

IMMANUEL KANT AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

For sometime now philosophers have discussed the possibility of the existence of right and wrong. The issues of morality and ethical decision-making figure predominantly in studies on human conduct. Various theories have been offered throughout the centuries in an attempt to answer the question, "Do morals exist?" The great German Idealist philosopher of the 19th century, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), gave considerable thought to this question.

In this essay I shall present and critically analyze Kant's particular view of *meta-ethics*⁽¹⁾ in order to determine if his reasons render sufficiently why we ought to accept a practical moral point of view. Before such an analysis and evaluation can be given, I shall advance some antecedent terminology for the reader's appreciation of Kant's trek. When we say *ethics* we mean *theories* or *systems* that reflect personal actions, decisions, and relations. *Morality* refers to the belief and conformity of acts of right and wrong. For example, *ethics* refers to such systems as Utilitarianism and Hedonism where general principles of moral decision-making are employed, and *morality* refers to such things as "lying is wrong" and "it is good to be sacrificial" which refer to actions cloaked under a particular ethical theory. Although these definitions are not exclusively for these examples, their meaning is strictly to convey the idea that there is a difference between a classification of systems and an identification of what a system believes, respectively. For most people, *ethics* and *morality* are used interchangeably. This will be the case in this essay as well. Finally, while we hear about ethical systems that are broadly *teleological* we will only be interested in the branched ethical system that is commonly referred to as *deontology*.⁽²⁾ The precise interpretation of how one ought to classify Kant in regard to his ethical theory will be considered in this work as well.

THE CONCEPT OF DUTY

The particular work under consideration here will be Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* translated by H. J. Paton. This work, although relatively short, contains Kant's working definition of his concept of morality. In addition, a portion of Kant's work, *Good Will, Duty, and the Categorical Imperative* will be included in our discussion (edited by Professor Anthony Serafini). For Kant, the central radix of morality concerns *obligation* or *reasons of ought*. If it is defined in terms of *ought*, we must understand if *conditional* or *unconditional* usages are being applied here. That is, a *conditional ought* means that one ought to perform some act in order for something else

to happen (i.e. possibly some type of reward). If something is an *unconditional ought* then one ought to perform some act apart from any consideration of merit.

It appears that Kant himself adopts the view that morality is the unconditional ought. It is without regard to reward or merit. Dr. Ed L. Miller of the University of Colorado states:

For Kant, only the unconditional *ought* is the *moral* ought. Why? Because, as we all recognize--don't we?--morality must be *necessary* and *universal*, that is, it must be absolutely binding, and absolutely binding on everyone alike: Whoever you are, what- ever your situation, you ought to do X.⁽³⁾

The implication here is that moral acts are to be accomplished *apart from* any alternate considerations such as merit and reward. In fact, Miller suggests that this morality must be "binding" and "universal." After all there would be something wrong with the idea suggesting "murder is wrong" if it only applied to person *Q* and not person *R*. Indeed, Kant himself states:

I am never to act otherwise than *so that I could also will that my maxim should become universal law*. Here, now, it is the simple conformity to law in general, without assuming any particular law applicable to certain actions, that serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it, if duty is not to be a vain delusion and a chimeric vision.⁽⁴⁾

Kant further dismisses the notion that morality operates in a meritocracy:

[T]he moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it, nor in any principle of action which requires to borrow its motive from this expected effect.⁽⁵⁾

When one understands the departure of a moral act from its consequences then it becomes clear what Kant was attempting to convey. This is what he and others refer to as *duty*. The fulfillment of our duty then does not rest on the consequences of our actions. However, the results of an action may be necessary in determining duty, while it must be remembered that this is not to be confused with the consequences that result from human action. In the terms of 19th century philosophy, the results of the thing-in-itself (the moral act) affect both the subject (the moral agent) and the object (the other individual(s) affected). By making the act universal and necessary, the highest good must be achieved in the subject-object relationship. This determines what our duty is. In understanding what the proper ideal is in the maximization of the highest good of each action, we look

through it in our perception of the world and how we ought to act in it. So now the categorization of morality as *a priori* must be established.

