

Alix Cohen

Kant on Epistemic Autonomy

The aim of this paper is to defend the claim that epistemic autonomy plays a central role in Kant's account of epistemic normativity. Just as the formula of autonomy ought to regulate the activity of the will, I argue that our epistemic activity, and in particular that of believing ('holding to be true', *Fürwahrhalten*), is subject to an epistemic version of this formula. To support this claim, I show that while believing and willing are different kinds of activities, they are subject to the same normative demands. Thus, contrary to what is often assumed, the demand for autonomy applies to cognitive as well as moral agency. However, there are many reasons to be suspicious of the application of Kant's notion of autonomy to the cognitive realm, so the final section focuses on three objections that question its soundness. I conclude that the analogy between epistemic and moral autonomy turns out to be a lot more robust than one may have thought.¹

1 Epistemic maxims and their norms

One may worry that an argument defending epistemic autonomy cannot even get off the ground since it presupposes as its condition of possibility that we control our beliefs just as we control our actions, and yet doxastic voluntarism is blatantly false. However, on my reading of Kant, the demand for epistemic autonomy doesn't apply directly to our beliefs since we have no direct doxastic control over them. Rather, it applies to them indirectly through what I have called our 'epistemic maxims' and the principles that govern them.² As I have argued elsewhere, it is because we have direct control over the epistemic maxims that determine belief-acquisition that we have indirect control over the beliefs we hold – a form of indirect doxastic voluntarism.³ In this sense, the prime object of epistemic responsibility is not beliefs but the maxims that determine their acquisition.

On Kant's account, once I adopt a principle, it becomes my maxim: "A rule that the subject makes his principle is called a maxim" (V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 738). Most familiar are the maxims that determine my actions, which include my moral maxims. They are "the subjective principle[s] of acting ... the

¹ All translations are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge University Press.

² For an account of epistemic maxims, see Cohen 2014, 318–20.

³ For a defence of this claim, see Cohen 2013.

principle[s] in accordance with which the subject *acts*” (GMS, AA 4: 421). Less familiar are my epistemic maxims. On my interpretation, they constitute my epistemic strategy (e.g., how I should cognise the world, how I can make the best use of my cognitive abilities). They are the subjective principles that determine the exercise of my cognitive agency – for instance, ‘I should proportion my beliefs according to evidence’, ‘I should not believe something on the grounds that it makes me feel better’, or ‘I should not ignore evidence in cases when it falsifies a belief I desire to be true’.⁴ Crucially for my argument, any kind of learning or believing, including belief-formation and belief-acquisition, is based on an epistemic maxim. There is no such thing as simply learning facts or taking in information; my beliefs are always the result of the exercise of epistemic agency. It is in this respect that believing isn’t a normatively neutral exercise of my cognitive capacities and thus that it should be subject to normative constraints.

On this basis, believing responsibly consists in ensuring that the epistemic maxims that determine my beliefs are subject to the right kind of norms. We should think of these norms as second-order epistemic principles that govern the first-order epistemic maxims that define my cognitive activity, including holding a belief, acquiring a belief and using my cognitive capacities more generally. Within this framework, I believe that the normative demands at play in the exercise of cognitive agency are analogous to those in moral agency not only in their structure (i.e., they make categorical demands), but also in their principles (i.e., they are epistemic versions of the formulas of the moral law). In other words, my epistemic maxims are subject to the same normative demands as my moral maxims.⁵ However, since I can’t possibly defend this claim here, I will focus my discussion on the formula of autonomy.⁶ But before I do so, I must pre-

4 Note that my focus here is the prospective or action-guiding function of maxims, not whether we can know our maxims or be aware of them as we cognise. It may well be that I don’t experience believing as a form of agency at all, but on my account, I am nevertheless actively guided by maxims as I do so. In this sense, while my account doesn’t commit me to a particular view of maxims, the issues at stake here are akin to those in the case of moral maxims (see for instance Kitcher 2003).

