

Kant and the Moral Will

I. Background.

Kant (1724-1804) was born and spent his life in Königsberg, where he spent an intellectually eventful but in other ways uneventful life. His early writings were on philosophy of physics and astronomy (his 1755 work on a theory of the heavens predicted the existence of Uranus, later discovered by Herschel in 1881). He survived on a precarious income, and did not receive a regular academic salary until 1770, when he was appointed to the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics. He is best known for his revolutionary *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), and his ethics, of which the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* is a classic statement.

II. Moral Philosophy

Here are five questions we might want a moral theory to answer for us:

- i) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts *ought* we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?
- ii) What *makes* something, e.g., an action, right or wrong? What is the source of moral rightness/goodness?
- iii) How do we *know* what is right and wrong?
- iv) What, if anything, motivates us to do what is right?

Normative ethics: addresses “first-order” questions about our moral lives, questions about what morality requires/permits us to do, and what is morally valuable. E.g. should we be vegetarians? Is euthanasia permissible? Is it (morally) good to devote oneself to a life of pleasure?

Meta-ethics: addresses questions about first-order (normative) ethical judgments, e.g., about the nature of morality; the meaning of moral talk; whether morality is absolute or relative; whether moral judgments can be true or false (objective) or merely subjective, how we can have knowledge of moral truth.

III. Recall Aristotle

What is the source of moral value?

Virtue (excellence), then, is (a) a state of character concerned with choice, (b) lying in a mean, (c) the mean relative to us, (d) this being determined by a rational principle, (e) and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (NE 1106b36-1107a2)

In simpler terms:

An action is right insofar as it is the manifestation of a character trait involving excellence in rational deliberation found in the fully flourishing human being.

Aristotle offers a *Virtue Theory* of morality: the source of moral value is the character of the individual.

Note that there seem to be three components of any action that may host the source of moral value:

- i. The person who performs the action (including their character)
- ii. The action itself (what makes it the action that it is)
- iii. Consequences that result from the action

Aristotle locates the source of moral value in (i). Kant suggests, however, that we should locate it in (ii). (Mill, we will see, will locate it in (iii).)

IV. Kantian Meta-ethical principles: Unconditionality

Unconditionality: If it is morally right to ϕ in circumstances C, then ϕ ing is *unconditionally required* of anyone in C, e.g., if it morally right to keep one’s promise in C, then no one is morally permitted break their promise in C. (2)

Kant thinks this rules out (iii): if ϕ ing in circumstances C is morally right, then it can’t be right because of its effects or consequences. We can’t always predict the consequences of ϕ ing in C, but we are required to ϕ

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anyway. If something's value depended on its good effects, its value would be conditional on those effects. (Take away the effects and you would take away the source of its value.) Since its value must satisfy *Unconditionality*, it must be valuable even without the good effects.¹

What about (i)? Are good actions those that are performed by the flourishing person? On the Aristotelian picture, the capacity for practical reason is bound up with happiness: those who reason excellently are those who flourish. But Kant thinks this can't be right because reason is not an effective means to achieve happiness:

Reason, however, is not competent enough to guide the will safely as regards its objects and the satisfaction of all our needs (which it in part even multiplies); to this end would an implanted natural instinct have led much more certainly....its true function must be to produce a will which is not merely good as a means to some further end, but is good in itself. (9)

V. The Good Will

Kant maintains that the only thing that is unconditionally good, i.e., good in itself, is the good will: "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*." (7) Because only the good will is good in itself, it will have to be the source of all moral goodness. But what does he mean by a "good will"?

Non-accidentality: If one's action of ϕ ing in circumstances C has moral value, then it couldn't have been an accident that one ϕ ed, e.g., if one's keeping one's promise in C had moral value, then one had to keep one's promise on purpose, because one promised. (3, 12)

Kant takes it to follow from this that the right action will be an action performed *out of duty* (9-10). We don't do our duty when we act in ways we know to be wrong; but even in some cases when we do the right thing, our action fails to have moral value. Why? The idea is that in any intentional action, I am implicitly or explicitly acting on a principle of some kind. Consider two shopkeepers, both of whom are committed to giving correct change to their customers. They act, however, on different principles, or what Kant called "maxims":

Mr. Practical: When I can gain a good business reputation by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.

