



## Autonomy and morality: A Self-Determination Theory discussion of ethics



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### ABSTRACT

Kantian ethics is based on a metaphysical conception of autonomy that may seem difficult to reconcile with the empirically-based science of psychology. I argue that, although not formally developed, a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective of ethics can broaden the field of Kantian-based moral psychology and specify what it means, motivationally, to have autonomy in the application of a moral norm. More specifically, I argue that this is possible when a moral norm is fully endorsed by the self through a process of internalization that is energized by intrinsic motivation and is facilitated by the fulfillment of the basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. The conditions of the fulfillment of these needs may even implicitly reveal which norms will be integrated and treated as moral norms. I conclude that SDT offers a motivational approach that is useful in understanding the development of moral norms.

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Moral psychology is an interdisciplinary field that draws from psychology and philosophy equally and cannot really be approached without a basic understanding of both. This becomes apparent when one gets acquainted with the best known theory of moral psychology, that of Kohlberg (1971, 1973). Kohlberg defined the highest form of moral development in terms of the theory of Immanuel Kant (1785/2011) and conceptualized it as our ability to author the moral rules we live by. Kant (1785/2011) saw 'autonomy of the will' as the foundation for authoring our own rules and famously argued that ethical principles should not be derived from human inclination: What we *ought to* do should not stem from what we want to do. Our needs, our emotions, our intuitions should be sacrificed in favor of objective criteria such as the categorical imperative, that is, acting consistently with a rule that we would treat as a universal law. This ability entails a high level of freedom from environmental contingencies as well as self-serving predispositions. Under this perspective, neither rewards nor conventional rules can be the basis of morality. It is through our own reasoning that we transcend our own bodies, author rules as universal laws and achieve the highest level of morality.

Kant's theory leaves little room for psychology, since his view is based on a metaphysical conception of will and duty that have no empirical antecedents (Campbell & Christopher, 1996). Any type of empirical cause would undermine the autonomy of the will and

would taint the moral character of an act. It is not easy to take his theory and apply it as a guide for approaching moral behavior in the real, empirical world. This may be one of the most important reasons for why Kohlberg's approach seems rationalistic: it depends too much on the abstract interpretative scheme of Kantian reasoning and on a hierarchically ordered sequence of moral cognitive structures that are more logically than psychologically related to each other. This fact may also account for why his perspective is no longer dominant. More recent approaches incorporate factors besides rational reasoning in their analyses, such as emotions (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2001), skills (Churchland, 1998), virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and intuitions (Haidt, 2001). Scientists are exploring new ground and including affective or personality processes, but also societal and cultural influences, in order to explain moral judgment. Of course, some approaches rely mainly on social processes (e.g., Ellemers & Bos, 2012) whereas others may rely on biological factors, such as brain structure (Moll, Zahn, de Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman, 2005).

Even though Kant's theory of freedom has received considerable criticism –even within philosophy–, it does make a strong, simple point that is easily, intuitively understood: If my reasons for performing a seemingly moral act illustrate contingencies beyond the act itself, that act should not be considered moral. For moral psychology the next question to ask is how we can discuss this type of autonomous behavior without stripping individuals of their brains, their emotions, their skills, their goals. In other words, without

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ignoring their organisms.

A potential answer may lie with a motivational theory called Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which examines the reasons why people perform any type of activity and places great importance on autonomy. Autonomy is defined as regulation by the self (Ryan & Deci, 2006) and is distinguished from heteronomy, that is, regulation by forces outside the self. One of the most important aspects that SDT can bring into the discussion of moral psychology is that it also distinguishes autonomy from independence (Ryan, 1993), meaning that it defines autonomous acts not in terms of the pure absence of contingencies but in terms of a person's endorsement of the act itself. The question I will ponder on is whether true endorsement of a moral act, even in the presence of contingencies, succeeds in the maintenance of the character of the Kantian moral act. In this endeavor, I will focus on autonomy and the concept of internalization, discuss SDT's relation to other theories, and argue that the *integration* of ethical rules is the basis of true, autonomous morality.

