

Kant

The Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals (excerpts)¹

PHIL101

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Section IV: What is it worth?

Reading IV.2

Kant's analysis of the good differs in scope from Aristotle's in two ways. In one respect, Kant's account is broader, subsuming not only human goods but all forms of good. Aristotle, by contrast, focuses on the highest human good, as we have seen. Nevertheless, Kant's account is also more narrow in scope than is that of Aristotle. Where Aristotle's account treats the whole of human life, Kant's focus isolates a particular form of human life and activity. Like Aristotle, Kant associates the human good with reason. But only a certain form of rational activity counts as properly moral, for Kant.

The Good Will

Kant's account of moral goodness begins with a distinction among goods. Some, he asserts, are good only given certain circumstances or conditions, while others, he maintains, are good "without qualification" – i.e., independently of any particular circumstance or condition. The one good that is good without qualification Kant identifies as the "Good Will" – i.e., the will to do the morally right thing. Other goods, including what he calls the "gifts of nature" and the "gifts of fortune" are not good objectively, but good only given some circumstance or condition. For instance, intelligence is a "gift of nature" – i.e., a quality that one may have as a result of one's natural-born mental make-up – and intelligence is certainly regarded as a good, ordinarily. But we regard intelligence as good only so long as it is used wisely: used to evil purpose, we don't count intelligence as a good. Intelligence is a good, then, only given the qualification that it is used in the service of goodness. Otherwise, it may have no particular value or even a negative value. In addition to the gifts of nature and of fortune, Kant regards the virtues, as Aristotle understood them also as merely conditional goods.

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these *gifts of nature* may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good. It is the same with the *gifts of fortune*. Power, riches, honor, even health, and the general well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called happiness, inspire pride, and often presumption, if there is not a good will to correct the influence of these on the mind, and with this also to rectify the whole principle of acting, and adapt it to its end. The sight of a being

¹ Immanuel Kant. *The Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, trans. Public Domain, as per http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gutenberg:Terms_of_Use.

who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus, a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness.

There are even some qualities which are of service to this good will itself, and may facilitate its action, yet which have no intrinsic unconditional values, but always presuppose a good will, and this qualifies the esteem that we justly have for them, and does not permit us to regard them as absolutely good. Moderation in the affections and passions, self-control and calm deliberation are not only good in many respects, but even seem to constitute part of the intrinsic worth of the person; but they are far from deserving to be called good without qualification, although they have been so unconditionally praised by the ancients.² For without the principles of a good will, they may become extremely bad, and the coolness of a villain not only makes him far more dangerous, but also directly makes him more abominable in our eyes than he would have been without it.

The intent to “do good”, however, the *good will*, is not so conditional. Indeed, a good will is a good *regardless* of its effectiveness. There are no conditions that must be met in order for a good will to be a good, and no circumstances or conditions that could result in the good will’s being anything but a good.

A good will is good, not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition; that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favor of any inclination, nay even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, owing to special disfavor of fortune, or the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will (not, to be sure, a mere wish, but the summoning of all means in our power), then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add to nor take away anything from this value. It would be, as it were, only the setting to it the attention of those who are not yet connoisseurs, but not to recommend it to true connoisseurs, or to determine its value.

We have, then, two points here, for Kant, concerning the Good Will: First, the goodness of anything is conditional upon its relationship to a good will; and second, the goodness of the good will is not so conditional upon anything. The next question to consider, then, concerns the nature of this good will. What exactly identifies a will as good, in this sense? What *is* the good will?

Duty to Moral Law

Kant’s account of morality is a *deontological* account. The Greek root *deont* means “necessity”, so deontological moral theories are based on the necessity by which moral laws bind us, or, in the more standard terminology, *duty*. Moral laws require certain actions of us; we have certain duties, given the truth of moral law. The exact nature of our *will*, therefore, and in particular our *motivation*, are crucial to moral behavior, for Kant. For an action to be morally good, it must be performed out of a sense of duty to moral law. The alternative form of motivation, for us humans, is what Kant calls “inclination” – that is, our inclination to realize the various objects of our needs and desires. Action motivated by inclination, however, has no moral worth, on Kant’s view.

² Kant here has in mind such figures as Aristotle, whose praise of the virtues we have just encountered.

