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PHIL 1107

5 April 2023

An Overemphasis on Duty

Immanuel Kant was one of the central Enlightenment thinkers, becoming one of the most influential philosophers in modern Western philosophy. Kant believed and based this philosophy that morality is grounded in reason and that moral principles are universal and necessary for a functional society. According to Kant an action done from duty is motivated by a sense of obligation and the moral law, apart from external factors and personal interests. As a result of being driven by a sense of moral law apart from other factors only acts performed out of a sense of duty are considered to have any moral worth. This idea stems from Kant’s fundamental idea of philosophy that moral law is derived from reason and applies universally to all rational beings. He called this the Categorical Imperative, which is an unconditional moral law applied to all rational beings requiring us to act out of a sense of duty and not in our interests. This is intercepted often as we should respect other people's autonomy and not use them for our purposes. This essay will explain Kant's conception of duty in morality by further explaining the concept of the Categorical Imperative as well as the significance of motives. Argue that his emphasis on the role of duty is a crucial aspect of moral decision-making, using examples such as lying and helping others. Along with my disagreements on the black-and-white nature that Kant places on motives and the role of duty. By determining what would be the perceived moral worth of seeming everyday actions.

The concept of the Categorical Imperative is fundamental to Kant’s philosophy. As stated in the introduction it is a universal principle that guides moral decision-making, it is an unconditional moral law that applies to all rational beings, which requires us to act out of duty apart from our self-interests. The concept of the Categorical Imperative is often summarized as the principle of treating ”rational beings as ends in themselves”₁ and not merely as means to our ends. Meaning that people should respect others’ autonomy and not use them for their purposes. Kant believed that this principle is essential for a functional society, and it provides a foundation and is directly tied to moral decision-making. In addition to the Categorical Imperative, Kant also placed great importance on the significance of motives. Acts driven by duty are (as a result) also driven by moral law resulting in pure motives apart from the selfishness that would be present otherwise. The motive of an act is directly related to Categorical Imperative and moral decision-making, together determining an act's moral worth. Actions done apart from duty rather in self-interest lack the Categorical Imperative and moral decision-making thus having no moral worth. Kant believed that motives driven by not only self-interest but also sympathy, or the desire for happiness cannot provide a sufficient basis for moral decision-making. Meaning that actions not performed out of a sense of duty are corrupted by the interests of the actor. Without proper moral decision-making behind an action. There is no moral worth behind such actions. Overall, Kant's emphasis on duty and the Categorical Imperative provides a proper recipe for making moral decisions with moral worth.

Emphasis on duty is a crucial and underrated aspect of moral decision-making. This emphasis on duty is particularly evident when considering examples such as lying and helping others. Kant argued that lying is always morally wrong, regardless of the circumstances. Kant wrote, "Hence, there can be no exception to the rule that everyone must tell the truth in all their statements, however damaging they may be to themselves or others."₂ Lying undermines a person's autonomy by treating them unworthy of the truth. One's duty to remain truthful to others is broken, treating them without respect and thus, does not satisfy the Categorical Imperative. This emphasis on duty is also apparent when helping others. Kant says when we help others we are treating them as rational beings and fulfilling the Categorical Imperative to "act so that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."₃. According to Kant, when we act from duty, we are acting in a way that respects the dignity and autonomy of others, and these are the only actions that have moral worth. Lying damages their dignity and autonomy by undermining them while helping them respect them. Therefore, the role of duty in moral decision-making is essential as it provides moral worth in our actions, through actions that respect the autonomy and dignity of others.

While Kant places duty as the most crucial aspect of moral decision-making, I disagree with his black-and-white approach. Kant's idea of the absolute nature of the Categorical Imperative and the role of duty seems to ignore the complexity of moral decision-making in real-life situations. For instance, cases often arise where acting out of self-interest leads to a greater good, particularly in the realm of government. Kant's absolute prohibition on rebellion, which states that no one can take arms against a civil state, becomes problematic since a positive change in government benefits society, and it would not be morally permissible to participate due to self-interest rather than solely out of duty. Similarly, an action may be done out of a sense of duty but with malicious intent, such as a police officer who uses excessive force to uphold the law. Under Kant’s philosophy, the presence of duty from the officer guarantees moral worth despite a horrific outcome. Overall, I believe that the moral worth of an action should factor in the context and consequences of the action. Kant's emphasis on duty can leave blind spots in practicality, where often people's self-interests align with the well-being of others. While determining the moral worth of action I believe it is important to consider duty, context, and consequences. All of which hold an important role in moral decision-making in the real world.

In conclusion, in Kant's Categorical Imperative, the significance of motives and the role of duty play a crucial aspect of moral decision-making. However, his approach to determining the moral worth of an action solely based on the presence or absence of duty ignores many of the dirty details of moral decision-making in real-life situations. Therefore, while Kant's philosophy provides a great basis for moral decision-making based on duty apart from the self-interests of malicious actors, it must be adapted to consider the context and consequences of each action.

Work Cited:

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