

PHIL 213 Ethics
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21th February 2017

Critique for Kant's idea on moral worth

According to Kant, moral worth depends merely on the maxim (formal principle of volition) according to which the action is done, rather than on any purposes or inclinations people might have in the action. Therefore, an action must be done from duty alone in order to have any moral worth (GMM 399). I do not agree with Kant's view on moral worth. In my view, there exists a more fundamental and irrational inclination in people's actions, which is embedded in human instinct, and it is more primary than duty and egoistic inclination that Kant refers to. Therefore moral worth cannot be determined by duty, which comes after the primary inclination and is thus secondary, but rather by the relationship between the primary inclination and the actions.

Kant's reasoning for his view on moral worth is as follows: since as rational beings, whether we have reason to be moral cannot be based on anything contingent, any purposes or inclinations we may have in our actions, which are contingent, cannot give actions any moral worth (GMM 401). Therefore moral worth does not lie in the expected effect of the action nor in any posteriori incentive of the will; it lies only in duty, a priori principle of the will, which is the "necessity of an action done out of respect for the law" (GMM 400). Since only the determining ground of the will but not its effect is priori, moral worth can consist only in the former, which is "objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for the law" (GMM 400). Therefore, moral worth can only be given by duty or respect for the law, excluding any influence of inclination (GMM 401).

More specifically, Kant examines four kinds of actions in which he thinks three of them as having no moral worth, and only one of them as having true moral worth. The former three kinds

of actions are first, actions contrary to duty; second, actions in accordance with duty yet to which people have no immediate inclination but have mediate inclination for them; and third, actions according with duty and to which people have an immediate inclination for them (GMM 397). The only kind of actions that have moral worth, in Kant's view, is the kind of actions done not from any inclination but purely from duty (GMM 398). Here, the distinction between actions in accordance with duty and actions done from duty is obvious: an action can be in accordance with duty even when it is done from inclination, but an action is done from duty only when the action is done without any inclination and is in accordance with duty.

There are two central ideas behind Kant's view on moral worth. First, for us as rational beings, the ground of morality is in reason itself (GMM 395). Second, since moral worth cannot depend on any contingent ends, it can only depend on the determining ground of the will (GMM 400). Because only duty and respect for the law can determine the ground of the will, an action has moral worth only when it is done from duty or respect for the law (GMM 401). However, I do not agree with the very first idea of the necessity of reason in moral actions. I think most fundamentally, there is something beyond reason and rationality in people's action, that is, the irrational primary inclination embedded in human instinct and human nature. All human actions are primarily derived from this irrational and instinctive inclination. Therefore, inclination and duty that Kant refers to only come after the primary inclination, and no matter whether they exist in the determination of actions or not, since they are always the secondary influence for actions, neither of them can determine an action's true moral worth. I believe that the determination of moral worth must be based on the most primary root of the action, the primary inclination. More specifically, the relationship between the primary inclination and action itself determines an

action's true moral worth.

Before I go on discussing the relationship between actions and the primary inclination, I want to first address the difference between what Kant means by inclinations and what I mean by "the primary inclination." Though Kant does not explicitly define inclinations in the text, from his explanation and examples of actions, we can deduce that the inclination he refers to is closely related to the egoistic purpose people have when conducting actions. However, the primary inclination I refer to has nothing to do with purposefulness or egoism; it is the irrational and most primitive inclination in human nature such as a mother's instinct to protect her child. It lies in every human action and is not influenced by any process of reasoning.

In regard of Kant's four cases of actions, in my view, there are three kinds of relationship between the primary inclination and the action itself. In the first relationship, actions are directly motivated by the primary inclination, without any further secondary influence. In the second one, actions are directly influenced by egoistic inclination, while the egoistic inclination is influenced and in accordance with the primary inclination. In the third one, actions are directly influenced by duty, while the process of respect for the law (fulfilling duty) is under the influence of the primary inclination.

To illustrate the three cases above, consider the beneficent person and suicidal examples Kant gives. First, consider the sympathetically constituted persons' actions of helping others without further motive of vanity or self-interest. In some cases, as in the first relationship, the action can directly arise from a person's primary inclination of helping others without further egoistic inclination. This possibility can be illustrated by the example of a person immediately pulling back a child standing in the middle of the road as she sees a car coming towards the

child. Apparently in that half a second the person's action does not arise from any inner-pleasure-seeking inclination, rather, it arises from the primary inclination of sympathy and helping others. In other cases, as in the second relationship, even when the action is directly driven by an egoistic inclination, the primary irrational inclination still exists beyond the egoistic inclination because it is the necessary irrational motivation in the action of people following their egoistic inclination. Second, consider the example where dire distress has completely taken away the taste for life in a person, and she wishes for death yet preserves her life without loving it. In one possibility, as in the first relationship, the person's action is directly and only driven by her primary irrational inclination to live. This does not conflict with her wish for death because she wishes for death in a rational process, yet the irrational instinct to live controls her beyond her rationality. In another possibility, as in the third relationship, she might preserve her life from directly from duty. However, duty is done out of the respect for law, and since the action of "respecting" originates from certain moral feelings, conducting actions from duty is primarily influenced by the primary inclination involving instinctive feelings. Therefore, as we can see from the above cases, since inclination and duty are only the secondary motives for actions, Kant's view on determining moral worth based on such motives is not plausible for me.

In response to my critique, Kant may point out the fact that in some cases, we would act in opposition to our primary inclination; then apparently the action cannot be motivated by our primary inclination. Therefore the action must be rather driven by either an objective principle, duty, or in other case merely by egoistic inclination that are contrary to the primary inclination. For the latter case, consider the example in which a person's primary inclination is to not wear clothes, yet after a process of reasoning, he decides to wear clothes out of an egoistic inclination

of avoiding being taunted in the society. Therefore, Kant might argue that for the above two cases where the primary inclination does not lead to action, moral worth must be given by merely the objective law, duty, rather than any egoistic inclination or primary inclination.

However, such response would not undermine my argument, because fundamentally, the primary inclination is always the indispensable instinctive motivation for people to follow their egoistic inclination or respect the law. In other words, even when the action is in contrary to some of our major primary inclinations, the primary inclination still indirectly exists in the action because it is always necessary and comes before any egoistic inclination or duty. Therefore, since egoistic inclination and duty are always secondary comparing to the primary inclination, i.e., the primary-secondary relationship is not undermined, my argument on moral worth cannot be refuted by the above response. Rather, this brings forward my further view on how moral worth can be determined by the relationship between the primary inclination and the actions. Since I believe that we, as human beings, should always first obey our nature, an action is only morally worthy when it is in accordance with our primary inclination (as in the three relationships I illustrated earlier); and I think that actions that are not in accordance with our major primary inclinations (actions addressed in Kant's response) have no true moral worth.

Bibliography

Kant, Immanuel, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, James W. Ellington (trans., ed.), Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992.

