

Applied Philosophy

GS F322

Kantian Ethics

and Duties to Oneself

Introduction:

There are 4 perspectives or fields of philosophical inquiry: Ethical, Logical, Epistemological and Metaphysical. Though each covers a different range of ideas and concepts applicable to human existence, they have in common the aim and method of study characteristic of philosophy - critical thinking/the systematic application of reason to satiate curiosity or provide intellectual autonomy. Among these, the field of moral philosophy or ethics has great bearing on the day-to-day lives and choices we make, as it has the potential to aid us in deciding how to behave correctly in a society and can also directly influence the laws/policies that support any human community.

Philosophers have put forth different methods of judging whether a certain act is morally right or wrong and have thus themselves attempted to define good and bad behaviour:

- **Virtue Ethics:** emphasis on cultivating good habits and the right virtues in oneself, which would lead to good or correct behaviour becoming second nature, whose main proponent was Aristotle
- **Utilitarianism:** emphasis on maximizing happiness (greater good), focus on the consequences of one's actions (consequentialism) hence making it tedious or even impossible sometimes to predict what act could be good or bad, studied by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- **Deontology:** emphasis on fulfilling or completing one's duty, focuses on the intention with which one commits an act and not the consequences of that act (unlike

consequentialism), claims that the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on whether it corresponds to one's duty, worked on primarily by W. D. Ross and Immanuel Kant

This paper focuses on Kant's work on duty ethics or deontology. It begins with some information on Kant himself to better understand his motivations for studying deontology and then goes on to explain the many facets of Kantianism including his propositions of morality and categorical imperative, particularly that of moral duties to oneself.

Immanuel Kant:

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 804) was an Enlightenment thinker who became one of the central figures in philosophy. He was born into a religious, artisan family in Prussia. As his parents were Pietist (Lutheran Protestant), he attended a Pietist school that put much emphasis on Christian values (including the power of faith and the inherent incompleteness of human reason), but the religious constraints he had to study under made him turn to Latin classics for secular ideas. This, including his disdain for typical religious principles may have led to his later focus on reason and intellectual autonomy instead of dependence on authority or grace/fate/consequences that influenced his studies of deontology. Kant studied and became a professor of philosophy at the University of Königsberg where he published many philosophical writings on topics ranging from ethics to metaphysics to even mathematics. Kant began developing a way determine good and bad deeds/actions without the use of rigid religious rules and divine principles (replacing faith with reason) in his book Critique of Pure Reason (1781). He explained all his ideas on ethics in Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and Metaphysics of Morals (1797), where he elaborated on the concepts of categorical imperative, the end or goal of an act and intellectual autonomy.

Kantian Ethics:

Kant strictly believed that consequences are irrelevant while judging the morality of an action, unlike other deontologists like W.D. Ross. Kant's ideas, deeply influenced by the Enlightenment

period, depend highly on the use of reason, are based on his view that humans possess the unique capacity of rationality and lay great emphasis on the concepts of duty and will.

Propositions of Morality:

To decipher the true nature of human actions, Kant began by exploring what virtue is objectively good as he believed that even those virtues commonly considered to be noble (like loyalty, truth etc.) could be used for immoral ends. Thus, going against the basic tenet of Aristotelian virtue ethics which considered more than one virtue as good, he concluded that only good will (or motive) can be said to fulfil the criterion of “absolute goodness” in all cases:

“Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will.”

Kant thus explained that only good will can be used to measure the correctness of an action: if a person acts out of one’s duty i.e., out of respect for moral law or through good will (instead of self - interest), one’s action, regardless of its consequences (which may be accidental or unplanned) is morally right. Kant arrived at this conclusion through his three “propositions” or questions about morality:

1. First Proposition: *What makes a person morally good?*

To determine the morality of a person, one must evaluate his/her intentions or motives.

The actual consequences that affect us and other humans do not make us morally good or bad as they are out of our hands, only our intentions do so.

2. Second Proposition: *What sorts of intentions make one morally good?*

Acting from the motive of duty alone and not self-interest or the intention of increasing happiness (whether one’s own or a group’s) makes one morally good.

3. Third Proposition: *What does it mean to act from the motive of duty?*

If one respects the moral law, one is acting from the motive of duty.

