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Two Conceptions of Kantian Autonomy

How to interpret autonomy plays a crucial role that leads to different readings in Kant's moral metaphysics, philosophy of religion and moral psychology. In this paper I argue for a two-layered conception of autonomy with varying degrees of justification for each: autonomy as a capacity and autonomy as a paragon-like paradigm. I argue that all healthy rational humans possess the inalienable capacity of autonomy, i.e. share the universal ground for the communicability of objective basic moral principles. This initial understanding stands for autonomy as a capacity about which we can talk of universal validity and justification. Nevertheless, the way a person fully actualizes herself, her freedom, namely autonomy, is shaped by her initial conception of autonomy and moral view of the world. Autonomy as an organic experience of real moral agents, which means an ongoing, non-static, irreducible and inexplicable judgmental process concerning one's actualization of oneself gives way to consider autonomy as a godlike state of the soul even though one cannot provide objective validity for this.

Kant's moral philosophy is based on the notion of autonomy; he aims to establish the supreme principle of morality as autonomy (GMS, AA 4:434, 440). Nevertheless the ground, content and scope of what is meant by autonomy is far from being an issue of consensus. Therefore it is very significant to understand Kant's basic principles and assumptions regarding autonomy. An analysis of Kantian autonomy necessarily relates to his explication of freedom, *Wille/Willkür*, practical reason and moral law. These concepts are not only dependent on one another, but at times they even seem to be interchangeable. Such an ambiguity relates to Kant's cautious and novel metaphysics in which epistemic and ontological claims are neatly separated from one another. His metaphysics of morals embraces several concepts that confuse or perhaps liberate the reader about how to conceive their *actuality*. Therefore the basics of Kant's moral theory do not leave us with a fixed and closed system of concepts. It allows for a latitude ranging from what can be cognized objectively towards the subjective judging of making the most sense of one's moral experience as a human agent. In this regard, unlike the foundationalism (or theism) of rationalist metaphysics, his moral theory initially argues for an absolute independence from all sorts of givenness. The vast connotations of this "absolute independence" of reason obscures the reader especially in interpreting Kant's theism, ethical community and moral psychology. This paper aims at a reading that embraces Kant's own latitude without applying to reductionism of any sort to any ends. That non-reductionist strategy argues, e.g., that while Kantian autonomy is a break from

any divine command theory, from a certain perspective it can still be considered as compatible with it. On the other hand, an explication of Kant's notion of hope, i. e. a teleological moral view of the world in which laws of morals and nature can be considered in harmony does not need to end up with either moral realism or absolute psychologism.

To start with the simplest definition, auto-nomos is the law-giving capacity of reason. According to Kant, reason can be practical of itself, which means that it can immanently determine itself according to its own principles. This determination, being necessary and universal, thus owns the lawful status. That lawfulness has both its content and ground of obligation, again, from reason itself. In other words, a healthy moral agent can know (though fallibly) what is the right action to take and why it should be taken. The latter part is very simply answered, that because it is the right thing to do, one should and can act so without looking for further motivations. That is, moral judgment owns its necessary normative resource from itself, from the pure practical capacity of reason. To decode Kant's moral metaphysics, I start with his analysis of will and freedom. The initial analysis of these concepts exposes that autonomy is an inherent capacity of human agents. The further enquiry into autonomy, in conjunction of deontology and teleology, discloses that autonomy is also a paradigm for virtuous human agents. Therefore, in the basics of Kant's moral metaphysics, we have epistemic certainty about our moral imputability and responsibility. Yet a further inquiry about the very possibility of this undeniable and inalienable moral capacity and the possible limits of its actualization carries us to a domain where we no more have the same, objective epistemic certainty.

Famously, in his inauguration of "philosophical moral cognition", Kant declares a good will to be the sole unconditional good, good without limitation (GMS, AA 4:394). Thus we are required to figure out what good and what will is. Distinguishing himself from the ancient notion of virtues, Kant states how even virtues such as moderation, courage and self-control could only have conditional worth. The goodness then is not attributed to a will via what it achieves in consequence of certain actions or dispositions. Kant from the very beginning, in his first major work in moral philosophy, *Groundwork*, introduces a peculiar notion of the good. In his second *Critique*, apparently having received enough criticism about this peculiarity, he explicates more about how and why he seems to have prioritized the moral principle over the concept of the good (KpV, AA 5:910). He definitely argues for a conception of the good which is inherited neither from social customs, nor from an external divine authority. In the second *Critique*, putting it in a specific form, Kant states that good, along with evil, are the only objects of practical reason (KpV, AA 5:58). Nevertheless, this does not disambiguate the emptiness of the concept 'good'.