MORALITY AS A PRIORI

Kant emphasizes the absolute necessity of separating genuine morality from all empirical considerations. Instead, the necessity of deriving it *a priori*, or from the categorization of claims alleged to be true apart from experiencing them first, is derived from pure reason. For Kant, morality must be *a priori*. If it is not, then morality falls into the realm of "anthropology" or empirical truths about human nature. This means that morality must be "freed from everything which may be only empirical"⁽⁶⁾ For Kant, morality simply *must* be separate from experience due to the very idea of duty itself. In his *Foundations* Kant makes this argument:

Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e., as a ground of obligation, must imply absolute necessity; he must admit that the command, "Thou shalt not lie," does not apply to men only, as if other rational beings had no need to observe it. The same is true for all other moral laws properly so called.⁽⁷⁾

Again, the clear message of duty's transcendence of human experience becomes the idea shared by all rational beings who embrace an objective ethic. So, if all of us are wearing the rose-colored glasses of morality (the "idea") then the world must look rose-colored in perception to all of us (the "projection"). If morality appears to exist universally then it seems that all of us share the same idea, namely that morality exists *a priori*. This is how Kant's ethical system roots itself in the *a priori* assumption. Since Kant's system is known *a priori* then this presents us with a universal and necessary view of morality. It might be said that morality is a matter of discovery and not one of invention.

THE "GOOD WILL"

Kant gives a concise definition of what makes morality *a priori*, but the matter remains as to *where* these *a priori* assumptions derive from. Graciously enough, Kant has provided a foundation for these intuitions about morality, namely the "Good Will." Consider what Kant states:

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*.⁽⁸⁾

As seen in alternate ethical systems, such things as pleasure and happiness are seen as basic virtues or foundations of moral action (and in some cases its motive). But Kant wishes to avoid linking moral intuition to natural proclivities such as these. Thus morality must be rationally conceived apart from our human inclinations. Kant, through analogy, shows why morality cannot be based on such inclinations:

Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind, however they be named, or courage, resoluteness, and perseverance as qualities of temperament, are doubtless in many respects good and desirable. But they can become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good.⁽⁹⁾

What he is saying here is that just as qualities such as intelligence, wit, and judgment are neutral tools of the person, so are pleasure and happiness. It could be the case that pleasure and happiness motivate evil or morally forbidden acts. Slavery in one sense made many Europeans complacent but such acts are undeniably sinister to most people today. Dr. Miller explains what Kant connotes in the concept of the good will:

For Kant a good will, or a *pure* will, is an intention to act in accordance with moral *law*, and moral law is what it is no matter what anything else is. To act out of a good will is, then, to do X because it is *right* to do X, and for no other reason. This would be *rational* morality.⁽¹⁰⁾

Kant's motivation by the "Good Will" to enact a duty differs from acting *in accordance with* duty. Such difference neglects motivation. For example, someone who saves the life of a woman from a murderous man so that he may rob her may be considered to act only in accordance with duty in regard to her deliverance from the murderer. He did not act out of the "Good Will" since his motivation was to rob her. Therefore, to take both intent and motivation into account in order to do the right thing considers one to be acting morally or dutifully. This act is said to proceed from that universal "Good Will."

THE "CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE"

One final thought remains in Kant's ethical system. Having presented his view on how and why something may be considered moral, the issue of examination caps the end of his view in this section. That is, Kant presents us with a *test* or a method of determination on whether or not a particular act is considered to be morally right, morally wrong, or somewhere beyond the moral realm. For Kant the source of moral justification is the *categorical imperative*. An imperative is said to be either *hypothetical* or *categorical*. Kant writes, "If now the action is good only as a means *to something else*, then the imperative is *hypothetical*; if it is conceived as good *in itself* and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is *categorical*" ⁽¹¹⁾ So he says that in order for an act to be categorically imperative, it must be thought to be good in itself and in conformity to reason. As a categorical imperative, it asks us whether or not we can "universalize" our actions, that is, whether it would be the case that others would act in accordance with the same rule in a similar circumstance. This is seen in Kant's statement about the categorical imperative:

Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law. ⁽¹²⁾

The point Kant makes in his presentation of the categorical imperative is that an act becomes imperative (or commanded) when it ought to be applied to everyone. Miller comments:

