part of this volume focus on the development of Kant’s conception of autonomy and its relation to contemporary conceptions. This issue is connected to the first question of how Kant conceives of autonomy; for if his understanding of self-legislation turns out to be very different from contemporary conceptions of autonomy, it will be difficult to draw a direct line between present-day appeals to the principle of moral ‘autonomy’ and the explanation and justification of this

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principle offered by Kant. The contemporary usage of ‘autonomy,’ for instance, seems to focus on the decision of an empirical person. If it turns out that this is not Kant’s understanding, then how does his view relate to the contemporary understanding, and in which sense might Kant be an inspiration for present-day thought?

The third part of this volume focuses on the question of how relevant Kant’s conception of autonomy is to contemporary debates. If Kant’s conception turns out to be different from contemporary views of autonomy, why should it be relevant for thinking about moral issues today? Contemporary usage of autonomy is sometimes criticized for being overrated in its moral relevance. For instance, if one decides for oneself which course of action is right, this could yield morally good or neutral actions, but it might also lead to evil ones (cf. O’Neill 2003: 5–6). But if one argues that Kant’s notion of autonomy is different from contemporary conceptions, why is it morally significant? For instance, if Kantian autonomy is understood to refer to a principle that is not conditioned upon external elements, what is morally important about that? Even if Kant’s conception of autonomy is very different from contemporary conceptions, are there ways in which the study of Kant’s view of autonomy can inform and enrich contemporary debates?

These are the broad questions with which the fifteen essays in this volume engage. The remainder of this Introduction will offer a preview of the more specific concerns and claims of each contribution.

PART I: KANT’S CONCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

In Chapter 1, “Kantian autonomy and contemporary ideas of autonomy,” Thomas Hill argues that contemporary notions of autonomy differ from Kant’s conception. Hill distinguishes three commonly recurring themes regarding autonomy in contemporary ethics: autonomy is often considered to be (1) a *right* to make one’s own decisions without undue interference by others; (2) a *capacity* to make decisions with due reflection and independence of mind; but also (3) an *ideal* of living an autonomous life. While these themes often appear in applied ethical discussions of informed consent in medicine, of paternalism in law, and of the aims of education, Hill notes that Kant addresses autonomy in the context of abstract and foundational questions of moral theory. For Kant, autonomy is a necessary presupposition of all morality, and the main features of rational beings with autonomy is that they (a) have a *will* as a form of causality of rational beings; (b) are *free in a negative sense*, as not being

determined by prior physical or psychological causes; and (c) are *free in a positive sense*, by being able to act on a law of pure reason, the moral law or Categorical Imperative. But while Kant's conception of autonomy differs from contemporary ones, Hill argues that it can – as the core of a framework of moral deliberation – inform more concrete answers in the three contemporary contexts of applied ethics. Regarding the first view of autonomy as a right (1), Hill notes that Kant's framework provides the idea of the Categorical Imperative, according to which deliberation about specific moral principles must find principles acceptable to everyone, and thereby affirm each person's right to govern his or her own life. Regarding the second view of autonomy as a capacity (2), Kant's framework affirms the existence of a *capacity* for self-determination and as something others should respect. Finally concerning the third view of autonomy as the *ideal* of an autonomous life (3), Kant's framework supports the idea that all human beings have a disposition to such a life and the presumptive reason to support it in a context-sensitive manner.

Chapter 2, "Kant's conception of autonomy of the will," focuses on the precise nature of Kant's claim that autonomy "is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself" (*GMS* 4:440). Andrews Reath gives a close analysis of what prompts Kant to introduce autonomy, of his notion of will, of the law involved, and of the sense in which will is a law to itself. Reath points out that autonomy is introduced by Kant specifically in order to explain the authority of moral principles in ordinary thought – that is, the fact that moral requirements are said to hold unconditionally. In discussing self-legislation, the law Kant talks about is then the moral law or Categorical Imperative. The categorical nature of moral laws cannot be achieved if they are based on an interest the agent has or on some feature of a potential object of volition in which we have an interest, for then the law would be conditioned. The unconditional authority of the moral law can be achieved only if the law arises from the will as pure practical reason. Reath carefully distinguishes between different aspects of the will in the wider sense – Kant's distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* – and explains how the Categorical Imperative can arise from the will, or how the will is a law to itself. Reath explains that the will is a kind of causality particular to rational beings, in which the representations that guide a being's activity to realize its objects are based in reason. Reath describes the Categorical Imperative as the internal constitutive principle that arises from the nature of the will, and as an expression of what it is to exercise the will. The will has the formal aim of reasoning correctly from principles to practical judgment that carries a claim to universal validity, which

means that it is guided by the moral law. Based on this normative conception of autonomy, Kant can then speak about autonomy as a capacity of free will or a moral status in a derivative sense.

