

Duties to Self in §2 of Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue: A Response to Timmermann

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1 Introduction

In §2 of the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant appears to claim that duties to self have primacy over duties owed to others.¹ In this paper, I critically examine a reading of Kant put forward by Jens Timmermann that endorses and purports to explain this primacy. According to this reading, duties to self have primacy in Kant’s ethical philosophy because all duties are self-imposed and a duty is owed to the lawgiver. Since the self-imposition of our duties makes each of us the lawgiver, all duties are owed to the self. This proposed reading faces serious objections. I suggest that we can make better sense of the text if we drop the claim that duties to self have primacy over duties to others.

2 The text

In §1 of the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant claims that the “concept of a duty to oneself contains (at first glance) a contradiction” (6:417). This is because in cases of duties to self the same self is both passively obligated and actively obliging with respect to the same obligation. But no one can be both active and passive, bound and binding, with

¹ References to Kant’s works refer to volume and page numbers of the Akademieausgabe (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin 1902–). Emphasis is in the original unless otherwise specified. I use the translations of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. See the bibliography for details.

respect to the same thing at the same time.² This raises a worry about the coherence of duties to self. Kant's solution to this apparent problem is familiar to readers of his other works. He argues that a person can regard themselves as both (i) a "sensible being", a member of the animal species subject to sensibility (*homo phaenomenon*), and (ii) an "intelligible being", a being not at all subject to sensibility (*homo noumenon*) (6:418). This creates the space for him to argue that the same self is not binding and bound simultaneously. Rather, the *homo phaenomenon* is bound by the *homo noumenon*. With this distinction in place, the worry about contradiction is dealt with.

It is in the context of this discussion that Kant appears to assert that duties to self have some form of primacy over duties to others. Here is the central passage that I'm concerned with:³

For suppose there were no such duties [i.e., duties to self]: then there would be no duties whatsoever, and so no external duties either. — For I can recognise [*erkennen*] that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason; and in being constrained by my own reason, I am also the one constraining myself. (6:417-18)

I will turn to an interpretation of this passage in the next section. For now, it is worth saying that despite Kant's use of '*erkennen*', it is unlikely that he is discussing the epistemic conditions under which we become aware of our duties to others. He is talking about the possibility of there being duties to others at all.⁴ Additionally, we should not take Kant to be suggesting that if some particular duties to self did not exist, then other particular duties to others would not exist. For example, that without

² Kant also worries that in cases of duties to self, one can always release oneself from the duty thus making it the case that "he would not be bound at all" (6:417). It is not clear that this is correct as some at least some duties are unwaivable and this might also be true of duties to self, but I leave this aside here. For discussion, see Hills (2003) and Muñoz (2020).

³ There are various places in Kant's lectures where he appears to endorse the primacy of duties to self (i.e., 27:341, 27:344, 27:372-73, 27:576, 27:579-580). For a helpful overview and analysis of these passages, see Denis (2010). I restrict my discussion above to Kant's discussion in the Doctrine of Virtue.

⁴ See Timmermann 2013 and Timmons 2021: 150.

a duty requiring that we cultivate our talents we would not be required to refrain from stealing. He is suggesting something more general.⁵

3 Duties to self *qua* lawgiver

Can we understand Kant's argument in the above passage such that it supports the primacy claim? Here is one suggestion: Kant holds that duties are not imposed by an external source, but rather issue from something internal to the agent — in particular, the agent's faculty of reason. This means that every genuine duty involves an act of self-binding. We might therefore think that every duty we have involves some aspect of a duty to self. Here is Oliver Sensen making this point:

To have a duty at all is to be bound by the law of one's own reason. Whether the duty is toward oneself or others in content, in both cases it is prescribed by one's own reason, and therefore this duty to oneself — to follow the law of one's own reason — is prior to and more important than any duty toward others. (Sensen 2018: 293; see also Sensen 2015: 143-44 and Timmermann 2013: 214)

The claim here is that due to the fact that it is one's own reason that prescribes duties, all duties contain an element of duty to self (and additionally that this means such duties are more important than other duties). Without one's own faculty of reason issuing duties, one would have no duties at all.