### 1. A motivational account of ethics

A motivational approach would focus on why an individual is energized or activated toward a particular end or, in the case of morality, why a person is energized toward ethically appropriate behavior. Motivation is closely related to the notion of energy, discussed in the classic theories of Freud (1962) and Hull (1943) and relating to the notions of instincts and drives. Especially after the advent of behaviorism, these theories declined in significance because of their inability to account for normal development (within Freudian theory) and to account for exploratory and interest-based behaviors (within Hullian theory). In response to the decline of motivation as a topic for research, White (1959) shifted the focus from the concepts of instincts and drives to independent ego energy and intrinsic motivation. He argued that exploration, playful behavior, and the production of effective changes in the environment exhibit direction, selectivity and persistence in a way that the actions seem motivating in their own right. Moreover, these aspects of behavior can only be conceived in relation to the stimulus field that an individual would aspire to “conquer” and, therefore, concentration on cognition and emotion alone, as is often the case, cannot fully account for human behavior. Similarly, it can be argued that morality should not be sought in isolated aspects of human behavior—such as rational reasoning or emotions— but should take into consideration a broader conception of behavior that takes into account these inherent motivational tendencies.

Self-Determination Theory relies on a quite similar premise to White's (1959) propositions: individuals exhibit intrinsic motivation as the manifestation of the built-in energy of the organism to seek and conquer optimal challenges (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An SDT view of ethics will therefore attempt a more holistic psychological account of ethical behavior since it does not emphasize isolated elements of the person or the environment but the interplay between the two. On the one hand there is the environment, aspects of which often seek to control behavior, and on the other hand there is the organism, seeking to expand and conquer aspects of the environment. Self-Determination Theory accepts that the environment can control behavior but also that individual decisions can be causal elements in behavior. In this interaction, it is the will that energizes support for individual decisions and allows a person to counteract forces from the environment (Deci, 1980). In fact, the notions of will and autonomy are central elements in Self-Determination Theory, just as they are in Kant's account of morality. With regard to morality, an SDT account would especially focus on exploring when the will energizes support for ethical decisions.

### 2. The act, the self, contingencies and autonomy

In the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant (1785/2011) argued that the good will is not defined as good by what it accomplishes; it is good in itself. It is not defined, for example, by the fact that it may guide actions that contribute to the happiness of others. It is not defined by any sort of inclinations or natural laws either. In fact, the “good” will is not defined by anything other than reason. The “good” will is purely autonomous, free from contingencies and inclinations, and will abide by rules out of duty alone. Duty is a central element of Kantian ethics and refers to the objective necessity of an action from obligation. Of course, scientists struggle with such a metaphysical account of duty and will.

For an empirical science, such as psychology, it is indeed difficult to accept that the so-called *noumenal* will, having no connection to the empirical world, can actually cause behavior (Campbell & Christopher, 1996). Kant's concept of transcendental freedom goes beyond the organism and any contingencies of the empirical world into the realm of reason where the person can truly be free. This is the field where moral norms are produced according to Kant, who evidently wants to disengage the production of moral laws from any sort of environmental influence. Any type of duty should arise autonomously, free from contingencies. From a psychological perspective, I will try to account for how an organism can act out of duty while minimizing any sort of contingencies. In this sense, I offer a Kantian-based psychological account of ethics without accepting its metaphysical underpinnings.

Self-Determination Theory argues that an autonomous act is defined as regulation by the self, the *self* being a central process that regulates behavior and experience. It is an organismic theory that accepts that humans have a natural propensity to grow and assimilate aspects of their environment. Behavior is essentially the product of the interaction between the organism and the environment. A self-determined, autonomous act is an act that is regulated by the phenomenal *ego-center* (Pfander, 1908/1967), whereas a heteronomous act is mainly caused by external influences such as environmental controls or even inner impulses that are experienced as controlling urges that are not endorsed by the phenomenal ego-center or self. It is not the absence of controls that makes an action autonomous but full endorsement of an act by the self, even it is in accord with an external demand (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Within SDT, there is a concept that reflects the perceived autonomy that the self experiences in the performance of an act: The Perceived Locus of Causality (PLOC- Ryan & Connell, 1989; cf. Heider, 1958). Acts with an internal PLOC are acts in which a person feels as the *origin* of the behavior whereas acts with an external PLOC are acts in which the person feels as a *pawn* (cf. De Charms, 1968). Autonomous acts are therefore those acts during which the person feels as the “owner” of the behavior, even if they are in line with external demands. Extending this reasoning to the field of moral psychology, autonomous *moral* acts would be moral acts in which the individual perceives oneself as the origin of behavior, irrespective of the existence of environmental controls and inner impulses.

The prototype of an autonomous act is an *intrinsically* motivated activity where a person performs the activity for the sake of the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this case, there is no “ought” prevalent in the situation, no external constraints, but only wants and inclinations—such as curiosity, exploratory or playful tendencies—that are satisfied during the act. Intrinsic motivation is the primary energizing force within the organism that strives for the engagement in one's interests and the exercise of one's capacities (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It exists within the individual—and not necessarily only in humans—although it is understandable that the focus can also be on inherently interesting properties of an activity

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