

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF APPLIED ETHICS
Volume 10 (2024), pp. 49-56

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reevaluating Freedom and Autonomy: Kantian Ethics in the Modern World

Ayush Srivastava

Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay

Submitted: July 06, 2024; returned: November 29, 2024; revised: November 29, 2024; accepted: December 10, 2024

Abstract: In this paper, I will examine the concept of freedom and autonomy within Kantian philosophy, emphasizing its significance in contemporary ethical discourse. Immanuel Kant's deontological framework, particularly as outlined in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (2012), posits that autonomy and self-legislation according to moral law are essential for true freedom and moral action. The debate between autonomy and heteronomy is central to understanding moral responsibility and practical reason. Kant's 'Categorical Imperative,' with its emphasis on universalizability and treating humanity as an end in itself, provides a robust foundation for ethical behaviour. This paper argues for the enduring relevance of Kant's principles, highlighting their applicability in addressing modern moral dilemmas. Navigating the complexities of autonomy and heteronomy underscores the importance of maintaining moral autonomy in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Categorical Imperative, Deontology, Ethics, Freedom, Heteronomy, Humanity, Practical Reason, Universalizability*

1 Introduction

The question, 'What does it mean to say that an individual is free?' is paramount in contemporary ethics. Central to this discourse is the examination of Immanuel Kant's philosophy, which has profoundly influenced modern ethical thought (Robert & Cureton, 2024). Kant, a pivotal figure of the Enlightenment, structured his philosophy around three

critical works: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998), *Critique of Practical Reason* (2015), and *Critique of Judgement*. His deontological approach emphasizes that actions are inherently right or wrong, independent of their consequences. In his work, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (2012), Kant posits that freedom is foundational to morality. He asserts that only practical reason can serve as the criterion of moral judgment, where reason accesses an a priori cosmic order, originating from the noumena, the realm of things that can only be thought and not known. This idea of reason as an autonomous, self-authorizing entity marks a significant departure from empirical principles.

A pivotal aspect of Kantian ethics is the debate between autonomy and heteronomy (Henry, 2012). Autonomy, derived from the Greek words 'autos' (self) and 'nomos' (law), implies self-legislation in accordance with moral law. In contrast, heteronomy denotes being governed by external forces or empirical desires. Kant argues that true freedom and morality arise from autonomy, where actions are guided by practical reason rather than inclinations or external pressures (Wilson, 2009). Kant's concept of the 'Categorical Imperative,' an unconditional moral law, underscores this autonomy. He outlines three formulations of the Categorical Imperative, which emphasize universalizability, treating humanity as an end in itself, and acting as members of a 'Kingdom of Ends' where all rational beings legislate moral laws. These principles aim to establish a universally acceptable basis for morality rooted in the autonomy of will.

In this paper, I will explore the relevance of Kant's notions of freedom and autonomy in contemporary ethics. By examining the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy and the implications of Kant's CI, it argues for the enduring significance of Kantian moral philosophy in addressing modern ethical dilemmas. The aim is to demonstrate that while autonomy may present challenges in practice, it remains a crucial foundation for moral action and ethical theory.

2 Reevaluating Freedom and Autonomy: Discussion and Debate

'What does it mean to say that individual is free?' This is the prudential question in contemporary ethics. Before beginning with presenting my arguments and analysis on the freedom and autonomy of will. It is important to investigate Kantian Philosophy, which has been the turning point in the discourse of the philosophical domain. Immanuel Kant was the prophet of *Enlightenment* in Europe and a critical philosopher. His philosophy revolves around three critiques: *Pure Reason*, *Practical Reason*, and *Judgement*. He was a deontologist (duty for duty's sake) as he emphasized that actions are right or wrong irrespective of consequences. In his great work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, he defines the fundamental principle for morality: *Freedom*. Freedom is sufficient for establishing morality. Only 'Practical Reason' can serve as the criterion of moral judgment. Reason means access to

¹ In this paper I will use CI for Categorical Imperative and HI for Hypothetical Imperative.

an *a priori* cosmic order. Reason is spontaneous, and it originates from the noumena, that is, which can only be thought and not known. Human reason is the outside casual network, which has self-authority. He tries to do away with the empirical part and search for only priori principles of reason (Gass, 1994).

