



The Practical Manifestation of Kant's Concept of Autonomy in Moral Behavior

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Abstract. Kant's concept of autonomy emphasizes that morality stems from the self-legislation of rational beings. In the form of "categorical imperative", it requires that the maxims of actions have the possibility of universal legislation, and regards human beings as ends in themselves rather than means. This concept not only completes the transformation of ethics from external norms to internal legislation, but also establishes the core status of moral subjectivity. Research shows that autonomy is specifically manifested in the universalization test of maxims, respect for ends, and the self-legislation of the will in individual moral judgment. However, in real-world practice, it faces challenges such as the impact of sensibility and over-moralization. By analyzing the path of cultivating autonomy with the assistance of heteronomy, this paper reveals the dialectical relationship between autonomy and heteronomy, providing a theoretical reference for the moral construction of modern society. As a moral force that is continuously generated and realized in practice, Kant's concept of autonomy has important enlightenment significance for solving contemporary moral dilemmas.

Keywords: Kant, Autonomy, Heteronomy, Moral Behavior, Over-moralizations

1 Introduction

In the context of the diverse values in modern society, the internal motivation and normative basis of moral behavior have increasingly become the focus of theoretical discussions. As the core of his moral philosophy, Kant's concept of autonomy posits that morality does not originate from external authorities or empirical consequences, but is the result of rational beings' self-legislation. This idea provides a profound theoretical perspective for understanding the practical manifestations of moral behavior [1]. This paper aims to systematically explore the practical mechanisms and real-world significance of Kant's concept of autonomy in specific moral behaviors.

The concept of autonomy not only accomplished the "Copernican revolution" in ethics from external norms to internal legislation but also elevated moral subjectivity to a core position, making moral behavior an expression of individual freedom and rational consciousness.

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T. Chamaratana et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2026 12th International Conference on Digital Humanities and Frontiers in Social Sciences (DHFS 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1031,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-611-6_106

At present, academic research on Kantian ethics mostly focuses on theoretical analysis, such as the interpretation of transcendental principles like free will and the “categorical imperative”. However, there is still a lack of exploration of its dynamic manifestations in specific moral practices and the real-world tensions it faces. Especially when the principle of autonomy is confronted with the impact of the sensible world and is alienated into over-moralized self-exploitation, how to achieve the cultivation of autonomy with the assistance of heteronomy still needs further in-depth analysis in light of the characteristics of modern society [2]. This paper attempts to fill this research gap. By analyzing the operating mechanism of autonomy in individual moral judgment and its adjustment path in the face of real-world challenges, it reveals the dialectical development process of the concept of autonomy in practice. This paper endeavors to demonstrate that Kant’s concept of autonomy is not only a theoretical construction but also a moral force that is continuously generated, reflected upon, and realized in the practical process.

2 Theoretical Explanation of Kant’s Concept of Autonomy

2.1 The Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Autonomy

The philosophical foundation of Kant’s concept of autonomy is deeply rooted in his profound analysis of the essence of rational beings. Kant believed that as rational beings, the fundamental characteristic of human will lies in freedom. This freedom is not lawless arbitrariness, but the ability of reason to self-legislate. A free will is a prerequisite for the possibility of morality. It enables moral agents to act independently of the domination of sensible impulses, guided solely by the dictates of reason itself. In Kant’s view, the validity of moral laws does not depend on any external authority or empirical consequences, but stems from the ability of rational beings to legislate for themselves, that is, the autonomy of the will [3]. This self-legislation means that the moral subject is both the legislator and the law-abider, and the binding force of moral commands comes from the universal requirements of reason for itself.

Kant demonstrated the formal structure of autonomy through the core concept of the “categorical imperative”. Its classic formulation, “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”, reveals the form of universal legislation that moral maxims must possess. This universality does not come from the induction of external experience, but from the formal determination of reason itself, which ensures the necessity and objectivity of moral laws.