5 Although there is no space to discuss whether epistemic norms are grounded on the moral law, the CI or something else entirely, what should become clear is that on my interpretation, it is crucial to get away from the idea that normativity necessarily has a moral foundation. Contrast with Kitcher who defends that epistemic obligations are ultimately moral obligations (Kitcher 2011, 247–8) and O’Neill who argues that the CI is the supreme principle of both theoretical and practical reason (O’Neill 1989, 51–59).

6 I have already begun to defend this overall claim by showing that there is an epistemic version of the formula of universal law (Cohen 2014).

vent an objection to the very idea that epistemic norms are akin to moral norms. Namely, there seems to be a fundamental difference between the way I ought to believe and the way I ought to will. While moral norms determine their object, namely ‘what ought to exist’, epistemic norms do not: they do not establish “that something is” (KrV, A 633/B 661); the world does. To formulate this point slightly differently, truth doesn’t come out of the application of epistemic norms in the same way as moral goodness does from the application of moral norms, for the former is constrained by the way the world is in a way that the latter doesn’t seem to be. If so, one may worry that epistemic and moral norms aren’t sufficiently analogous to support the claim that they share both structure and content.

Admittedly, believing and willing are different kinds of activities with opposite directions of fit, and accordingly the norms that govern them differ in some respects. However, what is crucial for my argument is that both activities are equally constrained, and these constraints shape the way in which normative demands apply to their respective domains. In particular, moral goodness is constrained by the way the world is, for moral norms must be applied to, and are thus shaped by, the world in which they are realized (TL, AA 6: 217). In this sense, both epistemic and moral norms determine their object, but neither does so all the way down. Accordingly, the analogy between epistemic and moral normativity not only survives this objection, it appears even stronger than originally stated.

Now that I have laid the foundation for the claim that epistemic normativity can be thought of on the model of moral normativity, I want to take this idea further and show that just as moral willing is subject to the formula of autonomy, believing is subject to an epistemic version of this formula.

2 The formula of epistemic autonomy

As is well-known, the formula of autonomy commands to “Act so that the will could regard itself as giving universal law through all its maxims” (GMS, AA 4: 434). A lot could be said about it, but for my purposes, it suffices to note that what distinguishes it from other formulas is that it grounds moral normativity on the agent as rational law-giver.⁷ The agent’s rational capacities ought to be the source of the ground of her moral maxims, which ensures their universalisability. I want to argue that there is an epistemic version of the formula of

⁷ E.g., Wood 1999, ch.5.

autonomy, a ‘formula of epistemic autonomy’ that can be formulated thus: ‘Believe so that your cognitive faculties could regard themselves as giving universal law through all their maxims’. This formula grounds epistemic normativity on the agent as rational law-giver insofar as it prescribes that her cognitive faculties be the source of the ground of her epistemic maxims, which ensures that these maxims can be adopted by all. In this sense, just as we will autonomously if we will in accordance with universalisable maxims, we believe autonomously if we believe in accordance with universalisable epistemic maxims.⁸ To support this claim, let’s turn to cases of epistemic heteronomy, for they are helpful in bringing to light what is at stake in the demand for epistemic autonomy.

Kant writes that “The tendency toward [...] heteronomy of reason, is called *prejudice*” (KU, AA 5: 294). While prejudice is commonly thought of as an unjustified belief, on Kant’s account a prejudice is an illegitimate principle I have adopted as my epistemic maxim: “Prejudice is a maxim of judging objectively from subjective grounds” (V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 737). Three kinds of subjective grounds can play this role: inclinations (e.g., ‘Believe what I wish to be true’), habits (e.g., ‘Believe what I have always believed no matter what’), and imitation (e.g., ‘Believe what my parents believe’).⁹ These prejudiced maxims seem rather different, but Kant is clear that they are impermissible for the same reason: they prescribe the use of merely subjective grounds as objective. On my reading, what this means is that by adopting these maxims to determine our beliefs, we are believing heteronomously. For when we are guided by prejudiced maxims, our cognitive activity is governed by principles whose grounds reside outside our cognitive faculties (i.e., sensibility, lower feeling, or desire) instead of reason, understanding or judgment. It is in light of this possibility that our cognitive activity is subject to a normative demand for autonomy. As responsible epistemic agents, we ought to believe autonomously in the sense that we ought not adopt prejudiced maxims that lead us to form beliefs that are unjustified because they have insufficient, merely subjective grounds (i.e., inclination, habit or imitation) rather than sufficient objective grounds (i.e., evidence, proof, or testimony).

