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5. WHAT MATTERS IS THE MOTIVE / IMMANUEL KANT

If you believe in universal human rights, you are probably not a utilitarian. If all human beings are worthy of respect, regardless of who they are or where they live, then it's wrong to treat them as mere instruments of the collective happiness. (Recall the story of the malnourished child languishing in the cellar for the sake of the "city of happiness.")

You might defend human rights on the grounds that respecting them will maximize utility in the long run. In that case, however, your reason for respecting rights is not to respect the person who holds them but to make things better for everyone. It is one thing to condemn the scenario of the suffering child because it reduces overall utility, and something else to condemn it as an intrinsic moral wrong, an injustice to the child.

If rights don't rest on utility, what is their moral basis? Libertarians offer a possible answer: Persons should not be used merely as means to the welfare of others, because doing so violates the fundamental right of self-ownership. My life, labor, and person belong to me and me alone. They are not at the disposal of the society as a whole.

As we have seen, however, the idea of self-ownership, consistently applied, has implications that only an ardent libertarian can love—an unfettered market without a safety net for those who fall behind; a

minimal state that rules out most measures to ease inequality and promote the common good; and a celebration of consent so complete that it permits self-inflicted affronts to human dignity such as consensual cannibalism or selling oneself into slavery.

Even John Locke (1632–1704), the great theorist of property rights and limited government, does not assert an unlimited right of self-possession. He rejects the notion that we may dispose of our life and liberty however we please. But Locke's theory of unalienable rights invokes God, posing a problem for those who seek a moral basis for rights that does not rest on religious assumptions.

Kant's Case for Rights

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) offers an alternative account of duties and rights, one of the most powerful and influential accounts any philosopher has produced. It does not depend on the idea that we own ourselves, or on the claim that our lives and liberties are a gift from God. Instead, it depends on the idea that we are rational beings, worthy of dignity and respect.

Kant was born in the East Prussian city of Königsberg in 1724, and died there, almost eighty years later. He came from a family of modest means. His father was a harness-maker and his parents were Pietists, members of a Protestant faith that emphasized the inner religious life and the doing of good works.¹

He excelled at the University of Königsberg, which he entered at age sixteen. For a time, he worked as a private tutor, and then, at thirty-one, he received his first academic job, as an unsalaried lecturer, for which he was paid based on the number of students who showed up at his lectures. He was a popular and industrious lecturer, giving about twenty lectures a week on subjects including metaphysics, logic, ethics, law, geography, and anthropology.

In 1781, at age fifty-seven, he published his first major book, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which challenged the empiricist theory of

knowledge associated with David Hume and John Locke. Four years later, he published the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the first of his several works on moral philosophy. Five years after Jeremy Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1780), Kant's *Groundwork* launched a devastating critique of utilitarianism. It argues that morality is not about maximizing happiness or any other end. Instead, it is about respecting persons as ends in themselves.

Kant's *Groundwork* appeared shortly after the American Revolution (1776) and just before the French Revolution (1789). In line with the spirit and moral thrust of those revolutions, it offers a powerful basis for what the eighteenth-century revolutionaries called the rights of man, and what we in the early twenty-first century call universal human rights.

Kant's philosophy is hard going. But don't let that scare you away. It is worth the effort, because the stakes are enormous. The *Groundwork* takes up a big question: What is the supreme principle of morality? And in the course of answering that question, it addresses another hugely important one: What is freedom?

Kant's answers to these questions have loomed over moral and political philosophy ever since. But his historical influence is not the only reason to pay attention to him. Daunting though Kant's philosophy may seem at first glance, it actually informs much contemporary thinking about morality and politics, even if we are unaware of it. So making sense of Kant is not only a philosophical exercise; it is also a way of examining some of the key assumptions implicit in our public life.

