

Part VI

Kant: Duty and Respect

Chapter 15

The Ethics of Duty

15.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 9, RTD 9 (Kant)

Study questions:

- What is an hypothetical requirement? Illustrate your answer with an example
- What is a categorical requirement? Illustrate your answer with an example.
- What is the Categorical Imperative? How can we use it to decide what the right thing to do is?
- Is there some circumstances in which it is ok to lie for Kant? Why or why not?
- What is the main problem with the idea of absolute moral rules?
- Which important insight did we learn from Kant and his categorical imperative?

15.2 Introduction

We have seen that for the utilitarian, one should assess a given action in assessing *the consequences* of this action. For the orthodox utilitarian, the “best” the consequences are, the best the action is, *whatever the motives*. The consequences are judged better or worse depending on *the increase or decrease of happiness* that these consequences bring about for everyone concerned. *For the utilitarian, the ultimate value of our moral life is then: to make the world a better place.*

We have seen that this ideas put utilitarianism in conflict with our natural notion of right as absolutes. That is to say, our moral intuition is that there are some absolute moral rules, which have to be obeyed, no matter what the consequences are. The utilitarian’s answer to this concern is that our notion of right is mistaken: what we call rights are moral rules that we decided upon because we thought they were likely to bring the general welfare in a human society. Once one has understood the true foundation of these rights we cherish so

much, one is supposed to understand as well that these rights, when they do not fulfill their goal, that is, when they do not support the general welfare, should be abandoned, in favor of these rules which do bring about the general welfare.

In many ways, Kant can be seen as defending a view opposite to the utilitarian view.

About Kant: 1724 - 1804 – born and dead in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad in Russia). Never travelled, never change his schedule: people would set their clocks by his walks on the path named after him “the philosopher walk”. Weekly much-sought-after dinner guest. Last words: “Es ist gut” (This is good).

Kant the philosopher: One of the most important philosophers of all times. Writings in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, aesthetics and religion. Very difficult to read. Most well know: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*.

Kant’s ethics in a nutshell:

1. Actions are judged only on the basis of the motives.
2. These motives should strictly follow some absolute moral rules – our duty.
3. These moral rules are grounded in reason.

Let us see this in more detail...

The questions you want to think about in this chapter:

1. How important are the motives of our moral actions?
 - If someone has good intentions, but his action happens to work out badly, does he or she still deserve moral credit for it? – Chest compression during resuscitation attempt: ends up breaking a rib
 - If someone does something apparently morally good, but for the wrong reasons, does he or she still deserve moral credit for it? – The merchant giving change to a boy
2. Are there absolute moral rules, that we have to follow whatever the consequences?

Look at the list given by Anscombe in EMP p.119: which of these do *you* deem absolute?

15.3 “The law within me” – Duty

At the end of the second *Critique*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within”

What is the moral law? our sense of duty

Definition 22 – Duty Theory

Duty Theory is the view that what is right to do is to act in conformity with duty and for the sake of duty.

What does it mean?

Conformity with duty – Motives vs. Consequences

According to Kant, the motives of our actions are more important than the consequences.

One main reason for this: *consequences are always uncertain: they belong to the realm of nature, on which we do not have any power*

By contrast, our motives depends on our reason and free will. We have complete power here, and hence, we are completely responsible.

→ *Reason and free will is what define us as moral agents. Moral actions are to be assessed in regarding the reasons or motives of the actions.*

Think about the rescuers in *The courage to care*: do you admire these people because they actually managed to save people, or because they did what was right to do? Would you less admire them if their rescue, for one or another reason, had failed?

So: According to Kant, *our actions are moral only if they are governed by these motives that are conform with our duty.*

To act in conformity with duty is necessary, but not sufficient though:

For the sake of duty – It is possible to act in conformity with duty, but not for the sake of it: basically, you do what is right to do, but for the wrong reasons.

- Compare: Trial, John and Jim, both vote for freeing the innocent, but not both for the right reasons.

- Kant distinguishes between three kinds of motives

1. action from mediate inclination
2. action from immediate inclination
3. action for the sake of duty

Example: the grocer does not overcharge the kid

1. a witty person who wants to keep a good reputation
2. a friend of mankind who enjoys spreading happiness
3. a cold-hearted, unsympathetic person who nevertheless treat the kid right just because this is the right thing to do

All three are doing what is in conformity with duty. Only the third one is doing for the sake of duty alone. According to Kant, the later, that is, the third kind of person, is the most admirable person !