In Chapter 3, “Vindicating autonomy: Kant, Sartre, and O’Neill,” Karl Ameriks sheds further light on how one should understand Kant’s conception of autonomy. He focuses on the two components of autonomy: *auto* as independence or negative freedom, and *nomos* as lawfulness or positive freedom. The first component could be described as ‘deciding on one’s own,’ and the second as ‘following a law of one’s own making.’ Ameriks distinguishes between an empirical and transcendental reading of each component, and warns against two misunderstandings of Kant. The first misunderstanding would be that ‘deciding on one’s own’ amounts to a radical existentialism; the second would be that ‘a law of one’s own making’ requires a panicky metaphysics, in alluding to a metaphysical self that demands uniform behavior. Ameriks refers to Sartre in discussing the first component of autonomy and for the second component he refers to O’Neill – in addition to many writings of Kant’s – to show that there are significant positions in-between a radical choice and authoritarian metaphysical self; and he argues that Kant occupies the middle ground between the two. On Ameriks’ account, for the *auto* component Kant does not refer to an empirical freedom from particular empirical forces, but to transcendental freedom as a will that is a unique cause wholly independent of empirical determination. Similarly, Ameriks explains that the ‘law of one’s own making’ component does not commit Kant to either an empirical choosing of rules, or to an authoritarian metaphysical self. Rather Kant emphasizes the absolute necessity of moral lawfulness, which cannot be founded on spatiotemporal grounds. ‘Of one’s own making’ is then a shorthand for emphasizing the structure of what is necessarily reasonable as such, not a description of an empirical process.

Chapter 4, “Progress towards autonomy,” shows that there is also an important empirical side to Kant’s notion of autonomy. Paul Guyer argues that it does not reflect Kant’s full view to say that one either has or does not have autonomy – in the sense that one’s fundamental maxim is either (1) to be governed by the moral law only if it fits with one’s self-love, or (2) only to follow self-love if it complies with the moral law. Rather, Guyer notes that there is an empirical side to autonomy, in that compliance with the moral law can only be hard-won and achieved gradually. Guyer’s account makes use of the distinction between a negative and a positive aspect of autonomy – that is, of not being determined by outside forces, but of being determined by the moral law of one’s own reason. He

first argues that these are not two separate forms of autonomy, but rather two aspects of one unified form. An agent can achieve independence from outside determination only through positive autonomy; and since independence from outside determination can only be realized progressively, the same is true of the whole of autonomy. To further support his argument, Guyer discusses Kant's claim in the *Religion* that adopting a fundamental maxim concerning the subordination of morality to self-love, or the reverse, is an all-or-nothing decision; and he shows that it would at most capture an aspect of autonomy that is not given in experience. But on a psychological level, Guyer argues, being governed by the moral law is a gradual affair. This comes out in Kant's discussion of self-mastery in the *Lectures on Ethics*, as well as in his discussion of the aesthetic preconditions of morality in the *Doctrine of Virtue*.

PART II: THE HISTORY AND INFLUENCE OF KANT'S CONCEPTION OF AUTONOMY

In Chapter 5, "Transcending nature, unifying reason: on Kant's debt to Rousseau," Richard Velkley argues that Rousseau's influence on Kant's notion of autonomy goes deeper than the widely recognized kinship of autonomy with Rousseau's conception of the general will. Velkley notes that when Kant read Rousseau at about age forty, it led to a fundamental reorientation in Kant's conception of philosophy, a reorientation involving his views on nature, reason, desire, freedom, and history. Rousseau's works made Kant aware of a crisis in the intellectual life of Europe. On Rousseau's account, human life is burdened by luxury, vanity, and factitious desires, and Kant accordingly searches for a firm standpoint to counter these artificial desires. He finds it in freedom, whereby the factitious desires can be corrected by an opposing principle that rests in reason beyond nature. Human reason has an immediate awareness of the injustice of servitude, which includes foreign influences as well as luxurious desires. Therefore Velkley notes that most of the elements of Kant's mature notion of autonomy can be found in his thinking as early as his *Remarks on the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764–65), even if he has not yet worked out the internal connection of the different elements and has not developed a motive for adopting the standpoint of reason. Velkley then argues that these early thoughts were not confined to Kant's moral philosophy, but are also of central importance for the theoretical use of reason; and Velkley traces the development of these thoughts from the early *Remarks* to Kant's mature writings.