Kant provides a definition of ‘good’ with reference to reason. He states that whatever action is in conformity with the pure law of practical reason is good, the will determined by that law is absolutely good and the supreme condition of all that is good (KpV, AA 5:62). He argues that such goodness is valid for every rational being, as it is determined by means of representations of reason objectively (GMS, AA 4:414). This provides us an understanding of moral goodness which is inseparable from reason. Accordingly, in this picture moral goodness appears as a command of reason, and is attributed to a certain form of willing / volition. Therefore, Kant’s starting point, i.e. “good will” narrows down to an enquiry into the form of willing itself.

Kant defines the faculty of desire as the capacity of a being to act in accordance with its own concepts and representations. That capacity either to do or refrain from certain actions can be determined by inclinations, impulses or by the conscious determination of reason. Animals, Kant states, have *arbitrium brutum*, as they act on their inclinations and instincts (MS, AA 6:212–4). Thus their power of choice (*Willkür*) differs from human volition which is affected by sensations, though is not determined by them. In this regard, humans (“*arbitrium sensitivum*, yet not *brutum* but *liberum*”, KrV, A 534/B 562) are free from being determined by external causes. Nevertheless, as Kant frequently highlights, this counts only as negative freedom, whereas he locates his moral theory and notion of autonomy on the idea of positive freedom.

In the *Groundwork* (AA 4:446), Kant states that freedom is the key to explain the autonomy of the will. He suggests that will is the causality of rationality and freedom is the property of that will which can determine itself independently of alien causes and/or natural necessities. So far the notion of freedom is negative. Further than that, this will also has the property to be determined by its own law. This refers to a truly free will in the Kantian context which is positive freedom. That is, autonomy as “the sole principle of all moral laws” not only refers to independence from all material conditions; but it means will’s being law-giving of itself as pure practical reason (KpV, AA 5:33). Here and in several other passages Kant constitutes almost an equation or at least a circularity between the notions of practical reason, moral law, autonomy and freedom in the positive sense (see also GMS, AA 4:450). All human agents, being rational and free, possess this capacity. The categorical imperative is just the formulation of this law, as the pure form of the will in which no contingencies are involved. We can provide justification for basic principles of justice and duties of virtue by the categorical imperative: first with the procedural reasoning of contradiction in conception and then contradiction in willing tests. Therefore Kant justifies moral objectivism with reference to practical resourcefulness of reason itself and establishes human autonomy as an inalienable capacity. This primitive base does not de-

mand any reference to values or teleology. Moreover, the value-laden baggage of Kantian morality does not seem to fit into this plain picture, therefore notions such as human dignity, holiness of the moral law or considering moral demands *as if* they are divine commands seem unnecessary. Even though Kant often uses such vocabulary, he does not provide their objective validity. These further aspects of a moral view of the world gain the status of a peculiar kind of subjective certainty. That subjectivity is not simply a psychological consolation nor a projection of human needs. Reflective judgment makes the backbone of such subjective commitments about which the agent has a universally communicable voice.

As is well-known, the notion of hope is the central element in Kant's philosophy of religion. He introduces hope in relation to the highest good. The highest good has two distinct components with totally distinct laws. Kant claims that only a supreme author who is omniscient, all-good and wise can make a teleological unity possible between laws of nature and morals. Consequently, the highest good can be hoped for only through the idea of the Divinity. In that sense according to Kant, morality becomes fully rational in religion. Kant argues that the highest good has an objective validity, as it arises from reason as a need. Nevertheless, the idea of God, the rational belief in God can be subjectively necessary but objectively permissible. Even though Kant is unable to provide a sound construction of the postulate of God in the second *Critique* and in that context fails to argue why God is required for the rational completeness of morality (KpV, AA 5:124), he introduces the indispensable notion of "voluntary, rational faith/belief as a subjective necessity" to philosophical theology (KrV, A 813–30/B 841–57; KpV, AA 5:9, 57, 125, 143; MS, AA 6:439, 443, 487). In addition, Kant's aesthetic judgment exposes an alternative and this-worldly or immanent hope. That hope is dependent on one's considering autonomy as a godlike paradigm that the divine will stand as an exemplar for the moral agent to align her willing with.

In our aesthetic experiences we have a disinterested pleasure just through a representation of a beautiful object. Without a direct interest, without the actual existence, holding or making use of an object, we can and do enjoy its beauty (KU, AA 5:206). This disinterested pleasure we have through the experience of the beautiful provides an analogy for the moral contentment that is a result of obeying the moral law for its own sake. I contend that this contentment should make a crucial aspect of any interpretation of "the highest good" as Kant asserts "a joyous heart" to be a sign of genuineness of virtuous disposition (RGV, AA 6:23). The moral contentment, or what Wicks describes as participation in divine pleasure, introduces a peculiar state of the soul. This blessedness or complete satisfaction, which is not a sensory feeling as Kant repeatedly states, builds