Kant emphasized that autonomy is the highest principle of morality, which liberates morality from the constraints of various heteronomous principles. Neither the desire for happiness nor divine commands can provide a true foundation for morality [4]. Only when the will is determined by the universal law formulated by itself does morality truly come into being. This concept of autonomy exalts the status of human rational subjects. In the field of ethics, it has accomplished a “Copernican revolution”, shifting the foundation of morality from external authority to the self-legislation of rational beings, thus establishing human dignity and moral autonomy.

2.2 The Distinction Between Autonomy and Heteronomy

Kant's distinction between autonomy and heteronomy constitutes a crucial part of his critique of all previous moral theories. In Kant's theoretical framework, heteronomy refers to the situation where the determining ground of the will lies in principles outside of reason, that is, the will is determined by external objects or sensible impulses. Heteronomous moral systems place the origin of moral laws on empirical or external conditions such as desires, interests, social authority, or even divine will. This makes moral principles lose their universal necessity and degenerate into accidental and subjective maxims.

Autonomy emphasizes the self-determination of the will. The principle of autonomy requires that the will be completely determined by the formal laws of reason itself, that is, the will legislates for itself and consciously abides by this law. The absolute authority of moral imperatives precisely stems from this internal self-legislation process. Kant further clarifies the ethical implications of autonomy through the idea of the "Kingdom of Ends". In the Kingdom of Ends, every rational being should not be regarded as a mere means, but as an end-in-itself. Each member is both a legislator of the universal law and subject to the law that he himself participates in formulating. This reciprocal legislative relationship among subjects reflects the expansion of the principle of autonomy in the social dimension, that is, the mutual recognition and respect among rational beings [5].

The fundamental opposition between autonomy and heteronomy reveals that the true source of moral value lies in the rational autonomy of the subject, rather than any external or empirical considerations. Through this strict distinction, Kant not only clarifies the fundamental problem of morality but also provides a solid theoretical framework for understanding human freedom and responsibility. He emphasizes that true moral behavior must stem from the conscious compliance with rational laws, rather than the calculation of external rewards and punishments or the submission to sensible impulses.

3 The Practice of Autonomy in Individual Moral Judgment

3.1 Elevating Maxims to Universal Laws

The core of individual moral judgment lies in elevating subjective maxims of action to universal laws through rational examination. Kant emphasized that moral value depends on whether the maxim of an action can be conceived without contradiction as a natural law that is valid for all rational beings. This process requires an individual to assume that everyone follows their maxim and to test whether this universalization would lead to a logical contradiction or a practical self-annulment [6]. For example, if the maxim of false promising is universalized, it will destroy the trust system, making the very act of promising meaningless. This kind of examination ensures the objectivity and necessity of moral laws, excluding empirical and accidental interferences.

The universalization test is not only a logical procedure but also a practice of self-legislation by rational beings. The categorical imperative requires that a maxim must simultaneously become a principle of universal legislation, and its authority stems from

the rational being's awareness of its own legislative ability. When an individual voluntarily incorporates a subjective maxim into a universal framework, moral behavior becomes an expression of inner freedom rather than the result of external coercion.

This process often faces interference from sensible inclinations. For instance, the temptation of interests may prompt an individual to adopt a maxim that does not conform to universality. At this time, reason needs to restrain the impulse. By considering the long-term consequences of the action (such as the damage to interpersonal trust if deception is universalized), reason prompts the individual to choose an action path that conforms to the moral law.

3.2 Regarding People as Ends in Themselves

Kantian ethics requires individuals to always regard rational beings (including themselves and others) as ends in themselves, rather than as means, in their actions. This principle stems from the inherent dignity of rational beings, whose value does not depend on any external conditions. In moral practice, it is manifested as universal respect for personality, that is, one should not undermine the autonomy and basic rights of others while pursuing one's own goals. For example, honest transactions in business dealings not only concern the maintenance of interests but also show respect for trading partners as rational subjects. In contrast, fraudulent behavior objectifies others and violates the fundamental requirements of morality [7].

The principle of "humanity as an end" complements the universalization law: the former injects substantial value content into morality, while the latter ensures formal consistency. Kant expounded through the idea of the "Kingdom of Ends" that each member is both a legislator and a law-abider, and they recognize each other as ends in themselves through common laws. This ideal model emphasizes that the universal validity of moral imperatives depends on the unconditional recognition of the value of every rational being.

