

AGENCY AND ALTERITY IN KANT AND LEVINAS

This negative representation of freedom is rendered positive when Kant points out that the will is not conditioned by anything alien when and because it positively conditions itself. It conditions itself by giving to itself a motive or law (what Kant calls a “maxim”) for its actions. When the will acts on the basis of a motive that originates outside of itself, such as in natural necessity or in the self’s “feelings, impulses, and inclinations,”⁴ then the will is what Kant calls “heteronomous”—ruled by the law of another.⁵ But by being its own condition or by legislating its own law, the will may thereby be said to be “autonomous”—subject to its own law. It is because the will is in this way self-conditioning that Kant can famously claim that “a free will,” which is a negative conception, “and a will under moral laws,” which are laws it positively gives itself, “are one and the same.”⁶ To be unconditioned is to be the condition of oneself.

Now, even though human agency, if it is to be free, must not be motivated by anything outside of or other than itself, it does not mean for Kant that our agency does not have any relationship to others. In fact, the law which the will must obey in order to be properly free (i.e., autonomous) is a law which obliges reason to consider others (and so is equally a *moral law*). This obligation arises because, in the will’s acting on the basis of self-given motivations and not out of heteronomous motives, the will is acting out of consistency with *willfulness itself*, that is, with *willfulness in general*, and therefore with the wills of all other rational agencies: “if [this end] is given by reason alone, [it] must hold equally for all rational beings.”⁷ My pure reason and pure will, as purely rational and purely willful, are structurally equivalent to the pure reason and pure will of all others. That means that when I act autonomously, that is, purely on the basis of my self-determining will, then my action is *necessarily* consistent with the wills of all others (even if it may violate their heteronomous interests).

It is the isolation of this *willfulness itself* or *willfulness in general* that forms the basis of the so-called “reciprocity thesis” in the Kantian system, the link, often considered curious, between freedom and morality.⁸ For if one acts in a manner consistent with the a priori structure of *willfulness in general*, then one’s action is necessarily *both* autonomous *and* moral, since for one and the same reason one’s action is *neither* motivated by anything external to one’s own will *nor* inconsistent with the will of any other. Thus, it makes no difference whether one begins first with a concern for one’s own freedom or with a concern for morality (the freedom of others): if one wants to determine how one ought to act in relation to others in a way that does not do violence to their freedom, then clearly one should act only on the basis of motives that derive purely from one’s will itself; while if one wants to determine whether one is autonomous, then one should determine whether one’s action is consistent with the will of others. Being true to one’s will is, in effect, being true to the autonomy of others, while being true to