Between 1 and the others: It is pretty clear that the first kind of motive is not the best kind (Note that the utilitarian would not care though!).

Kant's claim is less obvious when it comes to compare 2 and 3: Why would the cold-hearted man be a better person than the friend of mankind?

- The friend of mankind acts upon his or her immediate inclinations, that is his or her desires

- Desires belong to our *bodily nature*, which implies that:

1. They don't depend on our free will (you are not morally responsible for your desires – they are part of your nature)

2. They can change: what if the friend of mankind gets sick of humanity after too much disappointment. He or she is likely to stop being nice to everybody and stop acting in conformity with duty. *By contrast, the cold-hearted man's behavior will remain steady whatever mankind does to him.*

→ *A moral life based on desires and emotion lacks the reliability of one based on reason.*

Alright then, Kant's view is that the right thing to do is to follow duty, for the sake of following duty. But how do we know what our duty is?

15.4 Universality and the categorical imperative

The basic intuition is the idea of the Golden Rule: our duty is to do what we would not want other people to do.

For developing this idea, Kant makes a distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives:

Hypothetical vs Categorical Imperatives – Definition Kant (RTD p.82)

Definition 23 – Imperative

An imperative is a command: it presents to my will which action would be good to do.

Definition 24 – Hypothetical Imperative

An hypothetical imperative presents to my will which action would be good to do “as a mean to something else”.

Structure: “If one wants then one ought to”

Definition 25 – Categorical Imperative

Categorical Imperative: presents to my will which action would be good to do “as a good in itself”

Structure: “one ought to...”

Examples:

- Hypothetical imperative: If you want to keep your friends, you'd better keep your promises

- Categorical imperative: one ought to keep his or her promises (no if...)

→ *According to Kant, the moral law is a categorical imperative: it is unconditional.*

The Categorical Imperative – Formulation and usage

There is only one categorical imperative (p.83):

“Act only accordingly to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”

The idea is that whenever you decide upon a moral action, you are deciding upon certain rules of action, which Kant calls maxims. *A maxim is the rule that a person has in mind when performing a certain action.* Kant claims that you can decide whether an action is moral or not just in checking on whether or not the rule of this action passes the test of the Categorical Imperative.

The test consists into two questions :

1. could I make the maxim of my action a universal law?
2. would I want to make the maxim of my action a universal law?

SO: how to decide whether action *A* is the right thing to do? it is pretty simple

1. Figure out what maxim is governing action *A*
2. Look whether this maxim is universalizable
3. If it is: then the action is the right thing to do / If it is not: then the action is the wrong thing to do

→ *Universality is the key: Our duty is to act in the way in which it would work out for everyone else to act.*

Kant's examples :

1. Is it right to commit suicide? No.
 - Maxim: destroying my life as an improvement on my life
 - Universalization: destroy life as a mean to improve life
 - Possible? Desirable?→ *Not even possible because contradictory*
2. Is it right to lie to get a loan when we know we won't be able to repay it? No.
 - Maxim: because I am in need, I can promise to repay a loan (in order to get a loan) with the intention not to repay it
 - Universalization? “anyone in need can promise what he pleased with the intention of not fulfilling it”

- Possible? Desirable?

—→ *Not even possible because contradictory*: if this law was in place, nobody would believe in promises anymore, which makes lying about your promises inefficient. Putting lying as a universal law shows that lying is self-defeating: when you lie, you damage the atmosphere of general trust that is necessary for a lie to work. In other words, lying makes sense only if we expect that other people don't lie. Clearly then, lying is not universalizable as a rule of action. In short: whenever you lie, you shoot yourself in the foot!

3. Is it right to neglect one's natural talents and indulge in pleasure instead?

Universalization:

- Possible: yes

- Desirable: no

4. Is it right to not help others and to only care about oneself instead?

Universalization:

- Possible: yes

- Desirable: no

It is easy to misunderstand Kant's argument about lying. We need to emphasize that what makes the maxims above unacceptable is not that putting them as universal law *would have terrible consequences*. Instead, Kant takes it that what makes them unacceptable is that *they are inconsistent*. Rational consistency is what is behind Kant's assessment of maxims.

15.5 Reason, Rationality and Free will as the foundation of morality

Back to lying – Compare

1. Lying to get advantage of others' credulity is not right because if put as an universal law, then everybody would lie all the time, and the society would not work well anymore
—→ *Not right because of bad consequences*

2. Lying to get advantage of others' credulity is not right because if put as an universal law, then the very possibility of lying to get advantage of others' credulity becomes impossible (there is no more credulity). —→ *Not right because of bad logical inconsistency*

It is crucial to understand the difference between the two: according to Kant, the problem is not about the consequences but about the consistency of the rule of your action.