In practice, this principle requires individuals to overcome self-centered tendencies. Especially in situations such as resource allocation, through rational reflection, they should realize the moral equality between themselves and others, thus practicing the principle of fairness. This kind of inclusion and respect for the ends of others marks the maturity of moral judgment.

3.3 The Realization of the Self-Legislation of the Will

The self-legislation of the will is the complete form of moral subjectivity, which means that the will, through its rational ability, sets moral laws for itself and acts out of respect for these laws. Kant emphasized that moral actions must be done out of duty, that is, purely in compliance with the moral law, rather than being driven by sensible motives. This process depends on the conscious application of practical reason. Individuals need to transform external requirements into internal rational commands [8]. In a moral dilemma, by weighing the applicability of principles, one makes a decision that not only conforms to the universal law but also reflects personal moral beliefs. This process itself is an act of legislation, demonstrating the autonomy of reason.

At the empirical level, the realization of self-legislation is often challenged by sensible desires. As finite rational beings, humans need to strengthen the dominance of reason through continuous cultivation (such as moral reflection and habit-building). For instance, by self-examining daily to check the gap between actions and laws and actively adjusting maxims, one can gradually approach the state of autonomy. The highest realm of self-legislation is the realization of moral freedom: when the will is completely determined by the laws set by itself, the individual no longer feels constrained but expresses inner freedom as a rational being. This freedom enables the individual to maintain a moral orientation in the complexity of reality and ultimately achieve the perfection and sublimation of personality.

4 Real-World Challenges Faced by Autonomy and its Adjustment

4.1 The Impact of the Sensible World on the Rational World

The impact of the sensible world on the rational world constitutes the primary challenge to the practice of autonomy. As finite rational beings, humans' wills are constantly disturbed by sensible inclinations such as instinctive needs, emotional fluctuations, and external temptations. Kantian ethics emphasizes the purity and universality of moral laws, requiring actions to be completely determined by rational self-legislation. However, as the direct entity of existence, sensible experiences derive their power from the spontaneity and immediacy of life instincts. This kind of sensible impact is specifically manifested as the desire for immediate gratification, the pursuit of comfort and ease, and the avoidance of pain and difficulty. These form an internal tension with the requirements of reason, making it difficult for moral laws to be fully realized in the empirical world.

The deep-seated reason for the sensible impact lies in the limitations of human cognition and behavior. Reason, as the observation and reflection of sensibility, requires conscious efforts to restrain sensible impulses. In moral judgment, sensible factors often intervene in the form of emotions, preferences, or interests, shaking the authority of rational legislation. Rational reflection aims to clarify the priority of moral laws, enabling individuals to realize the transience of sensible satisfaction and the eternity of moral values [9].

The adjustment of the sensible impact ultimately aims at the dialectical unity of reason and sensibility. Kantian ethics does not completely exclude sensibility but requires sensibility to submit to the legislation of reason. In an ideal state, reason and sensibility should form a synergistic relationship, where reason provides the moral direction and sensibility endows actions with emotional motivation. The feeling of respect for the moral law, as a special moral emotion, can embody the universality of reason and also integrate the vividness of sensibility. This unity transforms autonomy from cold rational rules into practical wisdom integrated into life experiences, enabling individuals to maintain moral firmness in the complexity of reality while still retaining the warmth of human nature.

4.2 The Risk of Over-moralization and Self-exploitation

Over-moralization is an extreme manifestation of the alienation of the concept of autonomy in practice. Its essence lies in absolutizing moral laws and ignoring the finiteness and complexity of human nature. This tendency requires individuals to practice moral obligations in a perfectionist manner, turning morality into an external coercive norm, and causing autonomy to transform into a tool for self-repression. Kant had already warned that over-moralization is essentially another form of self-exploitation, and true morality should start from the recognition and respect of one's own real needs. When moral posturing replaces internal legislation, individuals will fall into endless self-condemnation and even regard normal sensible needs as moral flaws [10].

