

EDITORIAL

The special focus of the papers in this issue is 'Divine Motivation vs. Human Autonomy?' They engage with the perennial debate on autonomy and heteronomy in ethics. This dispute has been experiencing a renaissance due to the works of analytic philosophers of religion such as Robert M. Adams and Linda Zagzebski, who purport to ground morality in God, thus making it heteronomous to the human mind.

The central tenets of the two opposing positions are clearly illustrated in the first paper 'Human Autonomy and Theological Ethics' by Robert M. Adams. He distinguishes an individualist (Kantian) outlook from a social (Rawlsian) perspective, and argues that the social character of moral knowledge necessarily implies some version of heteronomy.

The *individualistic account* lies at the very heart of enlightenment moral philosophy, and has as such shaped the intellectual landscape of European continental thought. Kant argues that autonomy consists in a certain form of self-legislation. The Kantian usage itself in fact stems directly from the etymology of the word: 'autos' and 'nomos', which, when combined, translate to 'a law, which is prescribed by the individual itself'.

The idea of the autonomy of the moral self is paramount to the Kantian outlook. By means of pure practical reason – independent from others and grounded only in one's own reasoning – human beings legislate norms *for* themselves. This Kantian outlook achieves universality by claiming that pure practical reason will lead all human beings to legislate the same norms.

In this sense the Kantian account truly stresses the autonomy of human beings in legislating moral norms: pure practical reason is detached from constraining, external factors, and rather is grounded solely in the individual itself.

In many respects the *social account* can be described as the antithesis to the Kantian account. This might come as a surprise because John Rawls is seen by many as a moral philosopher of Kantian heritage. Rawls claims that in a hypothetical situation where nobody knows her own place in a future society, people would choose the maxims which would maximize the prospects of the least well-off in the society.

Yet, as Adams points out, the pure practical reasoning in the Rawlsian 'original position' is merely hypothetical, a heuristic construct. In reality, we are embedded in various social relationships and biographical constraints which dictate the content of our moral thought. Morality,

we might claim following Rawls and Adams, originates within a second-personal relationship – a relationship between ‘me’ and ‘you’.

This social outlook thus seems to threaten Kantian autonomy: The essentially social nature of moral norms renders adherence to a moral authority, as opposed to pure, individual reasoning, inevitable. In a final analysis, this might lead to the idea that norms are not arrived at by practical reason, but are rather discovered as entities grounded in something which is greater than the determinations of the human mind: the Platonic idea of the Good or the Christian God.

Against this background of moral deliberation as inherently embedded in social practices and as something encountered as being intrinsically independent from us, we are able to reformulate the philosophical question which lies at the heart of this set of texts: Can there be a substantial sense in which human beings are autonomous, while still acknowledging the intrinsically social, and thus heteronomous, character of moral knowledge?

Most of the papers included in this special focus issue elaborate on the idea that there is indeed a substantial sense in which human beings remain autonomous, even if the ‘original position’ is merely an idealized construct. Autonomy then no longer consists in the pure and independent self-determination of an individual endowed with pure practical reason; it will rather be a second-order stance, which is exercised in the capacity of critically evaluating the moral norms experienced in relation with others.

In quite different ways, the various authors explore this middle-ground between autonomy and heteronomy. Linda Zagzebski’s paper ‘Divine Motivation Theory and Exemplarism’, which concludes this special focus issue, develops this very idea from the assumptions of exemplarist virtue theory. Assimilating oneself to an exemplar of human virtue does not preclude human autonomy, but is indeed the very origin of moral judgment within social relations: ‘We should investigate the judgment of exemplars, and that is revealed in narratives about them and other forms of observation of them.’ (Zagzebski *this issue*)

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Godehard Brüntrup & Ludwig Jaskolla
Munich School of Philosophy