

Autonomy – Handout

Now it is no wonder, when we look back on all the previous efforts that have ever been undertaken to bring to light the principle of morality, why they all had to fail. One saw the human being bound through his duty to laws, but it did not occur to one that he was subject only to his own and yet universal legislation, and that he was obligated only to act in accord with his own will, which, however, in accordance with its natural end, is a universally legislative will. For if one thought of him only as subject to a law (whatever it might be), then this would have to bring with it some interest as a stimulus or coercion, because as a law it did not arise from his will, but rather this will was necessitated by something else to act in a certain way in conformity with the law. Through this entirely necessary consequence, however, all the labor of finding a supreme ground of duty was irretrievably lost. For from it one **never got duty, but only necessity of action** from a certain interest. Now this might be one's own interest or someone else's. But then the imperative always had to come out **as conditioned**, and could never work at all as a **moral command**. Thus I will call this principle the principle of the autonomy of the will, in contrast to every other, which on this account I count as **heteronomy**.

[Ak 4:433]

And now, what is it that justifies the morally good disposition or virtue in making such high claims? It is nothing less than the share that it procures for the rational being in the universal legislation, thereby making it suitable as **a member in a possible realm of ends**, for which it by its own nature was already destined, as end in itself and precisely for this reason as legislative in the realm of ends, as free in regard to all natural laws, obeying only those that it gives itself and in accordance with which its maxims can belong to a universal legislation (to which it at the same time subjects itself). For nothing has a worth **except that which the law determines for it**. The legislation itself, however, which determines all worth, must precisely for this reason have a dignity, i.e., an unconditioned, incomparable worth; the word respect alone yields a becoming expression for the estimation that a rational being must assign to it. **Autonomy is thus the ground of the dignity** of the human and of every rational nature.

[Ak 4:436]

Morality is thus **the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will**, that is, to the possible universal legislation through its maxims. That action which can subsist with the autonomy of the will is permitted; that which does not agree with it is impermissible. The will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is **a holy, absolutely good will**. The dependence of a will which is not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (moral necessitation) is obligation. Thus the latter cannot be referred to a holy being. The objective necessity of an action from obligation is called duty.

[Ak 4:436]

Autonomy of the will is the property of the will through which it is a law to itself (**independently** of all properties of the objects of volition). The principle of autonomy is thus: 'Not to choose otherwise than so that the maxims of one's choice are at the same time comprehended with it in the same volition as universal law'. That this practical rule is **an imperative, i.e., the will of every rational being is necessarily bound to it as a condition**, cannot be proven through the mere analysis of the concepts occurring in it, because it is a synthetic proposition; one would have to advance beyond the cognition of objects and to a critique of the subject, i.e., of pure practical reason, since this synthetic proposition, which commands apodictically, must be able to be cognized fully a priori; but this enterprise does not belong in the present section. Yet that the specified principle of autonomy is the sole principle of morals may well be established through the mere analysis of the concepts of morality. For thereby it is found that its principle must be **a categorical imperative**, but this commands neither more nor less than just this autonomy.

[Ak 4:441]

The absolutely good will, **whose principle must be a categorical imperative**, will therefore, undetermined in regard to all objects, contain merely the form of volition in general, and indeed as autonomy, i.e., the suitability of the maxim of every good will to make itself into a universal law is itself the sole law that the will of every rational being imposes on itself, without grounding it on any incentive or interest in it.

[Ak 4:444]

Natural necessity was a **heteronomy of efficient causes**; for every effect was possible only in accordance with the law that something else determined the efficient cause to causality; what else, then, could the freedom of the will be, except autonomy, i.e., the quality of the will of being a law to itself? But the proposition 'The will is in all actions a law to itself' designates only the principle of acting in accordance with no other maxim than that which can also have itself as a universal law as its object. But this is just the formula of the **categorical imperative and the principle of morality**: thus a free will and a will under moral laws **are the same**.

[Ak 4:447]

It therefore appears as if in the idea of freedom we really only presupposed the moral law, namely the principle of the autonomy of the will itself, and could not prove its reality and objective necessity for itself.

[Ak 4:449]

As a mere member of the world of understanding, all my actions would be perfectly in accord with the principle of the **autonomy of the pure will**; as a mere piece of the sensible world, they would have to be taken as entirely in accord with the natural law of desires and inclinations, hence with the **heteronomy of nature**.

[Ak 4:449]