Kant's emphasis on human dignity informs present-day notions of universal human rights. More important, his account of freedom figures in many of our contemporary debates about justice. In the introduction to this book, I distinguished three approaches to justice. One approach, that of the utilitarians, says that the way to define justice and to determine the right thing to do is to ask what will maximize welfare, or the collective happiness of society as a whole. A second approach connects justice to freedom. Libertarians offer an example of

this approach. They say the just distribution of income and wealth is whatever distribution arises from the free exchange of goods and services in an unfettered market. To regulate the market is unjust, they maintain, because it violates the individual's freedom of choice. A third approach says that justice means giving people what they morally deserve—allocating goods to reward and promote virtue. As we will see when we turn to Aristotle (in Chapter 8), the virtue-based approach connects justice to reflection about the good life.

Kant rejects approach one (maximizing welfare) and approach three (promoting virtue). Neither, he thinks, respects human freedom. So Kant is a powerful advocate for approach two—the one that connects justice and morality to freedom. But the idea of freedom he puts forth is demanding—more demanding than the freedom of choice we exercise when buying and selling goods on the market. What we commonly think of as market freedom or consumer choice is not true freedom, Kant argues, because it simply involves satisfying desires we haven't chosen in the first place.

In a moment, we'll come to Kant's more exalted idea of freedom. But before we do, let's see why he thinks the utilitarians are wrong to think of justice and morality as a matter of maximizing happiness.

The Trouble with Maximizing Happiness

Kant rejects utilitarianism. By resting rights on a calculation about what will produce the greatest happiness, he argues, utilitarianism leaves rights vulnerable. There is also a deeper problem: trying to derive moral principles from the desires we happen to have is the wrong way to think about morality. Just because something gives many people pleasure doesn't make it right. The mere fact that the majority, however big, favors a certain law, however intensely, does not make the law just.

Kant argues that morality can't be based on merely empirical considerations, such as the interests, wants, desires, and preferences people

have at any given time. These factors are variable and contingent, he points out, so they could hardly serve as the basis for universal moral principles—such as universal human rights. But Kant’s more fundamental point is that basing moral principles on preferences and desires—even the desire for happiness—misunderstands what morality is about. The utilitarian’s happiness principle “contributes nothing whatever toward establishing morality, since making a man happy is quite different from making him good and making him prudent or astute in seeking his advantage quite different from making him virtuous.”² Basing morality on interests and preferences destroys its dignity. It doesn’t teach us how to distinguish right from wrong, but “only to become better at calculation.”³

If our wants and desires can’t serve as the basis of morality, what’s left? One possibility is God. But that is not Kant’s answer. Although he was a Christian, Kant did not base morality on divine authority. He argues instead that we can arrive at the supreme principle of morality through the exercise of what he calls “pure practical reason.” To see how, according to Kant, we can reason our way to the moral law, let’s now explore the close connection, as Kant sees it, between our capacity for reason and our capacity for freedom.

Kant argues that every person is worthy of respect, not because we own ourselves but because we are rational beings, capable of reason; we are also autonomous beings, capable of acting and choosing freely.

Kant doesn’t mean that we always succeed in acting rationally, or in choosing autonomously. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don’t. He means only that we have the capacity for reason, and for freedom, and that this capacity is common to human beings as such.

Kant readily concedes that our capacity for reason is not the only capacity we possess. We also have the capacity to feel pleasure and pain. Kant recognizes that we are sentient creatures as well as rational ones. By “sentient,” Kant means that we respond to our senses, our feelings. So Bentham was right—but only half right. He was right to observe that we like pleasure and dislike pain. But he was wrong to insist that

they are “our sovereign masters.” Kant argues that reason can be sovereign, at least some of the time. When reason governs our will, we are not driven by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Our capacity for reason is bound up with our capacity for freedom. Taken together, these capacities make us distinctive, and set us apart from mere animal existence. They make us more than mere creatures of appetite.

What Is Freedom?

To make sense of Kant’s moral philosophy, we need to understand what he means by freedom. We often think of freedom as the absence of obstacles to doing what we want. Kant disagrees. He has a more stringent, demanding notion of freedom.

Kant reasons as follows: When we, like animals, seek pleasure or the avoidance of pain, we aren’t really acting freely. We are acting as the slaves of our appetites and desires. Why? Because whenever we are seeking to satisfy our desires, everything we do is for the sake of some end given outside us. I go this way to assuage my hunger, that way to slake my thirst.

