

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 4 | Issue 3

Article 3

---

7-1-1987

## Kantian Autonomy and Divine Commands

Jeffrie G. Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Murphy, Jeffrie G. (1987) "Kantian Autonomy and Divine Commands," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# KANTIAN AUTONOMY AND DIVINE COMMANDS

Jeffrie G. Murphy

James Rachels has argued that a morally autonomous person (in Kant's sense) could not consistently accept the authority of divine commands. Against Rachels, this essay argues (a) that the Kantian concept of moral autonomy is to be analyzed in terms of an agent's responsiveness to the best available moral reasons and (b) that it is simply question-begging against divine command theory to assume that such commands could not count as the best moral reasons available to an agent.

On a certain conception (often thought to be Kantian) of moral autonomy, it is difficult to see how morally autonomous persons could accept any morally significant concept of *authority*—i.e., any concept of authority that goes beyond a mere description of a power relation in order to provide at least *prima facie* moral justifications for acts that would have been without justification in the absence of the authority. A few years ago Robert Paul Wolff used a supposed Kantian conception of moral autonomy to defend what he called philosophical anarchism—the claim that the concept of moral autonomy and the concept of legitimate political authority are inconsistent<sup>1</sup>; and, more recently, James Rachels has argued that a morally autonomous person could not accept divine commands as an authoritative source of moral obligation—and thus that the worship of God is impossible for an autonomous person.<sup>2</sup> Rachels's argument proceeds in this way:

- (1) "To be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or self-directed agent....The virtuous man is therefore identified with the man of integrity, i.e., the man who acts according to precepts which he can, on reflection, conscientiously approve in his own heart."
- (2) To accept divine commands as authoritative moral commands is to accept the possibility that one may be morally required to perform some action simply because it is required by God's commands even if the act is *not* one that is according to precepts which one does, on reflection, accept.<sup>3</sup>
- (3) Therefore: "To deliver oneself over to [God or any other] moral authority for directions about what to do is simply incompatible with being a moral agent."



There is, I think, considerably less to this argument than meets the eye. Indeed, on one plausible interpretation of Kantian autonomy, it is straightforwardly question-begging.

What is Kantian autonomy? Space limitations (and limitations on authorial ability) do not allow for a full treatment of this question, but one part of the answer should be obvious: Whatever else may be controversial about Kant's ethics, one thing is not—namely, that the property about human beings which gives them autonomy and confers upon them that special status that Kant calls “dignity” is their *rationality*. There is, indeed, substantial equivalence for Kant between the concepts of good will, rational will, and autonomous will.<sup>4</sup> Thus both of the following concepts of autonomy should surely be rejected as Kantian in either letter or spirit:

(a) An autonomous person is one who always does what he feels like doing or wants to do or desires to do (in some ordinary sense of “feel like”, “want” or “desire”).<sup>5</sup> [So far indeed is this from Kant's conception of autonomy that it is not a bad start toward an analysis of Kantian heteronomy.]

(b) An autonomous person is one who always does what he judges to be the rational thing to do regardless of what his conception of rationality is or how casually he applies that conception.

It is fairly obvious that (a) and (b) are indeed incompatible with the moral authority of divine commands, for how could we ever logically guarantee that God would never issue commands contrary to our wants or desires?—or to every idiosyncratic and negligently applied standard of rationality that we might dream up? It is also obvious, of course, that these incompatibilities are uninteresting and unimportant because these concepts of autonomy are uninteresting and unimportant (and surely unKantian). Suppose, then, we try another—and surely more plausible—analysis of Kantian autonomy:

(c) An autonomous person always decides what he morally ought to do based on the best set of morally relevant reasons available to him and is motivated to act as a result of this decision.

