

Cambridge University Press
 0521800374 - Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy
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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

The problem of autonomy

In the first sentence of his famous essay “What is Enlightenment?” Kant tells us that it is “man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage,” where *tutelage* is defined as “man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another” (*FMM* 35, p. 85). He then sums up the motto of enlightenment as “Have courage to use your own reason” or more simply “Think for yourself.” In the essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?” he elaborates:

Thinking for oneself means seeking the supreme touchstone of truth in one’s self, i.e., in one’s own reason; and the maxim of always thinking for oneself is *enlightenment* . . . To make use of one’s own reason means nothing more than to ask oneself with regard to everything that is to be assumed whether he finds it practicable to make the ground of the assumption or the rule which follows from the assumption a universal principle for the use of one’s reason.¹

It is clear then that Kant adopts a stern perspective on the use of reason: rather than looking to God or to people in positions of authority, a person seeking to distinguish truth from falsity should consult her own mind.

This does not mean that it is wrong to seek expert advice on subjects like medicine and engineering or that a person must have a valid argument for everything he believes. Kant himself is famous for saying that there are beliefs which cannot be established by theoretical means but which a rational person would be justified in accepting on other grounds, e.g. the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. It is also

¹ “What is Orientation in Thinking?” in Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Essays*, p. 305.

worth noting, as Allen Wood does, that the “Think for yourself” principle does not mean that a person is justified in thinking whatever he pleases.² It means that when it comes to truths accessible to all humanity, truths like the one that says it is wrong to break a promise, a person should consult his own reason and accept them on his own authority. In Kant’s eyes, the enemies of enlightenment are people like physicians, tax collectors, and clergy – what he calls “guardians” – who feed off the laziness of “the great unthinking masses” and ask for unquestioning obedience. Bad as this habit may be in other areas of the arts and sciences, it is worse in religious matters because in Kant’s opinion “religious incompetence is not only the most harmful but also the most degrading of all.” Behind this claim is the conviction that rational decision making is an end in itself and that anyone who interferes with it compromises human dignity.

Although it would be easy to find other people in the history of philosophy who espoused the “Think for yourself” principle, there is little question that Kant regarded himself as the spokesman for a new age (*FMM* 40, pp. 90–91):

As things now stand, much is lacking which prevents men from being, or easily becoming, capable of correctly using their own reason in religious matters with assurance and free from outside direction. But, on the other hand, we have clear indications that the field has now been opened wherein men may freely deal with these things and that the obstacles to general enlightenment or the release from self-imposed tutelage are gradually being reduced. In this respect, this is the age of enlightenment.

To appreciate the tone of Kant’s remarks, one need only recognize, again with Wood, that the “Think for yourself” principle is really a general version of the doctrine of autonomy. The doctrine of autonomy, in turn, is at the heart of the Copernican Revolution in moral theory, Kant’s attempt to show how all previous moral systems have failed and to put morality on a firm foundation.

² Allen Wood, “Kant’s Deism,” in P. J. Rossi and M. Wren (eds.), *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, pp. 16–17.

In Kant's view the reason previous morals systems have failed is not that they were unable to come up with a convincing account of how to advance human interests or improve the quality of human life but something more radical: they neglected to account for the central feature of morality – the fact of duty. As Kant conceives it, duty is a necessary relation between a moral agent and the object of volition (*FMM* 400, p.16). By *necessary* he means binding at all times and in all places. Thus any moral system that makes duty contingent upon a specific interest will culminate in imperatives that are hypothetical rather than categorical. It will treat people as beings subject to law but not subject as *moral* beings in Kant's sense of the term. Consider the claim that I am obliged to do whatever God commands. Kant's question is: Why am I so obliged? The thunder and lightning that broke out over Mt. Sinai have nothing to do with morality. Nor do the curses and threats that make disobedience imprudent. As it is often said, might does not make right. The only adequate response is that I should obey God because I have decided to accept God as the supreme authority on moral questions. But if this is so, the authority of God's commands presupposes a decision on my part and cannot bind categorically. If a person does not believe that God exists, he would be under no obligation at all.