Here is a problem with this way of proceeding. The claim that all duties involve an element of self-constraint does not get us to the claim that all duties are (or involve) duties to self. 'Self-constraint' and 'duty to self' are not equivalent. To illustrate, let's say that I promise to meet you for lunch tomorrow. In making this promise, I generate a duty to meet you at the time and place we've specified. No one else can make this promise for me or generate a promissory duty on my behalf (without my assent). In this way, the duty to meet you for lunch requires an element of self-constraint — I bind myself by my promise. Nevertheless, you are the one to whom I owe the fulfilment

⁵ See Bojanowski 2019, Schönecker 2010, Sensen 2018, and Timmermann 2013.

of this duty. This remains so even if I recognise that I am (or my rational faculty is) the source of the moral self-constraint I now face.⁶ If we thought that self-constraint generated a duty to self, then my promise to you would generate two duties. One that I owe to myself to follow the law of my own reason, and another to meet you for lunch. While possible, such a view seems to needlessly multiply duties.

Jens Timmermann offers a promising way to make the argument work. He says, “Kant seems to assume that a duty is owed to the lawgiver. As my own rational faculty is the lawgiver, I therefore owe any duty to myself” (2006: 512n; see also Timmermann 2013: 214). The worry with the initial pass at understanding the argument was that the necessity of self-constraint doesn’t get us to having a duty to self. But, if Kant is assuming that we have duties to the lawgiver, and the lawgiver is our own faculty of reason, then the self-binding of moral duty does entail a duty to self. Duties are owed to ourselves *qua* lawgivers of all of our duties. This reading not only bridges the gap between self-binding and duties to self, it does so in a way that appeals directly to a concept (‘self-legislation’) that is widely considered to be central to Kant’s moral philosophy.

4 Legislative authority and duties to self

In this section I raise two problems for Timmermann’s reading of Kant. Despite its initial plausibility, the reading fails to properly make space for duties to others and has difficulty accounting for the universal and unconditional nature of moral obligation. For this reason it must be rejected. In the next section I sketch a different reading.

4.1 Duties to others?

The claim that we owe duties to the lawgiver is not without apparent support in Kant’s work. Take, for example, his claim in the Doctrine of Virtue that “duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject’s will” (6:442). This suggests that we owe a duty to

⁶ On this point, see also Timmons (2021: 151): “From the claim that obligation requires being able to constrain oneself, it simply does not follow that one has any duties to oneself. Self-constraint is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for having duties to oneself”.

those who constrain our will. Since it is legislators who constrain a subject's will by imposing duties and given that all duties are self-legislated on the proposed reading, it will turn out that all duties involve an element of duty to self. This might be seen to provide further support for Timmermann's proposal.⁷

There is a problem with this reading of the passage though, which signals a problem with the 'self-binding' reading of the primacy claim as a whole. If duties are owed to some subject by virtue of that subject imposing a moral constraint through their will, and we are assuming that Kantian self-legislation asserts that all moral constraint is self-constraint, it will turn out that there are no duties to others at all. This is because it will never be the will of others that puts one under obligation. Only one's own will does this on the reading under consideration.⁸ This conclusion cannot be right. Insofar as the explanation of the primacy of duties to self commits us to a view that there are no duties to others, it fails to properly account for Kant's views. Kant consistently holds that we owe duties to others, not simply that we have duties to ourselves that regard others (4:421, 6:240, 6:442). By viewing all duties as duties to self, the proposal also fails to account for the primacy of duties to self *over duties to others*, which is precisely what we are trying to explain.

We might think that duties to others and duties to self coincide. Timmermann suggests that while others cannot bind me directly, they do bind me via my own rational will (2006: 513; see also Sensen 2015). Given the 6:442 passage quoted above, this suggestion requires an account of how duties can be *owed to* others rather than merely owed to oneself but *regarding* others. — What does it mean to say that others 'go via' my own rational will? — It also alerts us to the need for an explanation of why duties to others must involve a duty to self at all. As we have seen above, it cannot be the case that the mere necessity of self-binding entails that we owe the duty to ourself, even in a weak sense. It does not follow from the fact that our rational capacities are the source of our duties that all duties are therefore duties to self. Perhaps, instead, we have a secondary obligation to ourselves to comply with our moral duties to others — a

⁷ Lara Denis refers to this passage in order to support the 'hierarchical primacy' of duties to self over other duties (2010: 183). She does not claim that all duties contain an element of duty to self.