This conception of autonomy is surely at least a part of what Kant had in mind by the concept of autonomy. And thus, if it could be shown that an acceptance of the moral authority of divine commands is indeed incompatible with autonomy so understood, then one would have a potentially worrisome objection to divine command moral theories.<sup>6</sup> But can this be shown? Not, I think, without a simple begging of the question against divine command theories. For surely, at their very essence, what all forms of the divine command theory maintain is that the fact that some act is willed by God is the *very best* moral reason that could ever

be available to an agent for judging an action to be right, because it is the very thing about the act (the *only* thing about the act) that *makes* it right or obligatory. Simply to say without argument that this could not count as a decisive or even relevant moral reason is to beg the question against the whole account. Thus, on what seems to be one plausible interpretation of Kantian autonomy, acceptance of the authority of divine commands seems to be a consistent thing for a morally autonomous person to do.

If this is all correct, however, one may well wonder why Kant himself was such a committed opponent of divine command moral theories.<sup>7</sup> Kant, of course, wants my moral obligations to be “laws that I give unto myself,” and it is indeed hard to see how a law could be one that I give to myself if it is one that another (even God) is imposing on me. But if Kant seriously means—as he surely does—for such rational principles as non-contradiction and sufficient reason to be constraints on autonomous willing,<sup>8</sup> then he had better abandon at least some of his weird talk about our being moral lawgivers to ourselves because such rational constraints are surely not themselves self-generated. (If they were, they would not be constraints.) Thus I do not think that we can get much mileage on our issue simply by trotting out this venerable Kantian slogan.

Kant thinks, of course, that I am not acting autonomously if I act out of a sensuous motive or inclination such as fear (even fear of God), and thus perhaps it is a lurking suspicion that the motivation behind obedience to divine commands must be the (non-moral) motive of fear that explains Kant’s belief that such theories are inevitably heteronomous. But, if this thought pattern is indeed at work, then surely Kant can be challenged with respect to it in at least three ways: (1) It is by no means obvious that the motive of fear is the only motive that could drive a person who accepted the authority of divine commands. Perhaps the motive of such a person might simply be that he in fact accepted the moral authority of such commands—i.e., regarded the fact that an act had been commanded by God as the best moral reason that could be given in support of the act’s rightness. (2) It is by no means obvious what the phrase “the fear of God” means (i.e., by no means obvious that it means something like “the fear of Hitler”) and thus we must be cautious of hasty classifications of the motive of fear of God as either heteronomous or autonomous.<sup>9</sup> (3) Kant sometimes seems to regard motives such a fear as heteronomous because they engage only our phenomenal selves whereas truly autonomous motives (e.g., respect for moral duty) engage our noumenal selves. But what does this mean? If Kant thinks that my fear of some state of affairs (or any other desire or aversion directed to that state of affairs) can never give me a *reason* for acting (but can only *cause* me to act) he is surely mistaken. To give me a reason for *acting* (as opposed to believing) just is to tie into my preference structure or scheme of desires in some way. (How could I have a reason for *doing* something if it does not link up in

any way with anything at all I *care* about?) Thus if I act heteronomously whenever I act from my preferences, it seems that I always act heteronomously and that autonomy is an illusion. (Kant has his reasons for denying this, but they grow out of highly complex and controversial features of his metaphysical theory. Surely we would not reject divine command theories simply because they conflict with the most highly doubtful parts of the Kantian metaphysics.) Thus, if I legitimately fear adverse reaction from God whenever I disobey his commands, then I surely have a reason for obeying his commands; and thus I act autonomously here at least in some minimal sense. It is not as though I were simply experiencing twitches, spasms, reflexes, or engaging—in spite of myself—in compulsive behavior.