In a famous passage in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (432–33, p. 51), Kant puts his point this way:

If we now look back upon all previous attempts which have ever been undertaken to discover the principle of morality, it is not to be wondered at that they all had to fail. Man was seen to be bound to laws by his duty, but it was not seen that he is subject only to his own, yet universal, legislation, and that he is only bound to act in accordance with his own will, which is, however, designed by nature to be a will giving universal laws. For if one thought of him as subject only to a law (whatever it might be), this necessarily implied some interest as a stimulus or compulsion to obedience because the law did not arise from his will. Rather, his will was constrained by something else according to a law to act in a certain way. By this strictly necessary consequence, however, all the labor of finding a supreme ground for duty was irrevocably lost, and one never arrived at duty but only at the necessity of action from a certain interest. This might be his own

interest or that of another, but in either case the imperative had to be conditional and could not at all serve as a moral command.

Kant's solution is to invoke a version of internalism: we should not look for the source of obligation outside the will but inside. If divine commands do not become binding until I accept divine sovereignty, then from a moral perspective the real decision rests with me, not with God. In short, moral acts are inherently reflexive. Even if I decide to do what someone else asks, I must first decide if such a course of action is warranted.

The element of reflexivity means that it is not only wrong but degrading to look upon moral agents as merely subject to law. According to Kant they must be viewed as subjects and legislators simultaneously. In his most famous description of autonomy, he writes (*FMM* 431, p. 49):

The will is thus not only subject to the law but subject in such a way that it must be regarded also as self-legislative and only for this reason as being subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author).

Because we impose the law on ourselves and can look upon ourselves as its author, no external factor like fear of punishment or hope of reward is needed to explain why it is binding. The law we impose *on* ourselves is a sufficient motive for action *in* itself. Thus a law that we impose on ourselves is the only law that can bind categorically. To the degree that the law is based on rational legislation and not on self-interest or personal preference, it is a universal law that covers all rational agents. Again from Kant (443, p. 51), a rational agent "must regard itself as giving universal law through all the maxims of its will." As we saw, Kant believes that each of us is "designed by nature" to be a will giving universal laws. It is our status as both subject and legislator of universal laws that accounts for our dignity as moral agents and gains us membership in the kingdom of ends.

Before inquiring into the religious consequences of this doctrine, it is important to clear up a number of misconceptions. The first derives from Kant's use of metaphors like subject, author, and legislator. The crux of Kant's position is that autonomy involves self-rule in the sense that each of us follows his own will. Still we must be careful not to draw too

close an analogy between an individual and a government. Legislatures gather information, debate proposals, and enact laws. At the national level, they are free to determine their own course of action without interference from other governments. They are even free to reverse themselves if they see fit. But nothing like this is true when it comes to answering the call of duty. Having imposed the law on myself, I am not at liberty to repeal it.³ If I were, obeying the law would cease to be an obligation and become a preference. Nor am I at liberty to change its terms or ask for something in return.

Though the principle of autonomy represents a strong statement of human freedom, it does not permit me to do whatever I please.⁴ In the long passage from *Foundations* cited above, Kant makes this point by saying that we are subject to our own *yet universal* legislation. This means that the moral law is determined by reason a priori with no consideration for human success or failure. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (123, p. 127), he calls it “stern, unindulgent, truly commanding.” Again in *Foundations* (431, p. 49), he describes it as “the supreme limiting condition of all subjective ends, whatever they may be.” As we saw, it is the irrelevance of all interests or preferences that allows the law to bind categorically and permits a single individual to “legislate” for all humanity. Along these lines, Hermann Cohen argued that strictly speaking the problem of autonomy does not concern the origin of action but the origin of law.⁵

Kant would therefore take issue with the claim that autonomy is personal in the normal sense of the term. It can be considered personal if by *person* one means the noumenal or rational self, which is to say the self that wills independently of sensuous influences. But if one means a being with a history and a particular point of view, autonomy is no more personal than the law of excluded middle. As Cohen (*RR* p. 345) put it: we are

³ On this point, see G. A. Cohen, “Reason, Humanity and the Moral Law,” in Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 167–70 as well as Korsgaard’s reply on p. 236: “In both Kant’s version and mine the subject is unequivocally the author of the law, but autonomous lawmaking is not something you can do any way you like, any more than thinking is. It must be done universally.”

⁴ Cf. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, pp. 78–9, 134–35.

⁵ Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des Reinen Willens*, p. 319.

not volunteers for morality and must subjugate ourselves to duty. To see this point, one need only recognize that for Kant (*FMM* 447, p. 65) a free will is a will under law. Clearly he is not thinking of freedom as the ability to do whatever one wants. That conception of freedom is purely negative because all it tells us is that there is no external constraint on what we do. If lack of external constraint were all that is involved in freedom, there would be no difference between a free will and an arbitrary one. In the end autonomy would not be self-rule but the ability to act on whatever whim strikes one at the moment.