Suppose I’m trying to decide what flavor of ice cream to order: Should I go for chocolate, vanilla, or espresso toffee crunch? I may think of myself as exercising freedom of choice, but what I’m really doing is trying to figure out which flavor will best satisfy my preferences—preferences I didn’t choose in the first place. Kant doesn’t say it’s wrong to satisfy our preferences. His point is that, when we do so, we are not acting freely, but acting according to a determination given outside us. After all, I didn’t choose my desire for espresso toffee crunch rather than vanilla. I just have it.

Some years ago, Sprite had an advertising slogan: “Obey your thirst.” Sprite’s ad contained (inadvertently, no doubt) a Kantian insight. When I pick up a can of Sprite (or Pepsi or Coke), I act out of

obedience, not freedom. I am responding to a desire I haven't chosen. I am obeying my thirst.

People often argue over the role of nature and nurture in shaping behavior. Is the desire for Sprite (or other sugary drinks) inscribed in the genes or induced by advertising? For Kant, this debate is beside the point. Whenever my behavior is biologically determined or socially conditioned, it is not truly free. To act freely, according to Kant, is to act autonomously. And to act autonomously is to act according to a law I give myself—not according to the dictates of nature or social convention.

One way of understanding what Kant means by acting autonomously is to contrast autonomy with its opposite. Kant invents a word to capture this contrast—*heteronomy*. When I act heteronomously, I act according to determinations given outside of me. Here is an illustration: When you drop a billiard ball, it falls to the ground. As it falls, the billiard ball is not acting freely; its movement is governed by the laws of nature—in this case, the law of gravity.

Suppose that I fall (or am pushed) from the Empire State Building. As I hurtle toward the earth, no one would say that I am acting freely; my movement is governed by the law of gravity, as with the billiard ball.

Now suppose I land on another person and kill that person. I would not be morally responsible for the unfortunate death, any more than the billiard ball would be morally responsible if it fell from a great height and hit someone on the head. In neither case is the falling object—me or the billiard ball—acting freely. In both cases, the falling object is governed by the law of gravity. Since there is no autonomy, there can be no moral responsibility.

Here, then, is the link between freedom as autonomy and Kant's idea of morality. To act freely is not to choose the best means to a given end; it is to choose the end itself, for its own sake—a choice that human beings can make and billiard balls (and most animals) cannot.

Persons and Things

It is 3:00 a.m., and your college roommate asks you why you are up late pondering moral dilemmas involving runaway trolleys.

“To write a good paper in Ethics 101,” you reply.

“But why write a good paper?” your roommate asks.

“To get a good grade.”

“But why care about grades?”

“To get a job in investment banking.”

“But why get a job in investment banking?”

“To become a hedge fund manager someday.”

“But why be a hedge fund manager?”

“To make a lot of money.”

“But why make a lot of money?”

“To eat lobster often, which I like. I am, after all, a sentient creature. *That’s* why I’m up late thinking about runaway trolleys!”

This is an example of what Kant would call heteronomous determination—doing something for the sake of something else, for the sake of something else, and so on. When we act heteronomously, we act for the sake of ends given outside us. We are instruments, not authors, of the purposes we pursue.

Kant’s notion of autonomy stands in stark contrast to this. When we act autonomously, according to a law we give ourselves, we do something for its own sake, as an end in itself. We cease to be instruments of purposes given outside us. This capacity to act autonomously is what gives human life its special dignity. It marks out the difference between persons and things.

For Kant, respecting human dignity means treating persons as ends in themselves. This is why it is wrong to use people for the sake of the general welfare, as utilitarianism does. Pushing the heavy man onto the track to block the trolley uses him as a means, and so fails to respect him as an end in himself. An enlightened utilitarian (such as Mill) may refuse to push the man, out of concern for secondary effects that would

diminish utility in the long run. (People would soon be afraid to stand on bridges, etc.) But Kant would maintain that this is the wrong reason to desist from pushing. It still treats the would-be victim as an instrument, an object, a mere means to the happiness of others. It lets him live, not for his own sake, but so that other people can cross bridges without a second thought.

