

Freedom and its Capacity to Shape Morality

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How Kant's understanding of freedom leads to being obliged to act morally

In our everyday life we face a multitude of moral questions. Often these are not posed explicitly but, still, there are many delicate choices to be made: for example, whether or not we ought to be truthful to a friend knowing this will make her unhappy or whether we ought to scan all shopping goods at the self-service counter in the supermarket although we know that nobody would notice our leaving one out. Most of us have a clear opinion on what we think is right and what we think is wrong, but what is the ground for that? Questions as those posed in the examples above call for principles which guide us to right actions. What kind of principle for morality could there be? And if there is one, do we have the freedom to choose to act in accordance to it or is there an obligation which confines freedom in this sense? How can we be obliged to act morally? How does this relate to our freedom?

In his influential and widely read book '*The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*', Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) attempts to answer these questions. He tries to establish the supreme principle of morality¹. For Kant morality is the normative guideline of conduct that all rational agents should follow.

Three concepts are of prime importance for his argument: the *will*, *autonomy* and *freedom*. Crudely stated, the *will* is what causes our action, thus makes us act; *autonomy* means being governed by self-imposed laws and *freedom* has various meanings as we shall see when we move on. The two concepts, autonomy and freedom, are *a priori* propositions, which mean they cannot be justified by appealing to experience. For justification, they require a so-called 'synthetic'² argument, that is, an argument linking the two distinct concepts by using a third term.

A synthetic argument is opposed to an analytic argument which merely works through analysing a concept by what the term entails, for example from the word "ice" it can be derived that "ice is solid" by analysing the concept of "ice". An example for a synthetic argument is the sentence "ice is floating", which cannot be derived from the word "ice" but backed up by referring to experience.³ In Kant's case the concepts – autonomy and freedom – cannot be connected through experience since they are *a priori*, as mentioned above, but the type of argument required is also a synthetic one since the concepts are distinct.

In order to pursue the intended justification of (i) the autonomy of the will and (ii) the moral demand all imperfectly rational beings experience, Kant introduces the concept of *freedom*. From the concept of freedom he derives morality. Moreover, freedom leads him to the required third term. The moral demand takes the form of the *categorical imperative (CI)*, that is, Kant's widely known principle of morality.

"Act only on that maxim through which you could at the same time will that it should become a universal law".

What exactly he means by these concepts and how he relates them we shall see shortly. Before we begin to examine his argument it is worth noting that Kant's conception of freedom is different from what is called 'neutral freedom'⁴, that is, the freedom of choice whether to act morally or not. Kant's conception, as we shall see, does not leave us with this choice.

1 In this article I will refer to the page numbers of H. J. Paton's *The Moral Law*; I will refer to Kant's text by writing 'Kant' and to Paton's commentary by writing 'Paton': Kant p. 61

2 Kant p.62

3 Ross

4 Timmermann p. 164

The negative conception of freedom

In the third chapter of his book Kant begins with the claim that all rational beings have a will, that is, a ‘kind of causality’⁵ since it causes actions⁶. If I stand in front of a tree and reach out for an apple then this interaction, given that it was rational, was initially caused by my will. A will, according to Kant, is free in that it is able to work independently from sensuous influences, such as inclinations or desires, and merely springs from reason. The determination by ‘alien’ causes in general is labelled *natural necessity*⁷. Everything in the natural or sensible world is subject to the natural laws, that is, the laws of cause and effect. For example, if one moving billiard ball – the cause – hits another it induces the movement of the second – the effect. Everything that we can *experience* is determined by natural necessity. This is the first conception of freedom: freedom is the non-determination of the will by sensuous or ‘alien’ causes. It is a negative conception since it states only that the will is not externally determined. From this conception it follows that freedom is opposed to natural necessity.

The second and positive conception of freedom

From this point Kant infers that, even though the will is free from natural laws, it must still be subject to laws since the will is a ‘kind of causality’ and causality always requires laws. Since if X causes Y, there must be a connection governed by laws between X and Y⁸. Even if X is my will which causes me to pursue action Y, there must be a law governing this relationship. The laws determining the will must, however, be different from the natural laws because otherwise the will - being free from natural necessity - would be self-contradictory. The need for these laws leads Kant to the second conception of freedom which is positive. If the will were determined by an ‘alien’ cause, it would be a will under *heteronomy*, which is Kant’s technical term for the state of being caused by something other than itself. Since the will is not determined by any ‘alien’ cause but still has to be under laws, it has to be a will under *autonomy*, that is, governed by self-imposed laws. Freedom therefore implies autonomy.