[A] *categorical* imperative would command you to do X inasmuch as X is intrinsically right, that is, right in and of itself, aside from any other considerations--no "ifs," no conditions, no strings attached . . . a categorical imperative is *unconditional* (no "ifs") and *independent of* any things, circumstances, goals, or desires. It is for this reason that only a *categorical* imperative can be a *universal* and *binding* law, that is, a *moral* law, valid for all rational beings at all times. ⁽¹³⁾

This is to say that because a moral act is the right thing to do, it is universal and binding on the agent to follow through with the moral act. However, the act should not be done out of any condition ("ifs" or "if . . . thens").

With the categorical imperative becomes the guiding principle of morality, it becomes the impetus for determining whether an act is moral or not. At this point it should be emphasized that Kant's categorical imperative is concerned only with *general* and *abstract* moral actions. Therefore, the categorical imperative determines whether or not *any* act is right or wrong. It is at this point that to do the opposite (to *not* will to do an act that everyone in similar circumstances would do) would be to invite *contradiction*. This is to say that something is morally wrong when it would result in a contradiction. By *contradiction* we are not referring to a *logical* one (i.e. $A = [\sim A]$) but a *practical* one (i.e. when something is self-defeating). Kant himself uses four examples, one of which illustrates this ethical antinomy. He posits a man in extreme despair who considers whether or not he should take his own life.⁽¹⁴⁾ The dilemma is this: Either he takes his own life thereby thwarting the threat of ongoing dissatisfaction or he remains alive to face his situation. Kant states that the nature of feeling "despair" is one which impels one to improve live (e.g. feeling bad requires one to do something to feel good). If he chooses to take his own life, he is actually universalizing the maxim, "In order to love myself, I should shorten my life." This maxim is a practical contradiction because the consequent works opposite to the antecedent. That is, killing myself does nothing to improve my life. It results in a contradiction. In this sense the categorical imperative is used as a *test* for general moral principles in order to determine a particular act based on its own general maxim. The criterion for a particular action is found in its general principle. This general principle is tested to be either a contradiction or a morally permissible act. Consequently, the nature of the action is determined from this process.

In summary, Immanuel Kant's metaethical system relies on the fundamental realization of the moral law that exists in the agent (subject). When we view the world (the object) we know *a priori* that morality is universal and necessary. In order to determine whether or not a particular act is good or bad, morally speaking, we must apply the categorical imperative. This *imperative* or *command* requires that we fulfill our duty in the circumstance the act is occurring in. The classification of the act rests on whether or not the underlying principle is a practical contradiction (antinomian). If it is not then the act is considered to be morally obligatory.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

While Kant has indeed shaped modern thought on moral decision-making, not all moralists have accepted his deontological system. In this section I will briefly address three criticisms of Kant's moral system.

First, philosophers have properly targeted the basic problem with Kant's system, namely that it neglects to identify or, rather, to *justify* the existence of the *moral law*. Is there some undergirding morality that provides a foundation for a belief in a moral law? I would answer the question in the affirmative but not based upon Kant's justification for moral theory. It may be that Kant would answer the question by giving a discourse on

why metaphysical postulations are independent of theoretical reason.⁽¹⁵⁾ Whatever one's view of Kant's epistemological Idealism, I believe that there is a substantial reason to accept the moral law. My view agrees somewhat with Kant's system which goes beyond the mere Immanent Purpose and Transcendentalist views. My view rests on Christian theism that suggests that we ought to postulate a Law-giver before we can require human beings to be dutiful with their actions. The decision is arbitrary to follow the moral point of view if we assume that morality is simply the consensus of the general will. This certainly might help us in determining what is a moral act, but it does no good to provide a general will as the foundation for such morality. I also think there are good reasons to abandon morality as a brute fact: 1) There is no reason to choose it over other views such as nihilism or utilitarianism. At the end of the day, Kant's system requires the allegiance of the populace in order to become self-validated. In this vein it simply has nothing to offer over the other views; 2) Moral responsibility seems to imply free will. But free will makes the most sense on the assumption that materialism is false thereby granting implicit credence to substance dualism (the belief that human beings are made of two interacting substances: body and spirit). And substance dualism makes more sense if theism is true. Even though Kant himself accepted theism, I believe that it makes more sense to ground morality in God since the arbitrary and enigmatic views proposed by Kant and others offer no real sense of obligation or objectivity; and 3) Kant's system does not explain other transcendental aspects of moral decision-making. For example, we experience guilt feelings and feelings of shame and remorse. These feelings go beyond what would be appropriate if no other intellect were involved. H. P. Owen argues that on this basis guilt feelings do not make sense in the presence of mere abstract moral principles. Rather, they make more sense in the presence of a Person.⁽¹⁶⁾ This could be seen as a Christian modification of Bernard Williams' view where feelings of shame imply an "internalized other" that convicts our hearts of wrongdoing.⁽¹⁷⁾ The superficial escape of Williams' non-theistic theory only serves to show the deficit in shameful or dutiful actions in the absence of a real Observer.