But is my reason of the right sort? or a moral sort? Our natural inclination is to think that “because he said so” or “because he will hurt you if you do not” give us reasons for acting (at least in some contexts) but never reasons of a moral sort. (We might—following H.L.A. Hart—say that such reasons give us grounds for being obliged to do something but not for being obligated to do it.<sup>10</sup>) Thus we have at most prudential reasons rather than moral reasons. But what would moral reasons (and thus truly moral motivations) be? Not incursions from the spooky noumenal world, surely, for all the reasons noted above. But then what? Reasons that show that we really ought to perform the action independently of any bearing it may have—in either the short or long run—on our interests or preferences? But it is hard to understand what such reasons for acting could be, and indeed there is a long tradition of philosophical argument—approximately from Aristotle through Hobbes and Hume to Gilbert Harman and John Mackie<sup>11</sup>—that maintains that the whole idea of such a set of reasons is incoherent and that any moral theory that requires it must be rejected. According to these theorists, the distinction between morality and prudence—though useful to draw at certain levels—ultimately breaks down, and with its breakdown comes various forms of moral relativism.<sup>12</sup> Thus if Kantian autonomy can only be understood in the context of a kind of moral theory that there may be good reasons for regarding as misguided or confused, we must not grow unduly suspicious of divine command theories if we discover that they do conflict with some forms of Kantian autonomy. We must not reject a theory because it is incompatible with other theories that, from the point of view of justification, may be in just as bad or worse shape.

In short: On one reasonably plausible (and not unKantian) interpretation of moral autonomy, there is no reason to think that divine command theories are in conflict with it. They may conflict with certain implausible or highly controversial accounts of moral autonomy, ones that fail to capture an interesting concept of autonomy or that presuppose highly doubtful metaphysical claims, but it is unclear how this could constitute a ground for rejecting divine command theories.

There is a general moral in this: The rational justifications for and the metaphysical presuppositions of all available secular moral theories are highly suspect, and thus it is intellectually unfair to use them as sticks with which to beat divine command theories or other forms of religious and theological morality.<sup>13</sup>

Arizona State University

## NOTES

1. Robert Paul Wolff, "On Violence," *The Journal of Philosophy*, October 2, 1969, pp. 601-16, and *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). I replied to Wolff in "Violence and the Rule of Law," *Ethics*, July, 1970, pp. 319-321.

2. James Rachels, "God and Human Attitudes," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 7, 1971, pp. 325-37. For interesting discussions of the relationship between divine commands and moral autonomy, see Philip L. Quinn, "Religious Obedience and Moral Autonomy," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 11, 1975, pp. 265-81 and Robert M. Adams, "Autonomy and Theological Ethics," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 15, 1979.

3. The *possible* conflict is what generates the interesting puzzle even if it will never in fact occur because some attribute of God—e.g., his love of us or of orderliness and stability—will prevent it. See John Chandler, "Divine Command Theories and the Appeal to Love," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, July, 1985, pp. 231-39.

4. See J.G. Murphy, *Kant: The Philosophy of Right* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

5. These concepts must not, of course, be understood in such a way that psychological egoism becomes uninterestingly true. Kant did not always observe this caution.

6. I say "potentially worrisome" because not everyone is going to be so charmed with the notion of Kantian autonomy that he would seek to preserve it in the face of conflict with divine command theory. This "I am the captain of my soul" conception of human autonomy is indeed to some the springboard to human dignity, human rights and political liberalism. To others, however, it is merely a prideful fantasy (which started from a Protestant heresy) and serves only to hide from us our dependent natures and to block for us—through dangerous and meaningless slogans about human rights and liberalism—the possibility of truly human moral communities. For a spirited and insightful defense of something like the latter view, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

7. See, for example, *Grundlegung*, 408-409.

8. *Supra*, note 4.

9. See, in this regard, Peter Geach, "The Moral Law and the Law of God" in his *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

10. H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961, Chapter 2).

11. See J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) and Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

12. There is, of course, a sense in which even divine command theory is a version of moral relativism; for, on this view, the truth of statements of moral obligation is relative to the choices or preferences

of God.

13. The foregoing is not, of course, a positive defense of divine command moral theories. To render such theories acceptable (and not merely consistent with moral autonomy) one would have to have persuasive reasons for believing in the existence of God as the divine commander and for believing that His commands are the best moral reasons available to an agent, and this brief essay has nothing to contribute to these issues.