⁸ Reath (2002: 361) also makes this point.

broader duty to act in a way that befits an agent with moral worth. On this suggestion, I owe a duty to you to not treat you as a mere means (for example), and a duty to myself to comply with that duty because to not do so would be incompatible with my own moral standing. This makes sense of the idea that all duties to others also involves a duty to self, but it does not explain the primacy of the latter over the former. This is because the duty to self is only triggered by the duty to others. On the whole, then, more needs to be said about the idea that duties to self and duties to others coincide to determine whether it is a viable option.

4.2 Self-legislation and the moral law

There is a second problem for Timmermann's reading. Kant does not claim that we actually self-legislate, only that we can *regard* or *consider* ourselves as self-legislating (4:431, 4:433, 4:434, 4:438).⁹ This difference is important. To believe that we actually self-legislate via some chosen act or activity would lead to problems concerning how to understand the universality and unconditionality of moral obligation by committing Kant to thinking that our duties are dependent upon an act of will.¹⁰

The upshot of this for Timmermann's argument is the following. If we are only entitled to *regard* ourselves as the legislators of our duties (primarily as a heuristic device for testing the permissibility of our maxims), then it does not follow that we owe duties to ourselves by virtue of our status as legislator. After all, we are not the legislators of our duties according to Kant.¹¹ Moreover, merely being regarded as having a status is different to actually having it, and we should hesitate to ascribe duties to ourselves merely on the basis of a certain mode of regarding ourselves.

Might our individual obligations be self-legislated even if our duties are not (where

⁹ See Kleingeld and Willaschek 2019 and Wood 2008: 112-13 for discussion.

¹⁰ This criticism does not arise for a minimal view according to which self-legislation is dependent upon *Wille* and not *Willkür*. On this view, there is no freely chosen act or activity that is required of us for morality to be binding. Instead it is the rational faculty in us that (self-) legislates the moral law. However, this minimal view, as a view of self-legislation, does not sit well with Kant's claim that we can merely regard ourselves as the legislators of our duties.

¹¹ Kant explicitly denies that we are the authors of the content of the moral law in his lectures; see: 27:282-3, 27:261-2, 29:633-4.

duties are general rules and obligations are specific cases of being morally bound)? We might think that while we do not self-legislate the duties required of us by the moral law, we do self-legislate individual obligations that follow from it. Timmermann might be taken to suggest this. He says: “Whenever I see that I face an obligation — in the sense that I see here and now some specific action is made necessary by the moral law — I must bind myself to do it (i.e. I must *put* myself under the obligation, I must try to make myself act accordingly)” (2013: 213). This suggests that the performance of a certain act is necessary in order for the general prescriptions of the moral law to bind me. I ‘put myself under’ the specific obligation required by the moral law.¹²

One problem with this suggestion is that it would make the moral law itself inert prior to individual acts of self-binding. If the move from general duty to specific obligation required a voluntarily undertaken act of self-binding, then the worries about not being able to make sense of the universality and unconditionality of the moral law would simply arise at a different level. To my mind, a more plausible alternative is to suggest that it is due to our possession of rational faculties that we are able to consider our moral duties as having issued from something internal to us. By virtue of possessing this faculty we are bound to act in accordance with the duties that we owe to ourselves and to others. There is something internal to us that make us the subjects of moral duty and obligation, but that does not mean that we are the legislators of our duties.

5 Duties to self and moral agency

I have now argued that Timmermann’s strategy for making sense of Kant’s claims in §§1-3 of the Doctrine of Virtue fails. It seems that part of the problem is caused by reading Kant as making the primacy claim. After all, it is in order to make sense of this claim that Timmermann suggests that we owe duties to ourselves *qua* legislator of our duties. This latter claim then entails the commitments that I’ve argued we ought to reject.

¹² This reading is suggested by the passage from the Doctrine of Virtue. However, I think we should resist taking Kant’s language at face value. I return to this below; see §5.