This raises the question of what gives an action moral worth. It takes us from Kant's specially demanding idea of freedom to his equally demanding notion of morality.

What's Moral? Look for the Motive

According to Kant, the moral worth of an action consists not in the consequences that flow from it, but in the intention from which the act is done. What matters is the motive, and the motive must be of a certain kind. What matters is doing the right thing because it's right, not for some ulterior motive.

"A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes," Kant writes. It is good in itself, whether or not it prevails. "Even if . . . this will is entirely lacking in power to carry out its intentions; if by its utmost effort it still accomplishes nothing . . . even then it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself."⁴

For any action to be morally good, "it is not enough that it should *conform* to the moral law—it must also be done for the sake of the moral law."⁵ And the motive that confers moral worth on an action is the motive of duty, by which Kant means doing the right thing for the right reason.⁶

In saying that only the motive of duty confers moral worth on an action, Kant is not yet saying what particular duties we have. He is not yet telling us what the supreme principle of morality commands. He's simply observing that, when we assess the moral worth of an action, we assess the motive from which it's done, not the consequences it produces.⁶

If we act out of some motive other than duty, such as self-interest, for example, our action lacks moral worth. This is true, Kant maintains, not only for self-interest but for any and all attempts to satisfy our wants, desires, preferences, and appetites. Kant contrasts motives such as these—he calls them “motives of inclination”—with the motive of duty. And he insists that only actions done out of the motive of duty have moral worth.

The calculating shopkeeper and the Better Business Bureau

Kant offers several examples that bring out the difference between duty and inclination. The first involves a prudent shopkeeper. An inexperienced customer, say, a child, goes into a grocery store to buy a loaf of bread. The grocer could overcharge him—charge him more than the usual price for a loaf of bread—and the child would not know. But the grocer realizes that, if others discovered he took advantage of the child in this way, word might spread and hurt his business. For this reason, he decides not to overcharge the child. He charges him the usual price. So the shopkeeper does the right thing, but for the wrong reason. The only reason he deals honestly with the child is to protect his reputation. The shopkeeper acts honestly only for the sake of self-interest; the shopkeeper’s action lacks moral worth.⁷

A modern-day parallel to Kant’s prudent shopkeeper can be found in the recruiting campaign of the Better Business Bureau of New York. Seeking to enlist new members, the BBB sometimes runs a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with the headline “Honesty is the best policy. It’s also the most profitable.” The text of the ad leaves no mistake about the motive being appealed to.

Honesty. It’s as important as any other asset. Because a business that deals in truth, openness, and fair value cannot help but do well. It is toward this end [that] we support the Better Business Bureau. Come join us. And profit from it.

Kant would not condemn the Better Business Bureau; promoting honest business dealing is commendable. But there is an important moral difference between honesty for its own sake and honesty for the sake of the bottom line. The first is a principled position, the second a prudential one. Kant argues that only the principled position is in line with the motive of duty, the only motive that confers moral worth on an action.

Or consider this example: Some years ago, the University of Maryland sought to combat a widespread cheating problem by asking students to sign pledges not to cheat. As an inducement, students who took the pledge were offered a discount card good for savings of 10 to 25 percent at local shops.⁸ No one knows how many students promised not to cheat for the sake of a discount at the local pizza place. But most of us would agree that bought honesty lacks moral worth. (The discounts might or might not succeed in reducing the incidence of cheating; the moral question, however, is whether honesty motivated by the desire for a discount or a monetary reward has moral worth. Kant would say no.)

These cases bring out the plausibility of Kant's claim that only the motive of duty—doing something because it's right, not because it's useful or convenient—confers moral worth on an action. But two further examples bring out a complexity in Kant's claim.

Staying alive

The first involves the duty, as Kant sees it, to preserve one's own life. Since most people have a strong inclination to continue living, this duty rarely comes into play. Most of the precautions we take to preserve our lives therefore lack moral content. Buckling our seat belts and keeping our cholesterol in check are prudential acts, not moral ones.

Kant acknowledges that it is often difficult to know what motivates people to act as they do. And he recognizes that motives of duty and

inclination may both be present. His point is that only the motive of duty—doing something because it’s right, not because it’s useful or pleasing or convenient—confers moral worth on an action. He illustrates this point with the example of suicide.