The next step in Kant’s argument is contentious and not well-supported. According to Kant, autonomy implies acting only on those principles that can at the same time be willed to become a universal law, which is one formulation of the CI.

It is now clear that the will should be under a set of laws, but why should these laws take the shape of the CI? Kant reasons that saying a will is under self-imposed rules means the same as saying that a ‘will [...] is in all actions a law to itself’⁹, which he classifies as a modified formulation of the CI. Thus, by presupposing and simply analysing this conception of freedom he derives morality in the form of its supreme principle. Morality is in this sense inherent in the concept of freedom. Nevertheless, morality is still a synthetic proposition that is in need of a third term, which can be found by using the concept of freedom.

Freedom as property of all rational beings

If morality is to apply to every rational being, freedom must be compellingly ascribed to all rational beings. This is impossible by sensuous experience because freedom is an *a priori* concept, which means it is what Kant calls an *Idea*¹⁰: a concept that cannot be proven by empirical means because it

5 Kant p. 127

6 Kant p. 127

7 Kant p. 125

8 SEP – Kant’s moral philosophy

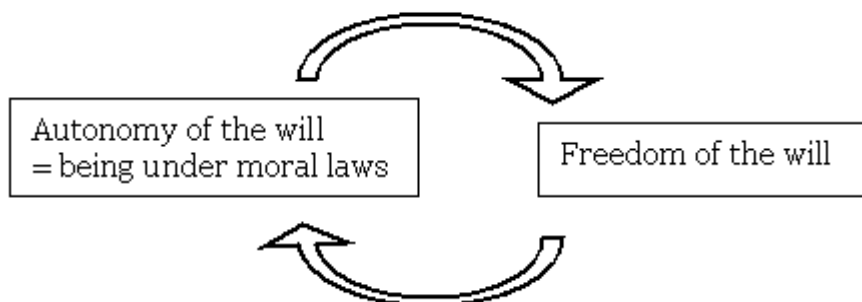
9 Kant p. 128

10 Paton p. 41

does not occur in the natural world. However, freedom can be conceived as the ‘property’ of every rational agent. In fact, no rational agent could be conceived as being capable of his own thoughts and decisions if he was not free from external determination. Thus, in practical terms, every rational agent with a rational will can only act on the ‘Idea of freedom’¹¹, that is, assuming non-determination and the will as a ‘first cause’.

The vicious circle

This leads to a problem: having argued that the freedom of the will implies autonomy - which means self-regulation - and thus being under moral laws, Kant argues in turn that freedom has to be presupposed because otherwise autonomy would not be possible. This appears to be a vicious circle since one concept cannot be used to justify the other if they are reciprocals.



The two standpoints

This is solved by Kant though appealing to his metaphysics. All things can be viewed from two standpoints. By merely ‘observing’ something – using one’s senses -, a thing is perceived as a mere *appearance*¹². Kant calls this the *sensible world* where the laws of nature apply. In this world one billiard ball hits the other which causes the second to move. By contrast, there is a world that is ‘something more’¹³ beyond one’s senses. This world can only be conceived by reason and here the laws of morality apply. In this world a thing is not a mere *appearance* but a *thing in itself*, that is, it contains a part that cannot be experienced by our senses. This world Kant calls the *intelligible world*.

A rational being that is imperfect in the sense that it is influenced by both reason and sensuous inclinations, necessarily has to conceive itself as a member of both worlds. Consequently, it is subject to two different kinds of laws. As far as one is under sensuous influence one conceives oneself as part of the sensible world, therefore being subject to the laws of nature. However, as far as one is rational one conceives oneself as part of the intelligible world - being free from ‘alien’ determination - and is thus bound to conceive one’s causality under the ‘Idea of freedom’¹⁴, which is directly linked to autonomy, which in turn means being under moral laws.

In conclusion, rationality entails the ability to distinguish between the two standpoints. Acknowledgement of membership of the intelligible world shapes one’s conception of one’s causality as being free. Consequently, provided that one agrees with his metaphysics, Kant avoids being trapped in the vicious circle mentioned above.