To see the difference, consider what is involved in ruling oneself. According to Kant the key factor is the endorsement of a principle. If I scratch my ear inadvertently, I have initiated behavior but said nothing about the value of what I have done. If I lose my temper and blow up at a friend, I have initiated behavior of which I strongly disapprove.⁶ Suppose however that I give to charity in the belief that what I am doing is right. Here I have initiated behavior and affirmed something about the reason for doing it. It is the fact that my behavior is sanctioned by a principle I accept that allows us to say I have exercised self-control. In addition to having no external constraint, a free action expresses something about the person who performs it. It tells us what she stands for and what kind of person she wants to become.

The upshot is that a free action is mine in a way that an action on impulse is not. It is an action on which I have staked a claim. The difference between freedom and necessity is that in the latter case, the cause of my action is a force external to the will, while in the former case it is the will itself. How can the will be a cause? Without going into the metaphysical dimension of the question, we can say that it is a cause when it chooses a law of its own making rather than responding to a law imposed on it by something else. According to Kant's metaphor, when it

⁶ On the importance of secondary intentions for understanding autonomy, see Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, p. 15: "One may not just desire to smoke, but also desire that one not have that desire. I may not just be motivated by jealousy or anger, but may also desire that my motivations be different (or the same)."

chooses a law of its own making, it legislates its own behavior and in that sense is autonomous.

By a law, Kant means a principle that covers all moral agents, something I legislate for myself and urge you to legislate for yourself. As any student of Kant knows, this explanation is nothing but the first formulation of the categorical imperative: act according to a maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law. At this stage the categorical imperative does not tell us exactly what we should do. It says only that we should act for the sake of principle and not make exceptions of ourselves. Because of its generality, the categorical imperative is the only law that can govern the realm of freedom. Rather than constrain the will by saying “Do this” or “Don’t do that,” it requires only that in choosing a principle, we be consistent. Any breach in consistency means our action is not law-governed but arbitrary. As Christine Korsgaard points out, this formulation of the categorical imperative arises from the very nature of what a free will is.⁷ All it says is that freedom must be principled. That is why the will is subject to it.

The second misconception involves the metaphor of authorship. Since the moral law is known a priori, it cannot have an author in the sense that *King Lear* does. As members of the kingdom of ends, everyone is an author; as empirical beings responding to sensuous influences, no one is. Kant makes this point by saying (*FMM* 431, p. 49) that the supreme condition of the will’s harmony with universal practical reason is “the *idea* [my emphasis] of the will of every rational being as making universal law.” In other words, the author of the law is not Dick or Jane but our conception of ourselves as beings who live up to the demands of practical reason. Emil Fackenheim makes essentially the same point by saying that while I am the author of the law in the sense of being able to appropriate it freely, it does not follow that I am (or have to be) the author of the law in fact.⁸ Note Kant claims in the passage cited above that I must be able to *regard* myself as author. In one sense he means a great

⁷ Korsgaard, *Sources*, p. 98.

⁸ Emil Fackenheim, “Abraham and the Kantians,” in *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, p. 45.

deal, in another sense comparatively little. The problem is that he sometimes vacillates between the two, leaving the reader with conflicting impressions of what he means.

If we look at autonomy from the standpoint of the will in its relation to the law, all authorship means is that I am capable of grasping the validity of the law and choosing to act for its sake.⁹ Rather than create or introduce the law, I recognize that it is binding on every rational agent. In this sense, I am no more the author of the law than is a geometry student who proves the Pythagorean Theorem is its author. Along these lines Kant suggests (*CPrR* 8, p. 8) that only a fool would claim to be the inventor of morality. So while it is true to say that the will is a law to itself, it is important to remember that the only law it can impose on itself is one of which a morally perfect being would approve, a law that is universal and thus completely impartial.

By calling us the author of the law, Kant means that the law acquires its validity not because someone orders me to obey it but because reason requires it. It is significant that after introducing the formula of autonomy, Kant does not do what a casual reader would expect: he does not go into a discussion of the freedom to determine our own destiny but exactly the opposite, a discussion of the need to ignore “all admixture of interest” and to act solely on principle. So there is no reason to think that he took the formula of autonomy as a way of inviting creativity.

