

Kant on Morality and Unconditional Good

Corey McGrath
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Recall that for Hobbes for something to be called ‘good’ just means that it is desired by someone. Therefore nothing is good except on the *condition* that it be desired by somebody. Similarly, Gauthier’s picture of morality places it with ‘the framework of deliberative justification’, that is, within an account of human action where the only reason to act in a certain way is because we believe it benefits us (see page 707). Again, what is good is good because it is someone’s desire (or preference, in Gauthier’s terminology).

Gauthier earlier mentions and dismisses an alternative possibility. The suggestion is that we ‘reinterpret the idea of justification, showing that, more fully understood, deliberative justification is incomplete, and must be supplemented in a way that makes room for morality.’ That is, it maybe be that actions require *further* justification than that they bring us what we desire, and that this further justification is what morality consists in. Whether or not Gauthier and like-minded philosophers dismiss this possibility hastily or unfairly is a question too deep for us to get into — suffice to say it is perhaps the crux of the disagreement between those philosophers and Kant.

Looking at Kant’s attitude toward conditional good can illuminate his famous opening remark in Section I: ‘There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification except a *good will*.’ Note in the first place that this declaration assumes at the outset that there is such a thing as conditional good, thus we do not engage with the Hobbesian, who rejects such a notion. Kant does not argue, but rather assumes, that there is more to a thing’s being good, or act’s being right, than the fulfillment of desire.

Based upon the assumption that a thing can be good independently of any person’s interests, Kant gives an argument for the need of an a priori science of morality (390):

For in the case of what is to be morally good, that it conforms to the moral law is not enough; it must also be done for the sake of the moral law. Otherwise that conformity is only very contingent and uncertain, since the non-moral ground may now and then produce actions that conform with the law but quite often produces actions that are contrary to the law.

The idea here is that, per Gauthier’s characterization, any person’s desires (or other interests) are *non*-moral grounds for action, and moral grounds are something over and above these. It is a contingent fact that any non-moral ground for acting will move one

to act morally. Only an action that motivated by a desire to conform to the moral law will necessarily be moral.

An act that stems from a good will can be analyzed into two parts:

1. We act on a judgment that so acting is good to do.
2. We are correct in the judgment that so acting is good to do.

The second condition here is that we are correct in judging that an act is good to do. The standard for correctness is what Kant calls the moral law. The first condition is the requirement that we act, as Kant says, *from* duty, rather than merely *in accordance with* duty. That is, in order to act morally, we must so act on the judgment that it is the right thing to do.

Going forward, Kant explains in Section I what he means by ‘acting from duty’. In Section II, we see two characterizations of the ‘supreme moral principle’ from which Kant will derive the moral law in a later work, the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Study Questions

1. Explain the distinction between what is known a priori and empirically. Why does Kant think we must know an a priori moral principle in order to act morally?
2. Explain the analogy between Kant’s analysis of the good will and the idea that knowledge requires justification.
3. List the three ‘shopkeeper cases’. Explain why the first two illustrate acting merely in accordance with duty, while the third illustrates acting from duty.
4. Does Kant believe that we, like the third, miserable shopkeeper, must act reluctantly in order to act morally?