Where do we go from here? One option for proceeding would be to suggest that Kant simply commits himself to too much when he says that there would be no duties to others if there were no duties to self. Such a strong claim does not seem necessary for the substantial conclusions that he wants to draw about duties to self. We might therefore think that not much is lost by dropping it altogether.¹³ However, I think that we should opt for a different strategy. Namely, we should instead endorse an ‘agential’ explanation of Kant’s claim. According to this explanation, Kant’s view is that the structure of moral agency is the same in the case of duties to self and duties to others. Thus, to reject duties to self because they require a problematic account of moral agency (as seems to be the worry in §1 of the Doctrine of Virtue), would also require a rejection of duties to others since they rest on the same account of moral agency.

To elaborate upon this idea, let’s suppose that Kant is asking us to imagine a world in which there are no duties to self. In such a world, there would be no duties to others either, since the kind of agency that makes duties to others possible also always generates duties to self.¹⁴ The relevant kind of agency here is moral agency, which we can understand as being subject to the categorical imperative as a result of our rational capacities.¹⁵ Unlike the primacy claim, this explanation of Kant’s view does not assert that we have duties to others *because* we have duties to self. Duties to oneself and duties to others are both explained by the fact that the principle of humanity is the “supreme limiting condition of the freedom of action of every human being” (4:431-32).

¹³ This is the suggestion made by Timmons (2021: 151).

¹⁴ Bojanowski (2019: 84) makes a related claim, saying: “Wenn die Idee selbstgegebener Gesetze widersprüchlich wäre, würde dieser Widerspruch sich auf Pflichten gegen andere übertragen. Aber weil wir nicht glauben, dass Pflichten gegenüber anderen problematisch sind, sollten wir auch nicht glauben, dass Selbstgesetzgebung eine Gefahr für die Pflichten gegen uns selbst darstellt.” If we believe that we self-legislate the duties that we owe to others, then the fact that duties to self are also self-legislated should not be problematic. I argued above that we should drop the language of self-legislation, however the point is similar: the structure of obligation is the same both in the case of duties to self and duties to others.

¹⁵ Kähler (2022: 21) makes a similar claim in denying the primacy of duties to self over duties to others: “Vielmehr lässt sich die Verbindung beider Arten von Pflichten [duties to self and duties to others] so verstehen, dass beide als gemeinsame Grundlage das moralische Gesetz haben, womit sie nach anderer Terminologie gleichursprünglich sind, ohne dass den einen eine Priorität vor den anderen zukommt oder sie ganz verdrängt.”

To suggest that we could have duties to others but not duties to self is thus to suggest that we could be bound to respect the humanity of others but not bound to recognise and respect it in ourselves. Such a state is not possible for Kant. A world in which there are no duties to self is a world in which there are no moral agents at all, and thus no duties to others.¹⁶

Now let us consider the rest of the passage from the Doctrine of Virtue, which provides further explanation of Kant's claim. Here is the passage again:

For I can recognise [*erkennen*] that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason; and in being constrained by my own reason, I am also the one constraining myself.

This initially reads as expressing a kind of voluntarism that I've suggested we reject. We should instead understand Kant as claiming that I recognise that I am under obligation to others due to my recognition of practical reason *in me*. I have obligations to others due to my practical reason, and so it is *as if* I constrain myself. With this in mind, I think we can read this passage as supporting my agential explanation of the relation between duties to self and duties to others. Both kinds of duties have the same structure. In particular, in both kinds of duties it is my own practical reason, and thus my own moral agency, that explains the obligation. In the case of duties to self, my practical reason puts me under obligation and I am also the one to whom the duty is owed. In the case of duties to others, it is the same faculty puts me under obligation but I owe the duty to another. I regard myself as under obligation to others (and am so obliged) only because practical reason in me constrains me to act in certain ways. This means that, if we think that duties to self are contradictory due to the fact that it is one's own practical reason that explains their existence, we must also think that duties to others are contradictory. In addition, since it is only a rational agent that can have duties to others, any agent with duties to others will also be bound to respect the

¹⁶ See Gregor (1963: 47-48) for a similar claim, though one focused on the 'right of humanity in our own person'.

humanity in themselves and will thus be bound by duties to self.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that we should not read §2 of Kant's Doctrine of Right as claiming that duties to self have primacy over duties to others. Instead, we should read him as committed to a view according to which the moral agency that makes duties to others possible also always generates duties to self. This means that, if there were no duties to self, there would be no moral agents and thus no duties whatsoever.¹⁷

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