

# A critical evaluation of immanuel kant's notion of autonomy essay sample

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



## **Introduction**

Autonomy, defined as “ self-directing freedom and especially moral independence” (Merriam-Webster, 2013), is a concept that encompasses human rationality. It is a notion that has strong linkages to the idea of freedom, although those definitions have different concepts based on various perspectives. Notwithstanding the variations, autonomy is a feature that characterizes the freethinking nature of humans. With freethinking comes openness to accept any possibilities that could emerge as consequences to particular actions thought autonomously.

The notion of German philosopher Immanuel Kant is among those that have stood out in the literature of autonomy. Kant premised that humans act based on specific moral tenets – away from the thought that punishment and retribution force human actions (Guyer, 1995, p. 4). This study will seek to disclose particular details that make up Kant’s conception on autonomy. Arguments that support or deny Kant on autonomy will feature as well.

## **Kant on Autonomy**

Kant, in his notion of autonomy, stated that human actions are autonomous if they are rational. Rationality, in this case, brings forth the idea of freedom. Freedom, within this context, does not mean the absence of laws or any imposition coming from any competent authority. Rather, the Kantian context of freedom takes off from the existence of binding laws made and agreed by the intended constituents. In that case, it is consensus brought by the binding laws that unites people together. In that sense, people are free

because they freely observe and abide by the laws that they granted legitimization (Johnson, 2012).

Universal laws enable autonomy among adherents. When people observe laws as universal, they yield freely to those laws and they exhibit freedom not out of coercion but through willful submission. In that case, human rationality is not an end, but rather as a means for reaching autonomy. The observance of universal laws, in this case, preserves human freedom. However, there must be an understanding that such laws should not entirely come from tradition alienated from the recognition of supposed adherents. Rather, universal laws should center on the rationality of those adherents. In other words, people should understand and agree to the laws meant for imposition unto them in order for those to gain recognition as being universal (Guyer, 1995, p. 2). Human reason, in Kant's view, produces human morality, to which the people must submit themselves and cue influences towards agreeing and abiding by laws imposed unto them. Such differentiates universal laws from laws that hail from traditions influenced by religion and politics, among others. Tradition-based laws – in this context, laws that are not agreed by, or alienated from the rationality of people, promote servitude and not freedom. In that sense, people give in to those laws not because they freely do so, but because they fear punishment or any consequences contrary to their freedom (Guyer, 1995, p. 4).

Human will is central to the Kantian concept of autonomy. Consensus must characterize the creation of universal laws – one motivated not by fear, but rather by free resolve based on rational thinking. Rational thinking makes

the person a moral agent, one that acts with freedom and therefore autonomous. To understand autonomy better in this context with full characterization, there must be a discussion of two of its important facets - the psychological claim and non-corrigibility claim (Downie and Telfer, 1971, p. 295).

### **Psychological Autonomy**

The psychological claim to autonomy states that one could choose moral positions based on selecting a particular behavior. Once a person chooses to observe a particular behavior, there is an understanding that he has chosen a certain moral position. It then follows that people have the autonomy by being able to choose such. People could discern which moral positions are correct or incorrect based on their views, as manifested by their behaviors. Their moral standpoints reflect greatly on the behaviors they adapt, which in turn are influential for constructing and ratifying laws that they freely follow. In this case, people could choose which to believe in - in the form of expressed commitment to the morally ratified laws that, in the first place, would not resemble freedom if coercion or fear of punishment is the ground for such (Downie and Telfer, 1971, pp. 295-296).

### **Non-Corrigible Autonomy**

Under the psychological claim to autonomy, ascertaining moral positions from notions of moral standpoints determine the legitimacy of resultant laws. Yet, such is not the case under the non-corrigible claim to autonomy. Such view explains that all moral positions meant for adoption are legitimate, without one being incorrect. Under this view, looking at the pros and cons of

moral positions is the key to siding on a particular moral position, alongside emulating its associated behavior. Yet, such does not constitute real choice of moral position, for such limits people to a pre-made set of beliefs that they chose to adhere to, without questioning themselves either on the logical ground that people do not have the ability to choose their beliefs or due to indoctrination or conditioning (Downie and Telfer, 1971, pp. 295-296).