Morality is Rationality :

- The moral law is, in definitive, a *law of reason*, just like laws of logic. It is part of our “hardware”.

- Rationality imposes on us:

1. to think from the standpoint of everyone
2. to think consistently

→ *To be a moral agent is nothing else than being a rational agent! Acting morally is nothing more than acting rationally.*

This implies that *to be immoral is nothing but being irrational*. When you do something bad, you are being irrational, you’ve made a mistake!

Why such an emphasis on the power of reason?

Reason and free will :

Kant makes the following point: We are not free when we follow our immediate inclinations, desires and emotions. By contrast, we exercise our freedom only when we use reason.

Morality, then:

- is crucially linked to free will
- and hence crucially linked to the exercise of reason

→ *To be a moral agent is the only way to be a free agent. Acting morally is the only way to actually exercise your freedom.*

The power of reason :

The most admirable thing in human beings, according to Kant, is that *we are able to act against our immediate inclinations, desires and emotions, in listening to reason: these moments are moments of true freedom.*

Morality and Dignity :

Being capable of following our duty, irrespective of our desires, is the very essence of our humanity, of our dignity, and of morality.

- When you act upon your desires, you act as an animal.
- When you act upon practical reasons, without any assistance from our feelings or desires, you are exercising “*the autonomy of the will*”

→ *Morality gives you dignity*

Notice that there is no guarantee of happiness !!

Only acting Morality and having dignity does depend only on your will. Whether or not you’ll be happy depends on contingent circumstances. It does not depend only on your will.

15.6 Objections and Answers

Against “Duty Only” – Several philosophers have criticized Kant for his extreme emphasis on duty:

1. Desires and Emotions are not always unreliable – Kant considers human beings as divided into two parts: the body on one side, and reason and free will on the other side. According to him, the moral agent has nothing to do with the body (with its desires and emotions), and everything to do with reason and free will.

But is the division that strict? Some philosopher (Gilligan) defend the idea that the ability to care is an important part of being a moral agent.

And is it true that desires and emotions are unreliable? We’ll see that Aristotle defends the idea that we can educate our emotional responses to various situations.

2. The importance of character: Virtue ethics (Aristotle again) will tell us that it is an important part of moral life to build up a virtuous character. According to them, you are being virtuous only if you actually take some pleasure in doing good.

→ *So: Kant’s view of the moral agent is incomplete. That said, he pointed out something important: it is crucial for an action to be moral that the agent have the right kind of motives.*

Against absolute rules – is it always wrong to lie?

Strict kantian : that it is wrong to lie follows from the categorical imperative: nobody can want that lying be a universal law. It is self-defeating (lies would not work anymore if people were not expecting other to tell the truth)

Objection – the fugitive and the Gestapo

Possible Answers :

1. Uncertain consequences: the fugitive may have left your house, and the Gestapo is going to find him if you send them away

2. Moral safety:

- if you break the rule of the categorical imperative, and the consequences are bad, you are morally responsible

- if you don’t break the rule of the categorical imperative, and the consequences are bad, you are not morally responsible

2 pb:

1. we have sometimes a pretty clear idea of the consequences

2. why is there responsibility in one case and not in the other?

Kant thought there is a kind of safety in doing your duty. You cannot be held responsible for the consequences, if you have done your duty.

This seems unacceptable: if I can clearly foresee the consequences of an action, and that I act this way anyway, I am responsible for the consequences.

3. What if absolute rules are conflicting?
Kant: reason cannot be contradictory
Believer: God would not put us in such situations
Satisfactory?
4. Kant more flexible than sometimes depicted? different formulations of the maxim may lead to different conclusions.
The trick is to formulate the maxim appropriately. Some think that Kant's view this can be accepted without turning rules into absolutes: all it takes is that the exception (in given circumstances) would be accepted by others.
Is this true? what if we universalize: "one can lie to murderers seeking for a fugitive hiding in our house?" Would not this have as a consequence that murderers would not believe you anymore?
Maybe the lying case is the hardest one. It may be true in general that Kantianism is less rigid than often depicted, and that, if we refine the way in which we formulate the maxim, then we could find ways out of the biggest objections.

15.7 Kant's legacy

From Kant, we can retain that

1. It is important to make ethical decision upon rational reasons
2. Rational reasons apply to anybody and any circumstances