I will begin by dwelling on the debate between *Autonomy* and *Heteronomy* which is going on forever. 'What does it mean to be autonomous, will it be a boon for an individual or become a bane for society?' 'Is being heteronomous always bad or sometimes it is important for individual well-being?' 'Will is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational.' The supreme authority of morality is the practical reason or will. 'Free will' is the reason's capacity to choose a maxim. A responsible person is free and constrained at the same time. We are heteronomous by birth and not autonomous. Autonomy is the combination of *Autos*(self) and *Nomos* (law), which means that the self legislates and abides by the same moral law that is mandated by practical reason, the self is an author and subject of law. Autonomy of the will is acting without external pressure or coercion but subject to our inclination and desire. The heteronomy of will means when it is under the control of any other than itself. It is acting based on desire and not practical reason when one determines oneself from empirical contents. In short, 'heteronomy' is when volition is free only in a relative sense and 'autonomy' is when it is free in an absolute sense (Henry, 2012). In the contemporary world, autonomy may not sometimes be feasible as an individual, by his free will, may act in a certain maxim that cannot become a universal law. For example, out of the free will of his practical reason, he may commit suicide or not wear a helmet in traffic without thinking about humanity or the law. So, heteronomy also becomes important in certain cases when an empirical experience must affect an individual's choices. We are sometimes interest-driven (pathological beings) forces outside us. For example, not stealing out of fear of being caught and wearing helmets to avoid paying fines. I still argue for autonomy of will as an individual needs to be necessarily free in this world, and heteronomy limits an individual's choices, which may affect their behaviour adversely.

Autonomy should always be the ground of morality as it will increase an individual's motivation to always comply with moral laws (Gass, 1994). 'Is Kant's concept of autonomy the solution to the above debate? Will it work the same in the contemporary world also?' Kant wanted to achieve an impossible mission. He searches for a universally acceptable basis for morality. Kant redefined freedom, which is why he has given the concept of autonomy, which is of absolute spontaneity. Freedom of the will is the basis on which he builds his *Metaphysics of Morals*. The concept of freedom is necessary for the autonomy of will. The idea of 'Freedom' is one of the postulates of morality, which is of practical necessity, and we can make universal laws only if we are free (ought presupposes a can). Kant's concept of autonomy (we are necessarily free) is a way of dissolving the idea of contentment and discontentment with freedom. The capacity to choose constitutes the bedrock of all moral frameworks(freedom). Being law unto itself is the motto of autonomy. Action is right if it is performed based on our duty. If our reason chooses to do a certain act to perform a duty, it is called 'Goodwill.' Anything that is conceived to be good without any qualification and which is self-contained. Kant's idea of the autonomy of will can still be considered of great importance as an individual must perform only duties which can have some universal nature and are unconditional. In

contemporary times, there may be hindrances to the autonomy of will as some individuals might act only on those duties which offer them some reward, and refrain from following some virtues which may not provide them with anything in return. There might be some laws which are made universal by certain individuals, like selling or smuggling illegal products which are immoral and may not serve the purpose of autonomy, as it is done with the purpose of desire and not with practical reason. Autonomy of will still holds a great value in modern society in everyday lives, an individual wants to maintain his self-respect and moral personality by performing only those duties which may not offer him any reward or punishment but are universalizable and at the same time have *Goodwill*.

Kant put forth the objective principle of morality for rational beings, which is the 'Categorical Imperative.' 'Why is there a need for categorical imperative for will and not hypothetical imperative? What importance does CI hold for a rational agent?' We must act for the sake of duty out of respect for moral law. Ends might be of subjective or objective interests. Subjective ends are based on desire or self-interest, which has relative value and is conditioned. This is called a 'hypothetical imperative.' Example- 'If you want x, then you ought to perform y,' which is performed out of respect for moral law but due to desire to attain the purpose. Practical reason deals with the unconditional moral law. The CI (synthetic a priori) holds unconditionally and universally; it is the law of autonomous will (no ifs and buts). Ex- 'you ought to perform y.' It is the supreme principle of morality. A CI declares an action to be objectively necessary without any reference to any purpose or end (Robert & Cureton, 2024). I argue for CI because it is not possible for a rational being to perform duties under certain conditions (hypothetically), and autonomy of the will is only possible when we ought to perform certain actions unconditionally without vested interests or desires.