Categorical Imperative:

After establishing that one is morally good if one acts out of an intention to respect and uphold the moral law, Kant elaborated on what defines moral law through the concept of the categorical imperative:

- Universalising maxims: *Act as if the maxims of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.*

This formulation may be restated as “Treat others as you wish to be treated.” Kant explains that one must treat others in such a way that they can accept that this action, when generalized and universalized, can be carried out by everyone else also.

- People as ends and not means: *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.*

Kant states that as people, unlike inanimate objects, are rational beings, they have an intrinsic value or worth. Thus, one cannot simply use a person as one desires, the dignity of humans should be respected and humans should be seen as ends and not means.

Thus, Kant explained that by following the given formulations of the categorical imperative, one acts out of respect for the moral law and is thus morally right.

Duties to Oneself:

In the first formulation of the categorical imperative, it is very clear to see how one can judge one's actions towards others. If you can accept someone behaving the same way towards you, your action can be universalized. If your action cannot be universalized, you have the duty of not carrying out that action. Thus, a person's duties to others can be defined. But the statement “Treat others as you wish to be treated” does not explain what duties people have to themselves.

The first formulation can be explained in another way: *A person may carry out an action if that action, on being generalized and universalized, does not produce a contradiction.* For example: If you think you may steal money from your friend to pay for your educational requirements, your action on being generalized and universalized would mean that anyone can steal money from anybody they know. Though you are now richer and can pay for your education with the money you have stolen, your money can/will get stolen from you by someone else who needs

that money as well. Thus, you are now just as rich as you were before and you still cannot pay for your education adequately. In an attempt to be richer and no longer in need of money, you are now still in need of money and have achieved the opposite of your intended goal. This is clearly a contradiction. Hence, the action of stealing money from your friend has not passed the universality test and carrying out this action would mean breaking the moral law. If an action passes this universality test, it is morally permissible but if it does not pass this test, not carrying out the action becomes morally required.

In case of duties to oneself, this same test may be used. If you want to sleep every day in place of doing that day's work because you are frustrated/tired, this action on universalizing will mean everyone can do the same. If everyone does this and shirks on their duties, no work will have been completed by anyone and your work, that perhaps you thought would get completed by someone else, thus saving you the effort and time, will remain incomplete. This action, that was carried out with an end to alleviate frustration/tiredness leads to a contradiction as you are now left with the same amount of work and maybe even more, which will continue to frustrate you. Kant, in his work, highlights the importance of limiting duties that take away man's dignity and he makes this the basis of our moral duties to self. He writes about the duty to not lie to ourselves (as it violates our self-respect), the duty against miserly avarice (where we hoard possessions without using them, as it means we are not using our rational abilities afforded to us as humans to make use of these inanimate objects) and the duty against false humility or servility (as humans are afforded great value for being moral/rational creatures and we must live up to this value and not underestimate our worth) among others.

On Suicide:

Kant also speaks on the topic of suicide here, where he maintains that we are obligated not to kill ourselves (we have a duty to preserve our lives). He states that by committing suicide, one effectively discards one's humanity. His arguments against suicide reflect his very strong opinions, some of which are secular, while others consider man to be the property of God and as one cannot discard of something someone else owns, one must preserve one's life. Kant's main argument for the inherent immorality of suicide is the opinion that by killing ourselves, we destroy our own humanity, which we have a duty to preserve. But it must be noted that Kant's

basis for the duties we have to ourselves is the preservation of dignity, not the preservation of humanity, which has not been considered sufficiently here. In some cases, it may even seem that suicide may be compatible with dignity preservation (say in the case when someone has become disadvantaged due to a fatal disease, abuse/mistreatment by others, misunderstandings that have enormously influenced his life or even impactful immoral acts/choices he himself made in the past). I feel that Kant here has overlooked the fact that people do not commit suicide due to immorality. Their decision depends on the grief/stress they are under and morality does not completely come into the question.

Kant here outright condemns suicide (like many other thinkers of the Enlightenment era) but his arguments on the topic are not as well reasoned as his arguments on the other facets of Kantian ethics, which may be why people have noted flaws in his reasoning. There are other criticisms as well, against his formulation of duty ethics (like the assumption that all human beings are perfectly rational which may not be true as people are not usually capable of preventing their emotions from interfering in the decision-making process). Despite its criticisms, Kantian ethics is a well-structured and widely known view of human morality and is one that has the potential to establish itself as the primary formulation of ethics globally as more philosophers assess and modify its aspects and usage in the years to come.

References:

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