

Thinking for Oneself and Obeying the Commands of Duty: Resolving an Apparent Tension in Kantian Ethics

Abstract

Kant's moral philosophy appears to generate a tension between two central commitments: the demand that individuals "think for themselves" and act according to their own principles, and the requirement that they act in accordance with moral duties. This paper examines whether this tension constitutes a genuine contradiction. First, it identifies the apparent conflict between intellectual autonomy and obedience to duty. Second, it develops an argument that reconciles these commitments by interpreting duty as an expression of rational self-legislation. Third, it evaluates whether this reconciliation is vulnerable to refutation. Finally, it assesses whether the contradiction is real or merely apparent. The paper concludes that the tension arises from a misunderstanding of autonomy as independence from law rather than as self-legislation, and therefore does not undermine Kantian ethics.

1. Introduction: Statement of the Problem

Kant's philosophy places a dual demand on rational agents. On the one hand, individuals are called to exercise independent judgment. On the other hand, they are required to act in accordance with rigid moral laws (do not lie, do not commit suicide, do not be indifferent, do not be idle, etc.). These two commitments appear to pull in opposite directions. To think for oneself suggests independence from external authority. To act from duty suggests submission to the authority of rules that one might not endorse in all contexts.

This paper addresses four questions. First, is there a contradiction between thinking for oneself and acting from duty? Second, can this contradiction be resolved through a logically coherent argument? Third, is such a resolution refutable? Fourth, if the contradiction persists, does it undermine Kantian ethics?

The analysis proceeds by examining Kant's account of autonomy, then his account of duty, and finally the relation between them.

2. Kant on Autonomy

Kant's account of autonomy is grounded in the rejection of intellectual dependence. In *What is Enlightenment?*, he defines enlightenment as the individual's emergence from self-incurred "tutelage," which he describes as the inability to use one's understanding without direction from another. He calls on individuals to use their own reason: "Have courage to use your own reason!" (Kant, 1784/Beck).

The enlightened individual must not rely on external authorities—whether books, religious figures, or institutions—to think on their behalf.

To be rational is to think without direction from others, to follow the direction of one's own reason. This capacity grounds autonomy and, with it, human dignity: "Autonomy is the basis of the dignity of human and of every rational nature" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg).

However, this independence from external direction does not imply independence from law. It is the capacity to act according to laws that one gives to oneself that makes us autonomous. While they refuse to follow laws set by others, autonomous individuals must act in accordance with the laws they give to themselves; otherwise, their conduct becomes arbitrary and inconsistent. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract*, "obedience to a law that we prescribe to ourselves is liberty" (Rousseau, 1762/2017, p. 9).

The concept of autonomy therefore includes two elements: independence from external direction and the capacity for rational self-legislation (the capacity to use reason to articulate the laws that one wants to live by). The first element creates the appearance of tension with duty. The second provides the resources for resolving it.

3. Kant on Duty

Kant's account of duty places strict requirements on the subject. The subject must follow specific prescribed duties, irrespective of how they feel and irrespective of what they think. For example, one must be beneficent, must not lie, and must not commit suicide. Not only does Kant prescribe rigid requirements on how we should act, but he also imposes strict requirements on the motives that we should adopt. We must act "not from inclination, but from duty" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg).

Kant illustrates this point through the case of the philanthropist. A person may be naturally sympathetic and take pleasure in helping others; in such a case, the action is grounded in inclination, that is, it is performed because the agent is moved by feeling rather than by the recognition that the action is required by duty. Such actions, however "amiable," lack true moral worth. By contrast, when a person "performs the action without any inclination to it, but simply from duty, then first has his action its genuine moral worth" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg). It is therefore not enough to practice beneficence; we must also practice beneficence for the sake of duty, not for the sake of the joy that comes with giving.

In the Enlightenment essay Kant tells us not to take direction from others. Yet in the *Groundwork*, he gives us direction on how we should act and what motive we should adopt for our actions. We must help others not because we enjoy helping others, but because we take helping others to be a duty. We must not commit suicide not because we enjoy life, but because we take it to be a duty to live. Duty governs not only what we do, but why we do it. Duty requires adherence to laws that we must follow irrespective of our feelings and judgments.