A *maxim* is a subjective principle of volition, the objective principle through which will is driven to act. We should so act that we may think of ourselves as legislating universal laws through maxims. There are three maxims of CI:

- 1) "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will to become a universal law.'
- 2) "Act as to treat humanity wherein their own person or in that of any other, always as an end and never as a means.'
- 3) "Act as a member of Kingdom of Ends.' (Henry, 2012; Robert & Cureton, 2024)

Sometimes, it is necessary to act only on those duties which are universalizable at the time, but it is not possible all the time as sometimes lying or promise-breaking may become universal due to the absolute freedom of some rational agents. On the other hand, we may want only those moral laws which are of virtue and not pleasure. Human dignity is very important to look after as it is necessary to not use any individual to our self-interest, it may be hazardous to the autonomy of will (suicide, murder). Adoption of some maxims is immoral as the adoption of them may frustrate everyone (doing away with oneself to escape from a painful situation), this violates the perfect duties to us. The most important maxim according to me is the third one

because in the *Kingdom of ends*, all beings are autonomous. Everyone is of intrinsic value and all members obey the moral law. This is the ideal human community, in which people reason together about what to do. We must be autonomous beings, capable of being motivated by the conception of ourselves as legislative citizens in the Kingdom of Ends. However, it is difficult to make every rational being respect the same moral law and act autonomously. I think it is not very possible in the modern state to put forth the idea of a *Kingdom of ends*, due to the presence of various groups and religions within the state that have their own set of moral laws or rules to follow.

Rational beings must be governed only by their reason. A morally good person has remained true to his nature as a rational or free being. Freedom and morality are analytically connected. In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the first part, he deals with all relations/causation being a necessity and in the second part deals with freedom. 'Why causality of will is a necessary condition for freedom?' Absolute autonomy is only possible when the causality of a will is purest. Free will is governed essentially by its causal powers. Every causal relation is a necessary relation that completely rules out the freedom of choice. Choices are determined by rationale and interests. If there is no freedom, there will be no responsibility. Will is synonymous with a kind of causality. Will is a cause that is a cause has the power to bring about an effect, which is called causality, and this causality is freedom. Will is devoid of any determinants which are alien to it in manifesting the causality of freedom. Our will determines our actions, and it is through our actions that we have effects on the world. A free will must, therefore, have its law or principle, which it gives to itself (autonomous will). Freedom is way away from necessity, the attempt to move from heteronomy to autonomy to be free and have freedom. A causally autonomous agent adopts only those maxims that he can regard as causally regulating his will. For example- committing suicide cannot be causally legislated as the law for nature as it violates the intrinsic value of a rational being.

'Why is freedom regarded as belonging to the intelligible or noumenal world?' We regard ourselves as the first causes or ultimate sources of these inner appearances. We must see ourselves as belonging to both the world of sense (phenomena) and the world of understanding (noumena). The empirical causality of a human being is a 'causality of his reason' it is not the intelligible character of the will. While freedom is the character of a thing in itself (noumena). Freedom cannot be known as it is intelligible, not part of the phenomenal world. Causality is an empirical necessity, as we see in the world of appearances. Reason determines itself spontaneously. Freedom is not a relation that we can experience, so it is not an attribute of phenomena. We experience only the phenomenal world, and its laws are laws of causality. The world of sense includes our choices and actions and falls under the laws of nature. In the world of understanding, we are free, and so our will is governed by the moral law. We give laws to ourselves as members of the world of sense. As a member of the noumenal world is a conception of ourselves as self-governing and so as autonomous or moral beings (Henry, 2012). Laws of causality that would govern our ideal world of appearance describe how we ought to act as causal agents of the intelligible variety.' The noble ideal of a universal *Kingdom of ends* in themselves (rational beings) to which we can belong as members only when we carefully conduct ourselves in accordance with maxims of freedom as if they were laws of nature.

3 Weaknesses in Kant's Understanding of Rationality and Freedom

Kant's moral philosophy, centred on the concepts of rationality and autonomy, has been criticized for its rigidity, particularly in its exclusion of emotions and the emphasis on universalizability. While his framework has had a profound impact on modern ethical thought, the abstract and formal nature of Kantian ethics limits its applicability in contexts that demand relational and situational considerations. Kant, by subordinating emotions to reason and universal principles, his moral philosophy neglects the moral significance of human relationships and contextual nuances.