Now an action done from duty must wholly exclude the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will, so that nothing remains which can determine the will except objectively the law, and subjectively pure respect for this practical law, and consequently the maxim³ that I should follow this law even to the thwarting of all my inclinations. Thus the 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. For all these effects – agreeableness of one's condition and even the promotion of the happiness of others – could have been also brought about by other causes, so that for this there would have been no need of the will of a rational being; whereas it is in this alone that the supreme and unconditional good can be found. The pre-eminent good which we call moral can therefore consist in nothing else than the conception of law in itself, which certainly is only possible in a rational being, in so far as this conception, and not the expected effect, determines the will.

We can then identify two “sides” to the Kantian moral act. Subjectively, we have the felt nature of the act, the thinking that prompts one's act. This state must be a state of respect for moral law, if one's act is to be morally good. Objectively, we must also consider the nature of the law inspiring our act. Moral law, as we shall see, takes a certain, distinctive form, which form can act as a guide to our moral action.

It is interesting to note that for Kant moral laws imply imperatives for humans only because humans do not always obey moral laws.

All imperatives are expressed by the word *ought*, and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which from its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by this law. Imperatives say that something would be good to do or to forbear, but they say it to a will which does not always do a thing because it is conceived to be good to do it.

As noted above, humans may act on inclination, either in conformity with moral law or not. Mere awareness of a moral law, perhaps to our sorrow, is not by itself sufficient to evoke in us action out of respect for that law. The situation would be otherwise if, like angels, we had a perfectly good will.

A perfectly good will would therefore be equally subject to objective laws (i.e., laws of good), but could not be conceived as obliged thereby to act lawfully, because of itself from its subjective constitution it can only be determined by the conception of good. Therefore no imperatives hold for the Divine will, or in general for a holy will; *ought* is here out of place, because the *would* is already of itself necessarily in agreement with the law.

A divine being is not *required* to act morally in the same way that a human being is, for the divine being is always sufficiently motivated by recognition of moral law. Since that recognition is not by itself sufficient to motivate us, the concept of obligation applies to us. Objectively, we are obliged to be moral. Subjectively, the moral response to this obligation is duty.

The Categorical Imperative

The good will, then, is the will motivated by respect for moral law – i.e., the dutiful will. We gain further insight into the moral, for Kant, by attention to the logic of moral law. More specifically, where we are required to act out of respect for moral law, a reasonable question would be how we are to know which are the moral laws, the laws that we are to obey. According

³ Kant's footnote reads, “A maxim is the subjective principle of volition. The objective principle (i.e., that which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle to all rational beings if reason had full power over the faculty of desire) is the practical law.”

to Kant, moral laws differ in general form from other “practical laws” that might govern our behavior. The difference may be identified by a comparison of the forms of imperative that moral and non-moral practical laws entail. An *imperative*, recall, issues a command, such as *shut the door* or *tell the truth*. Kant finds that where one form of imperative is conditional, another commands our behavior independently of any conditions.

Now all *imperatives* command either *hypothetically* or *categorically*. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as means to something else that one wants (or may possibly want). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as necessary of itself without reference to another end, that is, as objectively necessary.

A command such as *shut the door* is valid for our will only given certain conditions. If it’s cold outside and we want to keep warm inside, then shutting the door will be good and so the command to shut the door will apply to a rational will. That is, as a means to keeping the heat inside, the rational will will see that the door should be shut. This imperative, then, is a *hypothetical* imperative: given that a certain hypothesis obtains – namely, our desire to keep the heat indoors – a certain imperative applies to our will. Hypothetical imperatives have an *if ... then* logical form: *if* a certain condition obtains, *then* a certain imperative applies to the rational will.

Moral laws, by contrast, are not hypothetical, as Kant understands them. Our moral obligations are not a matter of whim or desire. They apply to us regardless of our particular needs or desires, regardless of the weather, regardless of any accidental condition. In looking for the laws that command our rational behavior regardless of circumstance, then, we should look for the *categorical* imperative – the imperative that applies to the rational will unconditionally.

Every practical law represents a possible action as good, and on this account, for a subject who is practically determinable by reason, as necessary. Hence, all imperatives are formulas determining an action which is necessary according to the principle of a will good in some respect. 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*.

