Questions for Kant

Kant's moral philosophy is powerful and compelling. But it can be difficult to grasp, especially at first. If you have followed along so far, several questions may have occurred to you. Here are four especially important ones.

QUESTION 1: *Kant's categorical imperative tells us to treat everyone with respect, as an end in itself. Isn't this pretty much the same as the Golden Rule? ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.")*

ANSWER: No. The Golden Rule depends on contingent facts about how people would like to be treated. The categorical imperative

requires that we abstract from such contingencies and respect persons as rational beings, regardless of what they might want in a particular situation.

Suppose you learn that your brother has died in a car accident. Your elderly mother, in frail condition in a nursing home, asks for news of him. You are torn between telling her the truth and sparing her the shock and agony of it. What is the right thing to do? The Golden Rule would ask, "How would you like to be treated in a similar circumstance?" The answer, of course, is highly contingent. Some people would rather be spared harsh truths at vulnerable moments, while others want the truth, however painful. You might well conclude that, if you found yourself in your mother's condition, you would rather not be told.

For Kant, however, this is the wrong question to ask. What matters is not how you (or your mother) would feel under these circumstances, but what it means to treat persons as rational beings, worthy of respect. Here is a case where compassion might point one way and Kantian respect another. From the standpoint of the categorical imperative, lying to your mother out of concern for her feelings would arguably use her as a means to her own contentment rather than respect her as a rational being.

QUESTION 2: *Kant seems to suggest that answering to duty and acting autonomously are one and the same. But how can this be? Acting according to duty means having to obey a law. How can subservience to a law be compatible with freedom?*

ANSWER: Duty and autonomy go together only in a special case—when I am the author of the law I have a duty to obey. My dignity as a free person does not consist in being subject to the moral law, but in being the author of "this very same law . . . and subordinated to it only on this ground." When we abide by the categorical imperative, we abide by a law we have chosen. "The dignity of man consists precisely in his capacity to make universal law,

although only on condition of being himself also subject to the law he makes."[26]

QUESTION 3: *If autonomy means acting according to a law I give myself, what guarantees that everyone will choose the same moral law? If the categorical imperative is the product of my will, isn't it likely that different people will come up with different categorical imperatives? Kant seems to think that we will all agree on the same moral law. But how can he be sure that different people won't reason differently, and arrive at various moral laws?*

ANSWER: When we will the moral law, we don't choose as you and me, particular persons that we are, but as rational beings, as participants in what Kant calls "pure practical reason." So it's a mistake to think that the moral law is up to us as individuals. Of course, if we reason from our particular interests, desires, and ends, we may be led to any number of principles. But these are not moral principles, only prudential ones. Insofar as we exercise pure practical reason, we abstract from our particular interests. This means that everyone who exercises pure practical reason will reach the same conclusion—will arrive at a single (universal) categorical imperative. "Thus a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same."[27]

QUESTION 4: *Kant argues that if morality is more than a matter of prudential calculation, it must take the form of a categorical imperative. But how can we know that morality exists apart from the play of power and interests? Can we ever be sure that we are capable of acting autonomously, with a free will? What if scientists discover (through brain-imaging, for example, or cognitive neuroscience) that we have no free will after all: Would that disprove Kant's moral philosophy?*

ANSWER: Freedom of the will is not the kind of thing that science can prove or disprove. Neither is morality. It's true that human beings inhabit the realm of nature. Everything we do can be described from a physical or biological point of view. When I raise my hand to cast a vote, my action can be explained in terms of muscles, neurons, synapses, and cells. But it can also be explained in terms of

ideas and beliefs. Kant says we can't help but understand ourselves from both standpoints—the empirical realm of physics and biology, and an "intelligible" realm of free human agency.

To answer this question more fully, I need to say a bit more about these two standpoints. They are two perspectives we can take on human agency, and on the laws that govern our actions. Here is how Kant describes the two standpoints:

> A rational being . . . has two points of view from which he can regard himself and from which he can know laws governing . . . all his actions. He can consider himself *first*—so far as he belongs to the sensible world—to be under laws of nature (heteronomy); and *secondly*—so far as he belongs to the intelligible world—to be under laws which, being independent of nature, are not empirical but have their ground in reason alone."[28]

The contrast between these two perspectives lines up with the three contrasts we have already discussed:

Contrast 1 (morality):	**duty v. inclination**
Contrast 2 (freedom):	**autonomy v. heteronomy**
Contrast 3 (reason):	**categorical v. hypothetical imperatives**
Contrast 4 (standpoints):	**intelligible v. sensible realms**

As a natural being, I belong to the sensible world. My actions are determined by the laws of nature and the regularities of cause and effect. This is the aspect of human action that physics, biology, and neuroscience can describe. As a rational being, I inhabit an intelligible world. Here, being independent of the laws of nature, I am capable of autonomy, capable of acting according to a law I give myself.

Kant argues that only from this second (intelligible) standpoint can I regard myself as free, "for to be independent of determination by

causes in the sensible world (and this is what reason must always attribute to itself) is to be free."[29]

If I were only an empirical being, I would not be capable of freedom; every exercise of will would be conditioned by some interest or desire. All choice would be heteronomous choice, governed by the pursuit of some end. My will could never be a first cause, only the effect of some prior cause, the instrument of one or another impulse or inclination.

Insofar as we think of ourselves as free, we cannot think of ourselves as merely empirical beings. "When we think of ourselves as free, we transfer ourselves into the intelligible world as members and recognize the autonomy of the will together with its consequence—morality."[30]

So—to return to the question—how are categorical imperatives possible? Only because "the idea of freedom makes me a member of the intelligible world."[31] The idea that we can act freely, take moral responsibility for our actions, and hold other people morally responsible for their actions requires that we see ourselves from this perspective—from the standpoint of an agent, not merely an object. If you really want to resist this notion, and claim that human freedom and moral responsibility are utter illusions, then Kant's account can't prove you wrong. But it would be difficult if not impossible to understand ourselves, to make sense of our lives, without some conception of freedom and morality. And any such conception, Kant thinks, commits us to the two standpoints—the standpoints of the agent and of the object. And once you see the force of this picture, you will see why science can never prove or disprove the possibility of freedom.

Remember, Kant admits that we aren't only rational beings. We don't only inhabit the intelligible world. If we were only rational beings, not subject to the laws and necessities of nature, then all of our actions "would invariably accord with the autonomy of the will."[32] Because we inhabit, simultaneously, both standpoints—the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom—there is always potentially a gap

between what we do and what we ought to do, between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

Another way of putting this point is to say that morality is not empirical. It stands at a certain distance from the world. It passes judgment on the world. Science can't, for all its power and insight, reach moral questions, because it operates within the sensible realm.

"To argue freedom away," Kant writes, "is as impossible for the most abstruse philosophy as it is for the most ordinary human reason."[33] It's also impossible, Kant might have added, for cognitive neuroscience, however sophisticated. Science can investigate nature and inquire into the empirical world, but it cannot answer moral questions or disprove free will. That is because morality and freedom are not empirical concepts. We can't prove that they exist, but neither can we make sense of our moral lives without presupposing them.