### **Psychological and Non-Corrigibility Claims Vis-à-vis Choosing Belief**

The foregoing discussed the two facets crucial to understanding the Kantian notion of autonomy - the psychological claim and non-corrigibility claim. The main difference between the two lies on the concept of belief on moral positions, which will receive further discussion in the succeeding section (Downie and Telfer, 1971, pp. 294-296).

**Psychological Claim on Belief.** Under the psychological claim, any person, as a moral agent, could choose his moral standpoint on his own will. Such would become instrumental in enacting laws, which he would eventually submit his commitment. Thus, commitment to such laws would constitute practice of freedom and an exhibition of autonomy. Autonomy thus enables a person to choose his moral positions (Downie and Telfer, 1971, p. 295).

**Non-Corrigibility Claim on Belief.** Non-corrigibility entails that people could not truly choose their own beliefs. Such finds logical explanations under three scenarios. Firstly, if a person claims to refuse a belief, it could mean that believes such by heart without letting it permeate through his conscious mind. In this case, he does not permit the belief to entertain his thoughts.

Secondly, refusing a belief could mean that a person just chose to focus on the evidence countering such a belief, without a perusal on the evidence of said belief. Thirdly, in saying that a person refuses to believe a particular belief, his statement could ultimately mean that he does not believe the evidence of the belief he is claiming to reject after his perusal. In other words, the person already examined the evidence on the belief he refuses to believe, yet in the end he claims that he still does not adhere to said belief. Said scenarios do not logically conform to the ability to choose beliefs, thus leading to the non-corrigible premise that people could not choose their own beliefs (Downie and Telfer, 1971, pp. 294-295).

## **Reconciling the Psychological Claim and Non-Corrigibility Claim**

Notwithstanding the obvious difference in the notion of belief, the foundation of the Kantian notion of autonomy on the reconciliation of both the psychological and non-corrigibility does not stand to falter as it premises itself on logical grounds. The psychological claim states that people, being moral agents, have the free will to stand by particular moral positions that they agree to. Agreement to said moral positions for forming laws would then entail genuine freedom consonant to the idea of autonomy – one based on familiarity and agreement and not on any fear of punishment or coercion of the law. Such finds reconciliation with the non-corrigibility claim in this wise – that obligations outside a person's will do not bind him. Since it follows that moral positions under the non-corrigible view are legitimate and thus people could not truly choose their beliefs due to the assumed legitimacy and correctness of those moral positions, it would thus entail that

any obligation that may not be under a person's will is not a moral position. Following the logical premise of belief under the non-corrigible view, a person may only allow particular beliefs under moral positions to permeate his consciousness, without discounting all other beliefs under other moral positions – the evidence of which he refuses to review or regard, despite their presumed legitimacy under the view.

Ultimately, both the psychological and non-corrigibility claims involve people positing themselves towards beliefs under moral positions. The only difference therein is the notion of belief towards moral positions under both claims, with the psychological claim maintaining that a person could choose his beliefs and the non-corrigibility claim asserting that the presumed legitimacy of all moral positions actually disable people to genuinely and logically choose their beliefs (Downie and Telfer, 1971, pp. 294-296).

## **Autonomy and the Categorical Imperative**

Kant's moral philosophy has a defining premise on the categorical imperative, which he described as one that commands persons to adhere to wills that are rational in nature. In this case, immoral acts are consequently irrational and are thus against the categorical imperative. There are no ends needed to define categorical imperatives, for it finds unconditional application premised on the universality and necessity of morality. Morality, in itself, is thus legitimate; all moral actions are to be products of categorical imperatives (Johnson, 2012).

Verily, autonomous actions find motivation from the categorical imperative. As it is, the concept of the categorical imperative does not regard any particular ends as motivations. Moral obligations motivate categorical imperatives, the duty therein being the maintenance of morality and the consequence of freedom due to the person fulfilling his will on a moral position he is taking. In other words, an autonomous action does not fulfill a specific end, but rather it is a manifestation for moral positions held by the person, as he is under the duty of moral obligation to fulfill such (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 23).