Mr. Righteous: When I can perform a morally right act by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.

Note that in each case there is a generalized form of the maxim:

General Form: Whenever one is _____, he/she shall _____ .

On Kant's view, what matters in evaluating an action is not the consequences, but the principle that is employed in intending or willing, i.e., *my reason* for acting. Two individuals can do the same thing, but one of them do wrong and the other right, depending on what they will. Some maxims fail the test, so the corresponding action is immoral.

This has quite surprising consequences, for even people who reliably do great charitable acts may not be morally good:

To be beneficent where one can is a duty: and besides this, there are many persons who are so sympathetically constituted that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading joy around them...But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however dutiful and amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth. It is on a level with such actions as arise from other inclinations, e.g., the inclination for honor, which if fortunately directed to what is in fact beneficial and accords with duty and is thus honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem, for its maxim lacks the moral content of an action done not from inclination, but from duty. (11)

But what sort of principle or maxim does Kant have in mind? What maxim might be the source of moral worth that doesn't rest on consequences?

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Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. *Kant's Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Very Brief Selective Summary of Sections I and II*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. © University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

¹ See Geoff Sayre-McCord's "Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Very Brief Selective Summary of Sections I and II*," available under recommended readings.

VI. Rational Willing

The underlying rationale for Kant's approach is to show that the source of morality is in *reason* or *rationality*; those who are immoral are in some important sense acting *irrationally*. On this view, we don't ground morality in God's will, or in the seemingly arbitrary moral codes of particular cultures. Morality is grounded in reason itself. This is not so different from what Aristotle thought, at least this far. But where Aristotle thought that reason was an excellence of character, Kant thinks that the demands of reason lie in logical features of the morally correct principles. (14f)

For example, suppose you are going to take an exam later today and have not studied. So you decide to copy off your neighbor's work during the exam.

Ms. Practical: When I have an exam and don't feel like studying, I shall cheat.

Consider the general maxim of Ms. Practical's action:

General Form: Whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, they shall copy their neighbor's work.

Presumably we could not all act on this maxim, for if we are all planning to copy off each other, there will be no work to copy! (Kant actually discusses the example of promising (14-15).) The problem lies in the logical impossibility of treating the maxim of the action as a universal law:

Inexperienced in the course of the world and incapable of being prepared for all its contingencies, I only ask myself whether I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law. If not, then the maxim must be rejected, not because of any disadvantage accruing to me or even to others, but because it cannot be fitting as a principle in a possible legislation of universal law, and reason exacts from me immediate respect for such legislation. (15)

VII. Questions and Concerns

1) *Isn't the good will part of an individual's character? How is Kant's view different from Aristotle's in this respect, i.e., is Kant really saying that the source of moral value is in the action itself?*

Note that Aristotle thought that character was a disposition to deliberate correctly, not a one-off example of deliberation about how to act. Kant focuses on the rightness of an *action*. Also, the source of the moral value for Kant has both an objective and a subjective dimension. He says:

Now an action done from duty must altogether exclude the influence of inclination and therewith every object of the will. Hence there is nothing left which can determine the will except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law, i.e., the will can be subjectively determined by the maxim that I should follow such a law even if all my inclinations are thereby thwarted. (13)

This is hard to interpret, but there seems to be an "objective" fact about the law, i.e., that it can be universalized, that makes it a moral law; and there is a subjective fact about my acting with such a law as my maxim. But note that what makes the action the very action it is, is the fact that it has been willed using this maxim. So the source of moral value is in the action rather than my character.

2) *In some cases a maxim cannot be generalized, but its failure is not due to moral factors. E.g., consider a person who decides to withdraw all his money from the bank as soon as the Dow Jones reaches a certain number...x. This maxim would not be one that everyone could act upon, but not due to constraints on morality.*

Note that Kant would not agree that this principle cannot be universalized, for the fact that we can't all will this (simultaneously?) is not due to "logic" but due to empirical facts about banking.

3) *It appears in many cases that one can adjust the statement of the maxim so that the problem disappears, e.g., consider the maxim: whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, and everyone else is well-prepared, and she can do it without being caught, she shall copy off her neighbor's work.*

What do you think?

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