As a result, contrary to what is often assumed, autonomy is not just the remit of practical reason; the demand for autonomy applies to cognitive agency as well. However, there are many reasons to be suspicious of the application of

⁸ The intrinsic connection between the formula of autonomy and the formula of universal law appears clearly here, and this is why many commentators choose to discuss them together (e.g. Wood 1999).

⁹ See V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 864–5.

Kant's concept of autonomy to the epistemic realm, so the next section will focus on three objections that question its soundness.

3 Objections

The first and possibly most devastating objection against epistemic autonomy as I have defined it casts doubts on the very possibility of drawing an analogy between the moral and the epistemic case on the grounds that doxastic agency doesn't relate to truth in the same way that moral agency relates to moral goodness. In the epistemic case, a true belief is as good as it gets irrespective of whether I am responsible for acquiring it. In the moral case, by contrast, my involvement in the intention behind the action is the condition of its being an action in the first place, even before we start questioning its moral status. In this sense, agential involvement in the moral case plays a necessary role that doesn't seem to translate to the epistemic case.

To make sense of what is at stake here, imagine the following case. A Truth Fairy can offer me a great epistemic situation (i.e., many true beliefs and very few false ones) if I agree to believe *p*. Insofar as the offer gives me very good epistemic results, why shouldn't I accept it? James Andow has submitted that my account of epistemic autonomy cannot rule out these trade-offs on principled grounds, and so in this respect at least, it fares no better than epistemic consequentialism (Andow draft). In a Moral Fairy case by contrast, the trade-off would not even be an option on Kant's account since if I accepted it, I could never produce morally worthy actions. I would turn into a "turnspit" that mechanically produces actions in mere conformity with the moral law (KpV, AA 5: 97). If this is correct, the disanalogy is undeniable.

On my reading however, accepting either fairies' offer is impermissible, and it is so for the same reason. If I accepted the Truth Fairy's offer, while I would acquire true beliefs, I would give up the capacity to believe, for the trade-off would apply not just to the belief I am asked to adopt, but to all the true beliefs I would thereby acquire. In other words, I would relinquish my doxastic agency and become an epistemic turnspit that mechanically produces true beliefs – which I couldn't, or at least shouldn't, do by reason's own lights since it would undermine the very possibility of its exercise. Accordingly, on the Kantian picture I defend, believing is not a matter of holding true beliefs but of acquiring them in the right way, through the exercise of the right capacities. This is why the exercise for doxastic agency shouldn't be traded-off, not even for an infinity of true beliefs.

However, being a responsible agent is not just a matter of exercising our capacity for agency, it involves exercising it in accordance with the right kind of norm. Yet this claim gives rise to a further worry that pertains to the strength of the analogy between the moral and the epistemic case. It may seem that in the epistemic case, a belief is true or false irrespective of the maxim on which its adoption is based. If so, a good epistemic maxim is not necessary for, or constitutive of, the truth of the belief that is based on it. Whether I hold the belief because I have adopted a good maxim, because god said so, or because a brain scientist implanted it in my brain, is irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of the belief: it is true or false either way since it is the world that makes it so. In the moral case by contrast, not only is the maxim the good-making feature of the action, its motive is essential for Kant: willing an action for the sake of duty is what gives it moral worth (GMS, AA 4: 390). If this is correct, the disanalogy between the moral and the epistemic case would entail that there is no epistemic equivalent to the right kind of maxim in the moral case, and thus that there is no such thing as epistemic worth. Or to formulate this objection slightly differently, there is no epistemic equivalent of the distinction between morality and legality.¹⁰