4. The Apparent Contradiction

The tension can now be stated precisely. On the one hand, Kant calls on individuals to think for themselves, to reject tutelage, and to use their own reason without direction from others. On the other hand, he prescribes a system of duties that the subject must follow irrespective of how they feel and irrespective of what they think. These two claims appear to conflict.

To think for oneself is to determine one's principles independently. It requires that one not accept rules simply because they are given by an external authority. Yet acting from duty appears to require precisely this: that one adopt and follow laws that are presented as binding, regardless of one's inclinations or judgments. The subject seems no longer to be self-directed, but directed by a system of moral requirements that they must obey.

The contrast can be stated in terms of authority. In the Enlightenment essay, Kant rejects external authority and calls on individuals to use their own reason. In the *Groundwork*, however, the authority appears to lie in the moral law itself. The subject must conform their actions and motives to this law, even when it conflicts with their desires or their judgments.

The contradiction can therefore be formulated as follows. If autonomy requires that the subject think and decide for themselves, and duty requires that the subject follow fixed moral laws irrespective of their own judgment, then Kant's theory appears to demand both independence and submission at the same time. The question is whether this is a genuine contradiction, or only the appearance of one.

5. Resolution: Duty as Self-Legislation

The apparent contradiction rests on the assumption that duty imposes an external constraint on the subject. If moral laws are understood as rules given to the individual from outside, then acting from duty does appear to conflict with the demand to think for oneself. However, this assumption misrepresents the source of moral law in Kant's theory.

For Kant, the authority of duty does not derive from an external source. It arises from reason itself, which is in all of us. Moral laws are not imposed on the will from outside; they are generated by the rational will on the inside. As Kant writes, "the will of a rational being must always be regarded as legislative" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg). The subject is not merely subject to law; the subject is the source of law.

This point can be clarified by examining what reason requires in order to function. Although individuals differ in how they think and judge, reason itself requires the same conditions in all rational beings. It requires access to truth, since without truth it cannot make informed judgments; for this reason, deception cannot be willed, and we therefore have a duty not to lie. It also requires the capacity to realize its ends; without developed abilities, reason would lack the means to translate its principles into action, and we therefore have a duty to cultivate our talents. Finally, reason requires the preservation of its own faculties; any impairment of these faculties would undermine the activity of reasoning itself, and we therefore have a duty to avoid states, such as intoxication, that disable the proper use of reason. The duties Kant articulates are therefore not externally imposed rules, but expressions of what reason requires of itself, that is, of what reason needs.

This changes the structure of the problem. If the law is derived from the needs of reason, which are the same for every rational being, then the law is not imposed on the subject from outside, but arises from the subject's own rational nature. Acting from duty is therefore not submission to an external authority, but the exercise of autonomy. The requirement to act from duty does not

replace independent reasoning; it presupposes it. One must determine, through reason, which principles can be willed as universal laws.

Kant also addresses a natural question. If duty arises from reason within us, why do we need an external agent, such as Kant, to tell us what our reason requires? Should it not be sufficient to listen to the voice of reason itself?

Kant's answer is that the voice of reason is not always clearly heard. He writes that "wisdom... has need of science, not in order to learn from it, but to secure for its precepts admission and permanence" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg). Philosophy does not introduce foreign principles; it clarifies and secures what reason already contains. We require such clarification because the voice of reason within us is often quieted by our inclinations. Sometimes our pursuit of happiness and of the satisfaction of our desires quiets the voice of reason. As Kant writes, "Against all the commands of duty which reason represents to man as so deserving of respect, he feels in himself a powerful counterpoise in his wants and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name of happiness" (Kant, 1785/Project Gutenberg).

The relation between autonomy and duty can therefore be restated. To think for oneself is to use reason without direction from others. To act from duty is to act in accordance with laws that one gives to oneself through reason. These are not competing requirements. They are two aspects of the same activity: the self-legislation of the rational will.