Chapter 6, “Kant and the ‘paradox’ of autonomy,” traces the development of Kant’s conception of autonomy from his earliest writings on cosmology to the *Groundwork*. Susan Shell describes this development as beginning from Kant’s early question of how separate entities as substances can stand in external relations, and from the paradoxes to which this gave rise. She shows that Kant grapples with this and related moral questions throughout his theoretical and practical writings, as well as his lectures, until he finds a solution in the *Groundwork*. Shell argues that Kant’s conception of autonomy, along with the related concept of a kingdom of ends, allows him in the *Groundwork* to conceive of the possibility of a community of substances that are related not only externally, but also through a reciprocal lawgiving. It is then possible to explain how external relations among substances-in-themselves are possible without positing a ground that is not accessible to human reason. And whereas the paradox of how material substances can interact is merely a metaphysical question, what matters is that one think pluralistically, as one citizen of the world.

In Chapter 7, “Autonomy in Kant and German Idealism,” Henry Allison presents Kant’s conception of autonomy and the modification and criticisms of it by Fichte, Schiller, and Hegel. Allison first describes in a concise way Kant’s conception of autonomy, its importance for morality, and Kant’s attempts to show that human beings have autonomy of the will. Allison then discusses the attempts of Fichte and Schiller to clarify and repair Kant’s conception, and Hegel’s attempt at a radical transformation of it. Fichte, Allison notes, tries to expand Kant’s notion of autonomy into a conception of the self or I. For Fichte, the autonomy of the self is the ultimate starting point of all philosophy, theoretical and practical; everything is to be explained in terms of the self. Autonomy in this sense is not a property of the will, but a pre-conscious activity of self-determining. As Allison observes, Fichte thereby turned Kant’s moral philosophy into an even more rigoristic direction by not allowing any room for inclinations. In contrast, Allison notes that Schiller tries to temper the rhetoric of Kant’s rigorism by emphasizing inclinations. While the imperativ form of Kant’s moral law makes it appear to be a foreign law, Schiller argues that true freedom is realized when there is a harmony between rational and emotional factors, or an inclination to duty. Allison notes that Hegel goes beyond Schiller in arguing for the need of a full integration of rational law and inclinations. According to Hegel, Kant’s notion of autonomy mentions merely one aspect of the will, which conflicts with the possibility of agency; in Hegel’s view, action presupposes an awareness of an ‘other,’ and this ‘other’ stems from particular interests.

In merely emphasizing the abstract law, Hegel claims, Kant leaves out an essential moment; only through a synthesis of both elements can rational self-determination be attained. For Hegel, then, autonomy becomes an ideal state to be attained.

Chapter 8, “Autonomy after Kant,” sheds light on the reception of Kant’s views of autonomy in the English-speaking world. J. B. Schneewind surveys decades of literature on autonomy, and he brings to light the reasons for the resurgence of autonomy over the last 40 years, after it had largely receded from view during the roughly 100 years following the works of John Stuart Mill. In particular, Schneewind discusses five areas which were conducive to the renewed interest in autonomy: (1) new ideas on free will and the philosophy of action (e.g., Frankfurt and Dworkin); (2) medical ethics and bio-ethics (led by Beauchamp); (3) feminist debates about sexism and women’s liberation (e.g., by Gilligan and Held); (4) liberalism and its critics in political thought (e.g., Rawls); (5) Kantian commentary and the revival of Kantian ethics. Schneewind discusses the relationship of the notions of autonomy employed in these different areas to Kant’s conception of autonomy, and he defends Kant’s conception against two recent challenges: an attack on the possibility of an autonomous self, and the claim that such a self is historically contingent and a social construction.

In Chapter 9, “Personal autonomy and public authority,” Katrin Flikschuh examines the influence of Kant’s conception of autonomy on political thought. Personal autonomy – as an individual’s capacity to lead his or her own life – has become the primary value of contemporary liberalism, and leads to the view that it is desirable for persons to collectively arrange their common affairs as they see fit. Kant is often seen as the inspiration for these views, but against this, Flikschuh argues on systematic grounds that personal autonomy does not by itself explain why one should take an interest in other people’s autonomy; and on textual grounds, she argues that Kant’s view of public legislation differs from that of contemporary liberalism. According to Flikschuh, Kant neither has a view of collective self-legislation – according to which each individual has a veto power over proposed legislation – nor does he have a co-legislative scheme – in which each individual has a voice, even if the outcome can overrule the positions of individuals, who lack veto powers. On Kant’s account of public legislation, rather, the sovereign’s deliberation is omnilateral, considering what is right for everyone, rather than being a private will that deliberates only for its own interests. Flikschuh notes that it is only in this way that a public will can have authority over private wills, in

Kant's view. The relation of legislator and individual citizens is then vertical and coercive, for Kant, while giving the individual freedom of the pen to point out where the legislator might have been mistaken.