Most people go on living because they love life, not because they have a duty to do so. Kant offers a case where the motive of duty comes into view. He imagines a hopeless, miserable person so filled with despair that he has no desire to go on living. If such a person summons the will to preserve his life, not from inclination but from duty, then his action has moral worth.⁹

Kant does not maintain that only miserable people can fulfill the duty to preserve their lives. It is possible to love life and still preserve it for the right reason—namely, that one has a duty to do so. The desire to go on living doesn’t undermine the moral worth of preserving one’s life, provided the person recognizes the duty to preserve his or her own life, and does so with this reason in mind.

The moral misanthrope

Perhaps the hardest case for Kant’s view involves what he takes to be the duty to help others. Some people are altruistic. They feel compassion for others and take pleasure in helping them. But for Kant, doing good deeds out of compassion, “however right and however amiable it may be,” lacks moral worth. This may seem counterintuitive. Isn’t it good to be the kind of person who takes pleasure in helping others? Kant would say yes. He certainly doesn’t think there is anything wrong with acting out of compassion. But he distinguishes between this motive for helping others—that doing the good deed gives me pleasure—and the motive of duty. And he maintains that only the motive of duty confers moral worth on an action. The compassion of the altruist “deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem.”¹⁰

What, then, would it take for a good deed to have moral worth?

Kant offers a scenario: Imagine that our altruist suffers a misfortune that extinguishes his love of humanity. He becomes a misanthrope who lacks all sympathy and compassion. But this cold-hearted soul tears himself out of his indifference and comes to the aid of his fellow human beings. Lacking any inclination to help, he does so “for the sake of duty alone.” Now, for the first time, his action has moral worth.¹¹

This seems in some ways an odd judgment. Does Kant mean to valorize misanthropes as moral exemplars? No, not exactly. Taking pleasure in doing the right thing does not necessarily undermine its moral worth. What matters, Kant tells us, is that the good deed be done because it’s the right thing to do—whether or not doing it gives us pleasure.

The spelling bee hero

Consider an episode that took place some years ago at the national spelling bee in Washington, D.C. A thirteen-year-old boy was asked to spell *echolalia*, a word that means a tendency to repeat whatever one hears. Although he misspelled the word, the judges misheard him, told him he had spelled the word right, and allowed him to advance. When the boy learned that he had misspelled the word, he went to the judges and told them. He was eliminated after all. Newspaper headlines the next day proclaimed the honest young man a “spelling bee hero,” and his photo appeared in *The New York Times*. “The judges said I had a lot of integrity,” the boy told reporters. He added that part of his motive was, “I didn’t want to feel like a slime.”¹²

When I read that quote from the spelling bee hero, I wondered what Kant would think. Not wanting to feel like a slime is an inclination, of course. So, if that was the boy’s motive for telling the truth, it would seem to undermine the moral worth of his act. But this seems too harsh. It would mean that only unfeeling people could ever perform morally worthy acts. I don’t think this is what Kant means.

If the only reason the boy told the truth was to avoid feeling guilty, or to avoid bad publicity should his error be discovered, then his truth-telling would lack moral worth. But if he told the truth because he knew it was the right thing to do, his act has moral worth regardless of the pleasure or satisfaction that might attend it. As long as he did the right thing for the right reason, feeling good about it doesn't undermine its moral worth.

The same is true of Kant's altruist. If he comes to the aid of other people simply for the pleasure it gives him, then his action lacks moral worth. But if he recognizes a duty to help one's fellow human beings and acts out of that duty, then the pleasure he derives from it is not morally disqualifying.

In practice, of course, duty and inclination often coexist. It is often hard to sort out one's own motives, let alone know for sure the motives of other people. Kant doesn't deny this. Nor does he think that only a hardhearted misanthrope can perform morally worthy acts. The point of his misanthrope example is to isolate the motive of duty—to see it unclouded by sympathy or compassion. And once we glimpse the motive of duty, we can identify the feature of our good deeds that gives them their moral worth—namely, their principle, not their consequences.