If however we look at the matter from the standpoint of the will as the source of the law, we get a different impression: not only that the will is subject to a universal principle but that it literally *makes* the principle for itself.¹⁰ Here the will is treated as sovereign, as a moral authority bound only by its own directives. It is almost as if the stern and unyielding voice of duty gets pushed to the margins. Kant would no doubt reply that he is not trying to create two impressions but one: since the will he is talking about is nothing but reason in its practical capacity, the

⁹ For this formulation, I am indebted to Brendan E. A. Liddell, *Kant on the Foundation of Morality*, p. 163.

¹⁰ For more on the two ways of reading the formula of autonomy, see Robert Paul Wolff, *The Autonomy of Reason*, pp. 178–79.

fact that it is both subject and sovereign is perfectly consistent. It is true that the will is bound only by its own directives but also true that it is subject to a principle that has nothing to do with the specifics of time and place. From Kant's perspective, the appearance of inconsistency arises only if we persist in interpreting sovereignty as ability to do whatever one wants. While his choice of words is partly responsible for this problem, we must be careful not to press the metaphor of authorship too far.

It is clear that freedom in the sense here intended involves more than the capacity to choose between alternatives. Sometimes Kant makes this point by distinguishing between *Wille* and *Willkür*, or as we might say between rational will and the liberty of free choice. Suppose a tyrant offered me a take-it-or-leave-it proposition: work for an evil bureaucracy or go to prison. Though some might say I am free to do one or the other, no matter what alternative I pick, I cannot regard myself as its author. The same is true of deception. If you trick me into thinking the money I give you will be used to feed hungry children, it may be true that I give it to you freely, but it is not true that I can regard myself as the author of what I have done.¹¹ The problem with coercion or deception is that they do not enable me to endorse the action I have undertaken, to exercise authority over my behavior and thus to be free.

It should also be clear that Kant's understanding of autonomy makes sense only if we accept his bifurcation of reality into the realms of nature and freedom. Yet here too we run the risk of misunderstanding. The distinction between nature and freedom, or phenomenon and noumenon, is not analogous to Descartes' distinction between body and mind. It is not, in other words, a distinction between two entities linked by a strange causal connection. There are, of course, passages where

¹¹ For discussion of why liberty does not necessarily imply autonomy, see again Dworkin, *Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, p. 14. Note however that Dworkin's account of autonomy does not include the idea of an objectively valid moral law. According to Dworkin (p. 21), a person who decides he wants to uphold the rule "I will do everything my mother, leader, or priest tells me to" is still autonomous. According to Kant, such a person would not be autonomous because the maxim according to which the person acts is suspect. We cannot follow the dictates of another person until we can assure ourselves on independent grounds that everything the person says is right.

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Kant talks this way, but I follow Cohen and a long tradition of scholars in regarding the noumenal realm not as a collection of entities but as a system of values, a target rather than a substance.¹² Put otherwise, the noumenal self is not a ghost-like creature that intervenes in the phenomenal world but a transcendental presupposition: our idea of ourselves insofar as we are capable of responding to the call of duty.

The upshot is that we do not possess autonomy in the way that we possess a circulatory system. Since it requires action on principle, autonomy involves the ability to subject the desires and impulses that affect behavior to rational scrutiny. If I am going to be autonomous, I must forget the fact that I like Peter and hate Paul and look at both as human beings worthy of respect. It follows that autonomy is something we have to make, or better yet, something we have to strive for. Though we all have the capacity to act rationally, there is nothing that guarantees we will succeed and every reason to think we can be mistaken in our estimate of what we have done. In the words of Yirmiahu Yovel: “*the very status of rationality is not ready-made but constituted.*”¹³

To this we should add that it has to be constituted by the agent herself. Behind Kant’s authorship metaphor is the view that it is impossible to receive morality from an external source, even if that source is divine. God can issue commands and beseech me to obey them. But if morality is to command unconditional respect, I must recognize the intrinsic value of obeying the commands and affirm them for their own sake. In the kingdom of ends, where everyone is rational and every subject’s humanity is respected, no one will follow any orders other than the ones she imposes on herself. We should keep in

¹² For a passage where the distinction between noumenon and phenomenon sounds like an ontological dualism, see “On the Extreme Limit of All Practical Philosophy” in the *Foundations*. For discussion of the Marburg interpretation of Kant, see Steven S. Schwarzschild, “The Tenability of H. Cohen’s Construction of the Self,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13: 3 (1975), 378–79: “Noumena are, however, normative constructs; they are the reasons for, not the causes of, their phenomena; and so the noumenal self is the definition of the self as an ethical task.” For a recent interpretation that takes a similar view, see Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Idea of Freedom*, pp. 3–5, 141–43.

¹³ Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, p. 13.