Similarly, a person who acts towards particular ends do not manifest autonomously. Rather, the fact that he has ends to fulfill means that he has a heteronomous motivation prompting his actions. Heteronomous motivations are those that bind a person to act according to particular ends. For instance, when a person follows a law for fear of punishment, it then follows that he is not acting according to freedom – a prerequisite for autonomous actions run by categorical imperatives. The action, in that case, has an end in the form of fear of punishment. Thus, the motivation of the person in the case is not an autonomous one that regards the fulfillment of moral obligation as a necessity. Rather, the person has a heteronomous motivation because he follows the law just to avoid any punishing consequences (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 23).

## **Morality as Universal Legislation**

As established in the foregoing, morality forms the core of human will and should thus adhere to actions that will satisfy moral obligations in order for



those actions to constitute autonomy. Autonomy, manifested by acting on any categorical imperative, does not adhere to any ends and is unconditional. Therefore, it follows that the will of any person adhering to autonomous motivations forms part of a universal legislation based on morality. Kant, in this case, explains that a universal legislation is one that is moral in nature and autonomously demonstrated. Moral laws, in this case, are autonomous laws that do not encourage any person to act based on particular ends but rather on the obligation to act on maintaining morality. Any action that runs counter to morality is, of course, immoral and irrational. Rational actions are those that fulfill universal legislation, eventually leading to the fulfillment of moral obligations (Korsgaard, 1996, pp. 23-24). Kant, in his critical moral philosophy, has posited that a person has consciousness on the moral law, to which he is committed to fulfill and not alienated (Anderson and Bell, 2010, p. 37). In sovereignty, for instance, Kant postulated that the sovereign state maintain and practice its autonomy as it legitimizes its powers over the people. Separation of powers is crucial in every sovereign state, as it disables admonition from the people by making its power more legitimate. In a republican sense, people have representatives who propose laws that, in turn, meet eventual approval for the executive branches to implement unto the people. The mere presence of representation reflects that said laws are the reflection of the will of the people. Hence, there is an application of autonomy by the sovereign state. It is free and unbound from any overarching power such as a colonial power (Hutchings, 1995, p. 45). The foregoing reflects that the sovereign state imposes a universal

legislation unto its people, in which they commit to the laws proposed and approved by their representatives.

## **Synthesis**

The preceding sections have sufficiently explained and evaluated several notions on the Kantian concept of autonomy. Prevalent and consistent across all facets is the premise that autonomy, in Kant's view, involves a moral authority that calls out for the peoples' will for action. In that case, people submit themselves to the universal legislation that embodies morality. For a graphical view, it is best to embody autonomy in the model of the sovereign state, where people choose freely for their legislative representatives through suffrage. Such is equivalent to forging a commitment to any legislation produced by the representatives. The main incentive of representatives is the maintenance of integrity in their position, perhaps most notably in the form of reelection – influenced in the way people react towards the legislation they pass in the name of representing the will of the people who voted for them. Within that model, people ensure that their commitment to the universal legislation embodying morality stays intact. That they have the will to speak against their representatives in the event they practice inadequate representation through actions against the will of the people means that they are ready to act in the name of their moral obligations, encompassed by the universal legislation.

Verily, it is best to think of Kant's autonomy in this wise – people act towards fulfilling their moral positions and not just because of a particular end. It is not autonomy if people agree to follow laws on grounds that they wish to

avoid punishment. Rather, it is heteronomous – people follow because they are afraid of punishment. Such does not reflect freedom because fear itself forces people to follow the laws, contrary to the notion of autonomy in which people follow the laws to maintain morality through rational actions. Thus, it is important to emphasize all the time that autonomous actions are devoid of avoiding fear as ends and are rather unconditional as to upholding morality.

## **Conclusion**

Autonomy, or Kantian autonomy, entails freedom. Naturally, people are free to follow laws that they, themselves, have agreed to in consonance to their moral positions. Facets that seem to conflict against one another – the psychological and non-corrigibility claims to autonomy do not undermine Kantian autonomy. Rather, those are essential elements of autonomy explaining how people adhere to their moral positions through manifesting observance to the laws embodying such. Furthermore, it is best to think of autonomy as centered on universal legislation. It is universal not because one dictator made it so, but rather because people adhere to those principles, all of which presumed as moral and thus legitimate.

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