To show why, on my reading of Kant, there is an epistemic equivalent of the distinction between morality and legality, let me begin by pointing out that while it is the case that a true belief is true irrespective of the maxim it is based on, it is also the case of a right action in ethics. For an action can be in conformity with the moral law even when it is not motivated by it, as Kant notes most famously in his discussion of the shopkeeper (GMS, AA 4: 397). The action of ‘giving back the correct change’ is the right action in all cases, just as the belief ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ is true no matter what. In this respect, there is no difference between an action and a belief. However, just as the moral case, in the epistemic case there is a crucial difference between the epistemic agent who believes something because they have sufficient grounds for it, because a scientist implanted it in their brain, or because god said so. Going back to a point I made in section 1, believing responsibly is not just a matter of acquiring content; it requires knowing why a belief is true, that is to say, being certain that the grounds it is based on are sufficient for the kind of belief that it is.¹¹ Thus, while two beliefs may have the same content,

¹⁰ For a helpful discussion of this distinction, see Timmermann 2007, 26–34.

¹¹ This is precisely one of the essential functions of epistemic maxims: they determine the kind of grounds that are appropriate to, and legitimate for, the type of belief we hold. For on Kant’s account, belief (*Fürwahrhalten*) has different epistemic modes, depending on whether its grounds are subjective or objective, sufficient or insufficient: knowledge (*Wissen*) is both subjectively and objectively sufficient; opinion (*Meinen*) is subjectively as well as objectively insuffi-

the maxims that regulate their adoption can vary immensely depending on the way the agent exercises her doxastic agency. Holding true beliefs on the basis of insufficient, merely subjective grounds (e.g., habit or inclination) is mere epistemic legality: the beliefs are true but based on an impermissible maxim. By contrast, holding beliefs on the basis of sufficient grounds as determined by the right kind of maxim is the epistemic equivalent of performing an action for the right motive: the beliefs have epistemic worth. As a result, insofar as the agent's epistemic maxims determine the degree of justification of the belief, they are just as important in the epistemic case as in the moral case.

Yet one may object that there is still an important disanalogy between the function of autonomy in the moral and the epistemic case. Namely, epistemic self-legislation is not necessary to epistemic agency in the same way that moral self-legislation is necessary to moral agency. For instance, if a brain scientist inputs into my brain the maxim "Think for myself" (KU, AA 5: 294), wouldn't this be sufficient to ensure my epistemic autonomy, since after all, as a result of this input, I am thinking autonomously? It doesn't seem to matter that the maxim itself hasn't been self-legislated, I nevertheless believe in accordance with a good epistemic maxim, which, presumably, is enough to make me as epistemically good as I ought to be. If this is correct, the epistemic case differs once again from the moral case. For the latter, the self-legislated nature of the process of maxim-formation is an essential part of making the resulting maxim the right kind of maxim. Without it, a maxim cannot possibly be good (see GMS, AA 4: 431).

However, I believe that self-legislation is just as crucial to epistemic agency as it is to moral agency. Granted, to the extent that in the brain-scientist case I am thinking according to good epistemic maxims, I am in a better situation than in the Truth Fairy case. For I am an epistemic *agent* rather than a mere epistemic turnspit. In this sense, it is important to note the difference between the Truth Fairy and the brain-scientist case. The Fairy gives me true beliefs by circumventing the exercise of my doxastic agency altogether. The brain-scientist, by contrast, by giving me good epistemic maxims, turns the exercise of my capacity for doxastic agency into a heteronomous one. For the maxims that determine my beliefs have insufficient, merely subjective grounds. Distinguishing between these two cases allows me to emphasise two different aspects of the Kantian view of epistemic autonomy as I have defined it, namely doxastic agency and its autonomous exercise. In the brain-scientist case, I may be an epistemic

cient; and faith (*Glauben*) is only subjectively sufficient and objectively insufficient (KrV A 822/B 850). See Chignell 2007 for a helpful discussion of this claim.

agent but I am not an autonomous one. Insofar as the authority over my maxims has been devolved to an external power (namely, the scientist), when I rely on them to determine my beliefs, I proceed blindly: I have no insight into what makes them good maxims and thus what makes the beliefs I have acquired on their basis justified. By contrast, the exercise of responsible epistemic agency requires me to think through what makes a belief justified, which in turn requires me to reflect on what makes a maxim the right kind of maxim.