a bridge upon the “incalculable gulf” (KU, AA 5:176) between our feelings and rational determinations. The aesthetic ideal of human beauty, the teleological conception of nature as a purposive whole are sensible images of morality. As Guyer puts it, they allow us to project that the absolutely formal and inert moral command can have an approximate representation in nature, in the sensible world, in the form of the beautiful and the sublime (Guyer, 1990; Chignell, 2010, 198–208). In this regard, aesthetic experiences provide a peculiar and indirect kind of rational and affective completeness for morality. That singular, immanent and unmediated experience involves in itself a universal communicability. That first person conviction in judging the beautiful and the sublime, about which Kant asserts that we can and should demand others to agree, provides a strong base about who we are, where we are and what we are capable of achieving and enjoying. As long as one is attentive, one is capable of having such moments in which one’s overall experience of oneself, others and all there is are harmoniously integrated. Both in the experience of the beautiful and the sublime; we are informed about ourselves, not simply about the object of our experience (KU, AA 5:218, 229, 251). This relational and momentary nature of aesthetic experience enables a ground to construct a teleologically united moral view of the world which is not deductive, yet communicable. Along these lines, Kant endorses a contentedness, and even cheerfulness (MS, AA 6:485) for the agent who obeys the duty for duty’s sake, and hints at a robust singular *moral experience* by the extension in his vocabulary, occasionally mentioning notions that are not involved in the core principles of his *moral theory* (e.g. moral law becoming the strongest incentive for the *heart*: GMS, AA 4:411; KpV, AA 5:153).

In Kant’s moral theology, God is initially the supreme moral agent for us whose will is the moral law itself. What we are capable of accessing is our share of the divine in us; i.e. the capacity to will godlike. In this regard the moral law is holy (KpV, AA 5:32), and the moral human agent has incommensurable dignity by her capacity towards holiness. Accordingly, Kant states that to be virtuous (a robust actualization of autonomy) is literally to resemble a Deity (KpV, AA 5:82), yet we can never achieve this. This idea of holiness in us and autonomy as dignity provide a perspective in which we are not beings only shaped by the needs and demands of the sensible world but are members of an order of all things with a *telos* (KpV, AA 5:87). In her efforts to harmonize herself with this order through the guidance of the moral law, the moral agent’s freedom resembles beatitude, which is the contentment of a supreme being free of inclinations (KpV, AA 5:119). The conjunction of teleology and deontology becomes possible when the divinity is considered as the one supreme lawgiver (GMS, AA 4:439). Only through this teleological perspective can the moral agent consider herself to harmonize or align her limited willing with an absolute

and perfect counterpart (KpV, AA 5:130). In this picture, divine will becomes a paradigm, a perfect model for autonomy. Only through this perspective does the moral will become an intrinsic element of ontology. That is, once moral volition is considered also as an instantiation of a telos it substantially impresses the agent's moral experience.

Depicting a broad understanding of autonomy from a capacity to a paradigm, it is legitimate to apply varying degrees of justification and types of judging in different domains which need not end up with worries such as a deflation with respect to postulates of practical reason (Redding, 2012, 6–7). This is because, first of all according to Kant, humility and fallibilism are inherent properties of human judging. Secondly, judging itself is the core of Kant's philosophy. Correspondingly, judging is the actual moment of spontaneity where we both witness and construct ourselves. In particular, reflexive judgment, in which we also judge about ourselves along with our overall experience, does not simply regulate our knowledge claims but provides an untouchable freedom for each to judge her own existence. Then one's pondering about her existence could better be considered as a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than an inert projection of reason to the cosmos.

It is in this regard I consider autonomy initially as a natural and justifiable human capacity, but also as the divine in us, i.e. the ground of human dignity which is not objectively demonstrable. It is significant not to ignore Kant's repeated awe and wonder about how pure reason is practical of itself, how the will determines itself immediately and how the law can be an incentive on the heart. Standing by Kant's redline (avoiding dogmatism of rational metaphysics, foundationalism), I emphasize the spontaneity of reason, i.e. our judgmental capacity which makes the conjunction point for reason, will, freedom, agency, self, character and finally one's worldview to converge. In that moment of spontaneity one is able to consider the moral law also as a divine command or as the dignity of humanity, whereas all are bound with it even without this aspiration. Accordingly, this spontaneity constructs not only one's understanding of the scope of human agency but shapes one's treating of oneself, others and the cosmos. Though this is at best a hermeneutical approach, it is no less real for the agent compared with any metaphysical theory or dogma.

In this paper, I argue for a latitude in interpreting autonomy. This latitude starts from the irreducible and inalienable rational capacity to be moral, towards the idea of autonomy as paradigm. The initial conception does not demand any reference to values or teleology. We can provide justification of basic moral principles of justice and duties of virtue via applying to the categorical imperative. That provides us a cosmopolitan and non-relativist initial ground for moral theory. Nevertheless, I argue that those objectively valid first principles do not suffice

to embrace the overall moral experience. Beyond this, autonomy is an organic experience of real moral agents, which means an ongoing, non-static, irreducible and inexplicable judgmental process about one's actualization of oneself. This latitude provides the paradigm of a divine will for autonomy which invites teleological and value-laden baggage into moral experience.

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