A central criticism of Kant's understanding of freedom lies in his conception of rational autonomy, which assumes that moral agents are entirely self-determining when they act in accordance with universalizable maxims derived from reason. For Kant, true freedom is realized when an individual transcends inclinations and emotions, acting solely on rational principles (Kant, 2012). However, this detachment from emotional and situational aspects of decision-making reduces the complexity of human moral experience. Emotions are not inherently antithetical to reason but can provide essential insights into moral decision-making, particularly in contexts that involve care, empathy, and relational responsibilities.

The rigidity of Kant's universalizability principle further undermines the applicability of his ethics. Kant's CI demands that moral actions be evaluated based on whether their guiding maxims can be universalized without contradiction (Kant, 2012). This abstract criterion assumes that moral laws are valid independently of particular circumstances. Critics such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and feminist ethicists argue that this decontextualized approach marginalizes relational and context-dependent dimensions of morality, particularly those emphasized in care ethics. Moral dilemmas often involve competing values and obligations that cannot be resolved through abstract universal principles. For example, the moral responsibilities in familial relationships may require prioritizing partiality and emotional engagement over impartial rationality.

Additionally, Kant's exclusion of emotions from moral worth creates a problematic dichotomy between reason and feeling. Scholars such as Bernard Williams (1981) have highlighted the importance of emotions in motivating moral behavior and in shaping moral judgment. Emotions like compassion and empathy are not merely passive inclinations but active components of moral deliberation, enabling agents to respond to specific needs and contexts. Kant's neglect of this relational dimension of ethics limits his framework's ability to address morally significant situations that demand emotional responsiveness, such as those involving care for vulnerable individuals.

Finally, the emphasis on rational autonomy in Kantian ethics has been critiqued for its individualistic orientation. Philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) argue that moral reasoning is embedded within traditions and social practices, challenging Kant's assumption of a purely rational, autonomous moral agent. A relational and context-sensitive approach to

ethics would acknowledge the interdependence of individuals within social contexts and the role of shared values and narratives in shaping moral identity.

4 Conclusion/Final Remarks

To sum up, Kant aims to search for and establish the supreme principle of morality. The fundamental principle of morality is based on the nature of rational volition and is based on principles that we autonomously impose on ourselves through reason. Freedom is a sufficient condition for the existence of morality. Practical reason deals with the unconditional moral law. The moral law is in the form of an imperative: a command. There can only be one reason why we must do what duty demands, and that is that we demand it of ourselves. Kant gave the best articulation of universal objective morality in his moral theory. He talks about the concept of moral freedom through three *Categorical imperatives*. In simple terms, being autonomous means choosing for yourself. CI becomes important here as it is a necessary condition for *Autonomy of the will* because it is an unconditional command, while *Heteronomy* promotes HI as it puts certain conditions on individuals. So, Kant's moral theory is groundbreaking in all its conceptions as it provides a way to live as free rational agents.

Kant's understanding of rationality and freedom, while groundbreaking, is limited by its exclusion of emotions, rigidity in universalizability, and neglect of relational contexts. Incorporating emotions and situational considerations into ethical deliberation would address these limitations, fostering a more holistic and context-sensitive moral philosophy. There are many arguments against his theory by 20th-century philosophers, but it still holds a great value and impact on all the other moral theories which are being articulated after him as most of them based their theories around his principles, whether accepting or refuting his view.

References

- [1] Allison, Henry E. (2012). *Autonomy, Heteronomy, and Constructing the Categorical Imperative, Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*. Oxford Academic.
- [2] Gass, M. (1994). Kant's causal conception of autonomy. *History of Philosophical Quarterly*, 11(1), 53-70.
- [3] Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Johnson, R. and Adam C. (2024) Kant's Moral Philosophy. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, eds.).
- [5] Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason* (P. Guyer & A. W. Wood, Trans.). Cambridge

- University Press. (Original work published 1781, revised 1787)
- [6] Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- [7] Kant, I. (2015). *Critique of Practical Reason* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1788)
- [8] MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- [9] Williams, B. (1981). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Wilson, E.E. (2009). Is Kant's concept of autonomy absurd? *History of Philosophical Quarterly*, 26(2), 159-174.