Duties are the outcome of the autonomous self-legislation of a rational will.

6. Refutability

The proposed resolution rests on the claim that duty is not imposed from outside, but arises from the self-legislation of the rational will. This claim can be challenged. If it fails, the apparent contradiction between autonomy and duty may re-emerge as a real one.

A first objection is that the account merely redescribes obedience as autonomy. Even if the law is said to arise from reason, it still binds the subject irrespective of their inclinations and judgments. The subject may still experience duty as a constraint. From this perspective, the distinction between external imposition and self-legislation appears nominal rather than substantive.

This objection, however, conflates two different forms of constraint. A law imposed from outside is independent of the subject's reasoning. By contrast, a law that arises from reason is binding precisely because it is the product of rational reflection. The fact that the subject may resist the law does not show that the law is external; it shows that inclination and reason can come into conflict within the same agent. The source of the law remains internal.

A second objection is that individuals do not, in practice, derive duties from reason. They learn them from upbringing, social norms, or philosophical instruction. If this is the case, then the claim that duty arises from within may appear empirically false.

This objection misidentifies the level at which Kant's claim operates. Kant does not deny that individuals come to recognize duties through education or external guidance. His claim is that the validity of those duties does not depend on their origin. A principle is binding not because it

is taught, but because it can be justified by reason. External instruction may guide the subject, but it does not supply the authority of the law.

A third objection concerns disagreement. If reason is the source of duty and is shared by all rational beings, then one might expect convergence in moral judgment. Yet individuals often disagree about what duty requires. This raises the question whether duties can truly be derived from a common rational structure.

This objection points to a difficulty, but it does not refute the argument. Disagreement may arise from incomplete reasoning, lack of information, or the influence of inclination. Kant himself acknowledges that inclination can generate a “natural dialectic” that leads individuals to rationalize departures from duty. The existence of disagreement therefore does not show that reason lacks a common structure; it shows that the application of reason can be distorted.

These objections indicate that the proposed resolution is not immune to challenge. However, none of them demonstrates that duty is external to the rational will. The distinction between external imposition and self-legislation remains intact. The claim that duties arise from the autonomous activity of reason therefore withstands these challenges.

7. Is the Contradiction Real?

The analysis has shown that the apparent contradiction between autonomy and duty arises from a misunderstanding of both concepts. Autonomy is taken to mean independence from all law, and duty is taken to mean obedience to an externally imposed rule. Under these interpretations, the two cannot be reconciled. However, these interpretations do not reflect Kant’s position.

Autonomy, for Kant, is not the absence of law, but the capacity of the rational will to legislate law for itself. Duty, in turn, is not submission to an external authority, but the expression of this self-legislation in action. Once autonomy is understood as self-legislation, the opposition between autonomy and duty disappears. Acting from duty is not contrary to thinking for oneself; it is the practical realization of it.

The source of the apparent contradiction can now be identified more precisely. It arises when the standpoint of inclination is conflated with the standpoint of reason. From the perspective of inclination, duty appears as a constraint, since it limits what the subject would otherwise be inclined to do. From the perspective of reason, however, duty expresses what the subject has reason to will. The tension is therefore not between autonomy and duty, but between reason and inclination within the agent.

This distinction explains why duty can be experienced as restrictive while still being grounded in autonomy. The subject may feel constrained because their inclinations conflict with what reason requires. Yet this conflict does not show that the law is external. It shows that the subject is divided between different sources of motivation. The authority of duty remains internal to the rational will.

If the contradiction were real, Kant’s theory would be incoherent. A theory that requires both independence from authority and obedience to authority would undermine itself. However, once

the concepts are properly understood, no such contradiction remains. The demand to think for oneself and the requirement to act from duty are not competing demands. They are expressions of the same rational activity.

The contradiction is therefore not real. It is the appearance of a contradiction generated by an incomplete understanding of autonomy and duty. When these concepts are clarified, Kant's theory remains internally coherent.

References

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