11 Kant p. 130

12 Kant p. 133

13 Kant p. 146

14 Kant p. 135

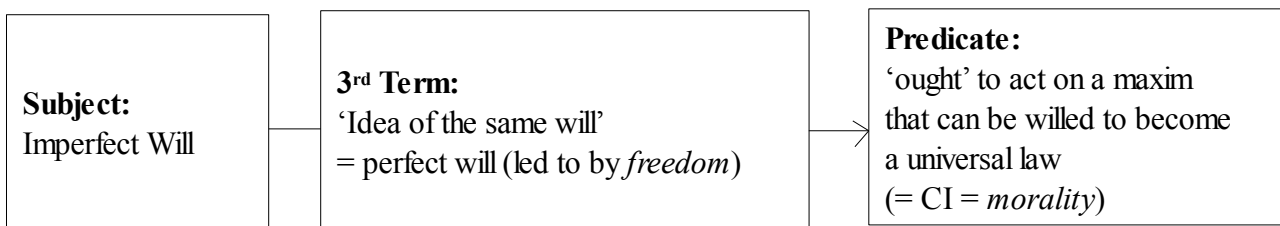
Why is the categorical imperative binding? - The third conception of freedom

The binding character of morality, that is, the CI, is possible because ‘the intelligible world contains the ground of the sensible world and also of its laws’¹⁵. It should be noted that Kant is regrettably vague in his explanation as to why this assumption is true. However, he seems to reason that the will of a rational being ‘ought’¹⁶ to conform to the principle of autonomy, although this being is, from a different standpoint, also part of the sensible world. This shows the third conception of freedom: the capacity to subordinate all sensuous influences to reason. This capacity implies a necessity of the free will to conform to moral laws.

How does this necessity come about? The necessity or ‘ought’ statement mentioned above is an a priori proposition which can only be conceived but not be proven empirically. For a logical connection between a subject and a predicate in a synthetic argument a third term is required that establishes the link. Thus, in order to link the imperfect will of a rational being to the moral obligation to act in accordance with the CI a third term is needed of which they are both part.

A rational being that is free in the third sense conceives of itself as part of the intelligible world and thus has a conception of its own will as a solely intelligible will. What is meant by a solely intelligible will? To explore this in more detail, let us think of a person that is perfectly rational and is not influenced by any desires or inclinations. This person would naturally act in accordance with the laws of morality and the will of that person would be perfect. But humans are under the influence of the sensuous world and thus they are only imperfectly rational and possess only an imperfect will. However, they are able to conceive of their will as being perfect since they are part of the intelligible world. Kant dubs the conception of a perfect will the ‘Idea of the will’¹⁷. This solely intelligible will – being beyond any sensuous influences – serves as the third term which Kant was seeking. It is a supreme condition of the will which we were directed to by the third conception of freedom.

Since, firstly, a rational being that is free in the third sense is capable of subordinating all sensuous influences to reason and, secondly, is able to conceive of its own will as being perfect or solely intelligible, the binding character of the the moral law becomes evident: subjectively, an imperfectly rational being perceives the law of morality thus as a categorical imperative, that is, as an ‘ought’ statement without exceptions, and the actions that conform to these laws as duties.



Conclusion

Having examined the question of how Kant relates freedom to morality, we have seen that, according to Kant, freedom – as non-determination by external sources – is a necessary presupposition of all rational beings. This leads to the positive conception of freedom as reciprocal of the principle of autonomy. As such, a will under freedom is one and the same as a will under the CI since a self-governed will is subject to its own laws and these laws can be identified as the CI. However, I find this argumentative connection between autonomy and CI questionable. Moreover,

15 Kant p. 136

16 Kant p. 137

17 Paton p. 43

freedom – as a conception of the capacity to subordinate inclinations to reason – is the reason as to why moral laws are binding. His metaphysics - the two standpoints – play a pivotal role for this moral authority of the CI: every rational being that is – necessarily so because it is rational - capable of conceiving itself as member of both the intelligible and the sensible world, will conceive the moral law as what a ‘pure will’ would aspire and perceives it as an imperative that it ‘ought’ to act upon. However, I object to Kant’s metaphysics since such a rigid distinction between reason and emotions it hardly existent in any human being and therefore implausible. This objection thus questions his argument since it is then trapped in the vicious circle. Despite this objection, Kant uses the *Idea* of freedom to justify both (i) the existence and (ii) the authority to act in accordance with morality. Being free in this sense implies the obligation to act morally.

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