

# Cognitive Virtue and Cognitive Self-Determination

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References to McDowell are to “Self-Determining Subjectivity and External Constraint” (in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* [Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard, 2009], 90-107).

References to Kant are to the German Academy of Sciences edition, by volume and page.

## 1. Two initial conceptions of self-determination

Set aside, on the grounds that it ill suits the case of experience as empirical cognition.

The conception of self-determination that McDowell takes up.

[T]he note of self-determination is sounded when Kant invokes the spontaneity of the understanding. We can consider two glosses on this connection of the understanding with an idea of freedom. First, the paradigmatic mode of actualization of conceptual capacities, in the relevant sense, is in judging, which is freely responsible cognitive activity, making up one’s mind. Second, and more abstractly, concepts constitute norms for cognitive activity, and the core of the self-determination idea is that the authority of any norms at all, whatever activity they regulate, must be capable of free acknowledgement by the subjects who engage in the activity. (96)

Self-determination is then to be understood in terms of a certain capacity to take a reflective — and presumably critical — attitude towards the norms themselves. This generic conception of self-determination is (at least in principle) as much Kantian as it is Hegelian.

## 2. Two “sides” to this self-determination idea:

<p><b>The “Kantian” side</b> relies on the idea that certain norms are <i>constitutive</i> of our cognitive capacity.</p> <p>To come into the use of one’s reason is to have a tacit grasp, at least, of the relevant norms, which are principles allowing for coherent thought and experience of objects.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Kantian one-sidedness risks turning into a “pre-critical platonism” (107).</p>	<p><b>The “Hegelian” side</b> claims that the norms governing cognitive activity can only be recognized as such from within a historically specific framework of concrete practices, and a shared form of life.</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Hegelian one-sidedness risks relativism. [Neo-Hegelians view about the institution of norms through mutual recognition is an example.]</p>
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McDowell suggests a further project: to work out in greater detail an appropriately balanced, or “two-sided” view of self-determination — for the sake of achieving a better understanding of *Hegel*. But what about *Kant*?

Perhaps a shift of focus is in order — away from our traditional focus on the Transcendental Deduction — if we wish to draw out the Kantian resources for an appropriately two-sided conception of rational self-determination.

3. VIRTUE is said in many ways...

(Kant's emphases are preserved in italics and bold; underlining is my added emphasis.)

DIVISION OF DUTIES TO ONESELF (6:419).

**... as *health* and as *strength*:**

“[I]t is not only unnecessary but even improper to ask whether great *crimes* might not require more strength of soul than do great *virtues*. For by strength of soul we mean strength of resolution in a human being as a being endowed with freedom, hence his strength insofar as he is in control of himself [...] and in a state of *health* proper to a human being” (6:384).

“The true strength of virtue is a *tranquil mind* with a considered and firm resolution to put the law of virtue into practice. That is the state of *health* in the moral life [...]” (6:409).

“Negative duties *forbid* a human being to act contrary to the **end** of his nature and so have to do merely with his moral *self-preservation*.”

Negative duties “belong to the moral *health* (*ad esse*) of a human being as object of both his outer and his inner sense, to the *preservation* of his nature in its perfection (as *receptivity*)” (6:419).

**... as an *ideal* and as a *cultivated perfection*:**

Virtue, “[i]n its highest stage [...] is an ideal (to which one must continually approximate)” (6:383).

“Virtue is always *in progress* and yet always starts *from the beginning*. — It is always in progress because, considered *objectively*, it is an ideal and unattainable, while yet constant approximation to it is a duty. That it always starts from the beginning has a *subjective* basis in human nature, which is affected by inclinations because of which virtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all but, if it is not arising, is unavoidably sinking” (6:409).

“...positive duties, which *command* him to make a certain object of choice his end, concern his *perfecting* of himself.”

Positive duties “belong to his moral *prosperity* (*ad melius esse, opulentia moralis*), which consists in possessing a *capacity* sufficient for all his ends, insofar as this can be acquired; they belong to his *cultivation* [*zur Cultur*] (active perfecting) of himself” (6:419).

4. Two passages on cognitive virtue:

“When it is said that it is in itself a duty for a human being to make his end the perfection belonging to a human being as such [...], this perfection must be put in what can result from his *deeds*, not in mere *gifts* for which he must be indebted to nature [...]. This duty can therefore consist only in cultivating one’s faculties (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is the *understanding*, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty. At the same time this duty includes the cultivation of one’s *will* (moral cast of mind), so as to satisfy all of the requirements of duty” (6:386-7).

“The common human understanding, which, as merely healthy (not yet cultivated) understanding, is regarded as the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the nature of a human being” (5:293).

5. The three maxims of common human understanding:

1. To think always for oneself;
2. To think in the position of everyone else;
3. Always to think in accord with oneself.

The three maxims are presented in *Critique of Judgment* §40 (5:294), in the *Jäsche Logic* (9:57), and twice in the *Anthropology* (7:200 [with a variant for the second maxim], and 228). They are obliquely and partially invoked in many of Kant’s shorter essays, including “What is Enlightenment?” and “What is Orientation in Thinking?”. In unpublished writings, see *Reflexionen* 1486, and 1508-9 (15: 715, 717, 820-3), and *Anthropologie Busolt* (25:1480ff.). In these texts, the three maxims are variously referred to as “maxims of reason”, of the “enlightened” and “broadminded way of thinking”, and of “mature” and “healthy” reason.