PART III: THE RELEVANCE OF KANT'S CONCEPTION FOR CONTEMPORARY MORAL PHILOSOPHY

In Chapter 10 Heiner Klemme brings out the importance of Kant's conception of autonomy for the understanding of nature as well as morality. In an essay entitled "Moralized nature, naturalized autonomy: Kant's way of bridging the gap in the third *Critique* (and in the *Groundwork*)," Klemme first links autonomy and its opposite, heteronomy, to two types of causality, namely freedom as *causa finalis*, and natural causality as *causa efficiens*. He then shows the importance of autonomy for understanding nature as Kant presents it in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. There Kant introduces the perspective of autonomy to explain nature as operating on purposes (*causa finalis*), in addition to a mechanical explanation of nature (*causa efficiens*). Although the autonomy perspective is merely a regulative one – reason judges *as if* nature has a purpose – this perspective is nonetheless necessary for understanding nature itself, as Klemme explains. It is needed when the mechanical explanation is not sufficient for the understanding of phenomena, as is the case with organized products of nature like living organisms. Without the autonomy perspective, reason could not detect necessity in all of nature: the difference between a living organism and a dead one would be a mere whim of nature to us. But Klemme notes that the autonomy perspective is also central to morality, on this view. If one looks at nature as if it has a purpose, the question arises whether it also has a highest purpose that is not a means to something else. This highest purpose seems to be human beings themselves, since they are the only beings on earth who can conceive of a system of ends. On Kant's account, therefore, in studying nature reason discovers itself as a faculty that has to be appreciated for its own sake. The autonomy perspective Kant presents is important for a description of nature and moral philosophy.

In Chapter 11, "Autonomy and moral regard for ends," Jens Timmermann explores this moral importance of autonomy for Kant in grounding our status as ends in ourselves. He argues that, on Kant's account, autonomy – as the capacity to act on self-imposed laws – is a pure will, insofar as it does not need an external object for its determination, but is determined by the formal moral law. Timmermann argues

that it is this self-referential structure, the will that wills itself, that makes a human being an end in itself, according to Kant. Everyone possesses this pure will no matter how morally bad he is, and as a capacity it cannot be corrupted, even if one does not act on it. In addition, Timmermann presents the consciousness of one's own pure will as leading to a sense of awe and elevation that can motivate one to act morally; one has reverence for one's own status as an end in itself. Since one's own rational self does not want to be undermined by sensibility or foreign determination, one should – on the presumption of equality – grant that same status to others. Thus Timmermann argues that, on Kant's account, autonomy – one's capacity to act on the self-imposed moral law in contrast to inclinations – has supreme moral importance, in being the ground of what should be respected in others.

In Chapter 12, Dieter Schönecker offers a close textual reading of the *Groundwork* passages in which Kant argues for the tight connection between freedom and morality. In an essay entitled “‘A free will and a will under moral laws are the same’: Kant's concept of autonomy and his thesis of analyticity in *Groundwork* III,” Schönecker explains that, as Kant sees it, to have free will is at the same time to be under the moral law. Schönecker first distinguishes two readings of this claim. Kant could hold (a) that in virtue of freedom, a perfectly rational being that is not under the influence of inclinations would be guided by the moral law as a descriptive law; or (b) that in virtue of freedom, a human being who possesses reason and inclinations is bound by the Categorical Imperative. Schönecker argues that Kant holds the weaker claim (a), and that it requires a separate argument to show that morality is binding for human beings. He then presents Kant's argument for (a) that relies on autonomy: freedom is a form of causality, and as a form of causality, it involves laws. These laws cannot come from outside, as Kant insists that this would be heteronomy. Therefore, Kant concludes, freedom of the will must be the will's quality of being a law to itself, i.e., autonomy. For Kant, autonomy is important in bringing out the link between freedom and morality.

In Chapter 13, “Morality and autonomy,” Philip Stratton-Lake questions the tight connection that Kant draws between morality and autonomy, from the perspective of contemporary ethics and a reasons-for-action account. Stratton-Lake first presents two arguments against the importance of Kantian autonomy – understood as legislating for everyone. In legislating for everyone, Stratton-Lake argues, one would undermine *their* autonomy. The second argument considers possible defenses the Kantian could make. For instance, the Kantian could reply that one