Second, Some have retorted that Kant's system neglects the value of nature. That is, since Kant's system treats human beings as ends-in-themselves, then the threat of abusing nature (e.g. what might be considered valuable) may be neglected (i.e. animal rights, environmental issues, etc. . .). In response, I would suggest a couple of points. First, it begs the question by assuming that other issues carry no moral weight in moral decision-making. However, others have demonstrated that Kantian ethics does consider these issues. Second, this is no objection to Kant's system as a whole. Rather, it only shows, at best, a particular shortcoming or flaw in its methodology. It may be that an addendum ought to be included in order to compensate for these "neglected" areas, but this in no way detracts from the truth of the role of duty. Finally, Kant's system emphasizes a greater value in human beings over environmental and natural entities. And this is not to be confused with objects of no moral value (e.g. rocks, tables, etc. . .).

Finally, philosophers have attempted to bring consequences back into the moral system. They believe that consequences cannot be ignored despite Kantian ethics. There may be some further consideration needed. However, I think that consequences play a minimized role in evaluating moral thought. Assessing moral issues ought to be defined in terms of

the acts themselves. Consequences actually are *not* taken into consideration in most instances. If I lie in order to protect a Jew during the holocaust period from a Nazi soldier then I am not accepting consequence over duty (i.e. the duty not to lie). Instead, I am preserving a "higher" duty to preserve human life. The former duty (the duty not to lie) is not being ignored but, rather, *trumped* by this greater need. This is why consequences are rarely considered.

Therefore, I find Kant's metaethical system to be a valuable tool but it neglects to define moral law as God-given. I believe that theism is required in order better establish purpose and ought in moral decision-making. To Kant's credit, his ethics provide a fantastic basis for current ethical issues and moral dilemmas we face today. The fact that Kant forces us to consider the worth of human beings will forever drive future debates that will haunt us for years to come.

END NOTES

1. *Meta-ethics* is that branch of philosophical reasoning that determines whether or not ethical values are real. See Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 247-8.
2. *Teleological* theories center their ethic toward favorable consequences or outcomes of actions. *Deontological* theories are assessed by intent to perform one's duty through a moral action. See Audi, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp. 247.
3. Miller, Ed. L., *Questions that Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Colorado: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1984, 1992), p. 454.
4. Kant, Immanuel, "Good Will, Duty, and the Categorical Imperative," ed. Anthony Serafini, *Ethics and Social Concern* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1989), p. 29.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. Kant, *Groundwork and the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Herbert J. Paton, (New York: HarperCollins, 1964), p. 27.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 461.

11. Kant, "Good Will," ed. Serafini, p. 31.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 462.
14. See Kant, "Good Will," ed. Serafini, p. 32.
15. See Miller, *Questions that Matter*, p. 255.
16. Owen, H. P., *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), pp. 49-50. For the interested reader, I have provided a detailed essay on the subject of proving God's existence (S. L. Guthrie, "[Evidence for the Existence of God](http://sguthrie.net/kalamcosmo.htm)" (<http://sguthrie.net/kalamcosmo.htm>)).
17. Williams, Bernard, *Shame and Necessity* (California: University of California Press, Ltd., 1993), pp. 75-102.

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