The direct consequence of over-moralization is self-exploitation. Individuals regard themselves as objects that must be infinitely optimized, and through self-reproach and excessive efforts, they try to meet illusory moral standards. This self-exploitation may seem highly self-disciplined on the surface, but in fact, it is self-consumption in the name of morality. What lies behind it is the negation of one's own value. The meritocratic and efficiency-oriented concepts in modern society further strengthen this trend, tying moral value to external achievements and making individuals caught in endless competitive comparisons. The cruelty of the work ethic is that it not only makes temporary and replaceable workers victims but also blames poverty on the moral decline of individuals, turning morality into a tool for utilitarian calculation.

The key to overcoming over-moralization lies in reconstructing a healthy view of morality. Individuals should acknowledge their own finiteness and accept the imperfections in moral practice. Moral evaluation should shift from the consequences of actions to the purity of motives. As long as the will is out of respect for the law, even if the result is not ideal, it still has moral value. Autonomy should serve the growth of life rather than self-negation. By setting reasonable moral boundaries and distinguishing between duties and preferences, individuals can maintain self-integrity and well-being while fulfilling their moral responsibilities. This adjustment transforms autonomy from a repressive norm into a force that promotes the blooming of life.

4.3 The Path to Cultivating Autonomy with the Assistance of Heteronomy

As an external norm and guidance, heteronomy plays an indispensable auxiliary role in the process of cultivating autonomy. Although Kant emphasized that the essence of morality lies in autonomy, he did not completely deny the transitional value of heteronomy in moral education. Heteronomy, through external forces such as laws, customs, and role models, provides individuals with clear behavioral frameworks and standards, enabling them to act in accordance with the norms at a stage when their reason has not yet fully developed. For example, society prohibits harmful behaviors through legal penalties, making individuals habitually abide by the principle of non-harm under external constraints, laying the foundation for internalizing this principle into autonomy in the future. The significance of heteronomy lies in providing initial motivation and direction for autonomy, preventing individuals from falling into blindness and confusion in moral exploration.

The transformation from heteronomy to autonomy needs to be achieved through an internalization mechanism. Internalization refers to the process in which an individual transforms the requirements of heteronomy into inner recognition and conscious pursuit. This process depends on rational reflection and emotional experience rather than external coercion. In moral education, by explaining the reasons behind the rules instead of simply punishing, individuals are prompted to understand the meaning of the rules and thus voluntarily accept them. The successful sign of internalization is that individuals no longer abide by the norms out of fear of punishment, but take the initiative to comply because they recognize the rationality of the norms. This transformation reflects the sublimation of rational beings from passive acceptance to active legislation.

The ultimate goal of heteronomy is to achieve self-transcendence, transforming the requirements of heteronomy into an individual's internal imperatives. When an individual has fully internalized heteronomy and formed a stable autonomous ability, their behavior no longer depends on external supervision, but is based on rational consciousness and free choice. This state marks the highest realm of moral maturity, that is, when an individual obeys the moral law, they feel not bound, but the dignity and freedom as a rational being. The dialectical relationship between heteronomy and autonomy shows that good moral construction should follow a progressive path from heteronomy to autonomy, ultimately cultivating a moral personality that both respects norms and is full of subjectivity.

5 Conclusions

The manifestations of Kant's concept of autonomy in moral practice reveal the profound value of rational legislation and the complexity of reality. Autonomy requires individuals not only to achieve moral judgment through universalization tests and respect for ends but also to maintain the dominance of reason in the face of challenges such as the impact of sensibility and over-moralization. As an auxiliary means, heteronomy promotes the cultivation of autonomy through the internalization mechanism, ultimately making moral behavior a unity of freedom and necessity. Research shows that healthy moral practice needs to uphold the core position of autonomy while avoiding its alienation into a tool for self-repression. Kantian ethics, by emphasizing the self-legislation of the will and moral subjectivity, provides modern people with important resources to deal with the dilemma of value pluralism. Future research could further explore the applicability of the concept of autonomy in different cultural contexts and its practical forms in specific ethical fields, thus deepening the understanding of the contemporary significance of moral autonomy.

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