This claim is crucial for my overall argument, for it shows that merely following the right maxim is not sufficient to ensure that the beliefs thereby acquired are either true or justified. First, a good maxim doesn't guarantee a true belief since truth doesn't automatically come out of the normative process. For Kant, deploying maxims requires the exercise of "a practised faculty of judgment" (V-Lo/Jasche, AA 9: 74) to determine what counts as a sufficient ground, what constitutes reliable evidence, or what makes a hypothesis probable. Thus, even the right epistemic maxims leave plenty of room for differences of opinion, arguments, disagreements and thus false beliefs. This is why I believe that Kant should be interpreted as holding a fallibilist conception of justification. A belief can be based on a good maxim, have sufficient grounds, and yet turn out to be false. Second, a good maxim is not sufficient to make me a good epistemic agent. As the brain-scientist case shows, I must reflect on whether a maxim is good in light of the principles that govern it in order to gain insight into its rightness. Without it, I can neither understand, generalise nor replicate the justificatory process.¹² Think for instance of mathematical demonstrations. It is only by going through their proof that I can get insight into what makes them justified; this process cannot be delegated. Similarly, we must self-legislate our epistemic maxims to be able to gain insight into their rightness and thus apply them correctly.¹³ This shows that the self-legislation of epistemic maxims is just as essential to the rightful exercise of epistemic responsibility as it is to moral responsibility.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to defend the claim that for Kant, while believing and willing are different kinds of activities, they are subject to the same demand for

¹² For instance, choosing the right kind of maxim involves ensuring that it is universalisable so that it can be adopted by all in principle if not in practice (Cohen 2014).

¹³ See Merritt 2018 for an account that emphasises the reflective nature of the process of belief acquisition.

autonomy. Of course, a lot more needs to be said to flesh out this claim. But I hope to have shown that far from being a non-starter, the account of epistemic autonomy I have put forward is a promising way of thinking about epistemic normativity within a Kantian framework.¹⁴

Bibliography

- Andow, James (draft): “Epistemic deontology, epistemic trade-offs, and Kant’s formula of humanity”.
- Chignell, Andrew (2007): “Belief in Kant”. In *Philosophical Review*, 116(3), 323–60.
- Cohen, Alix (2013): “Kant on Doxastic Voluntarism and its Implications for the Ethics of Belief”. In *Kant Yearbook*, 5, 33–50.
- Cohen, Alix (2014): “Kant on the Ethics of Belief”. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, CXIV, 317–333.
- Kitcher, Patricia (2003): “What Is a Maxim?”. In *Philosophical Topics*, 31, 1/2, 215–243.
- Kitcher, Patricia (2011): *Kant’s Thinker*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McCarty, Richard (2006): “Maxims in Kant’s Practical Philosophy”. In *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44.1, 65–83.
- Merritt, Melissa (2018). *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O’Neill, Onora (1989): *Constructions of Reason*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Timmermann, Jens (2007): *Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, Allen (1999): *Kant’s Ethical Thought*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ I would like to thank the audience in Oslo for a very stimulating discussion. Unfortunately, I was unable to address all the questions that were raised, but I hope to be able to do so in future work on these issues. Out of the many people who have helped me think about this topic, particular thanks go to James Andow, Angela Breitenbach, Andrew Chignell, Yoon Choi, Andrew Cooper, Onora O’Neill, Oliver Sensen, Andrew Stephenson, Martin Sticker, and Jens Timmermann for their comments, questions and objections on earlier drafts of this paper.