The categorical imperative commands not hypothetically but categorically. There are no *if ...* clauses to satisfy as conditions for the applicability of the imperative to the rational will.

Finally, there is an imperative which commands a certain conduct immediately, without having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by it. This imperative is *categorical*. It concerns not the matter of the action, or its intended result, but its form and the principle of which it is itself a result; and what is essentially good in it consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may. This imperative may be called that of *morality*.

And as there are no prior conditions to satisfy in order for a categorical imperative to apply to the rational will, for Kant, categorical imperatives all have a single, general form. Kant expresses this as what he calls *the categorical imperative*:

Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Since a categorical imperative applies unconditionally, Kant reasons, it has the same form as a universal law, a law applying to all things of a certain kind. In this case, the kind of thing in question is the rational being. Moral imperatives, in other words, are those that apply to all rational beings. Hypothetical imperatives lack this quality, since they apply only to rational

beings having certain needs or desires. Categorical imperatives, by contrast, apply to rational beings regardless of need or desire.

The categorical imperative can be regarded as a test of one's proposed action. If the maxim of one's action is "universalizable", then it corresponds to a moral law; if not, then it cannot be a law for moral creatures. Consider, for example, lying versus truth-telling. Would it be possible for all rational creatures to tell the only truth, always? Although such a law might lead to some unexpected or awkward results, it is hard to see why it *couldn't* be a law for rational beings. It is at least *logically* possible for all rational beings always to tell the truth. Conceivably, then, one's maxim, "I should tell the truth," could be a universal law for rational beings and, thus, truth-telling could be a moral law.

On the other hand, a community of rational beings could *not*, evidently, act in accordance with a law requiring lying.

[T]o discover the answer to this question whether a lying promise is consistent with duty, is to ask myself, "Should I be content that my maxim (to extricate myself from difficulty by a false promise) should hold good as a universal law, for myself as well as for others?" and should I be able to say to myself, "Every one may make a deceitful promise when he finds himself in a difficulty from which he cannot otherwise extricate himself?" Then I presently become aware that while I can will the lie, I can by no means will that lying should be a universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, since it would be in vain to allege my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this allegation, or if they over hastily did so would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim, as soon as it should be made a universal law, would necessarily destroy itself.

If lying were to be a law to rational agents, then every rational agent should have to lie in every act of speech. But in order to lie, one must be taken to be speaking the truth, for a lie is saying that which others take to be true but which is in fact not true. It would not, then, be possible to lie in a community of liars, because in a community of liars there would be no expectation of any truth, which expectation is a requirement of lying. In other words, a community rational agents cannot universally obey a law to tell lies. It isn't logically possible.

If so, then Kant may have a key to an important distinction, one that might enable us to identify moral law. Moral laws are those principles that can be enacted for a community of rational agents. If one's maxim is universalizable – if it could count as a law for each and every rational being – then one's maxim is morally imperative.

Test Cases

In order to test your understanding of Kant's view, consider the following cases, cases that Kant himself uses to illustrate his position. In each case, Kant finds, the proposed action fails to meet the standard set by the categorical imperative. Think about the action proposed and try to explain why or in what respect it violates the categorical imperative.

The first of these is much similar to the lying case: you should be able to see why Kant would find the maxim incapable of elevation to the status of moral law.

[A man] finds himself forced by necessity to borrow money. He knows that he will not be able to repay it, but sees also that nothing will be lent to him unless he promises stoutly to repay it in a definite time. He desires to make this promise, but he has still so much conscience as to ask himself; Is it not unlawful and inconsistent with duty to get out of a difficulty in this way? Suppose, however, that he resolves to do so, then the maxim of his action would be expressed thus: When I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that I never can do so. Now

this principle of self-love or of one's own advantage may perhaps be consistent with my whole future welfare; but the question now is, is it right? I change then the suggestion of self-love into a universal law, and state the question thus: How would it be if my maxim were a universal law? Then I see at once that it could never hold as a universal law of nature, but would necessarily contradict itself. For supposing it to be a universal law that everyone when he thinks himself in a difficulty should be able to promise whatever he pleases, with the purpose of not keeping his promise, the promise itself would become impossible, as well as the end that one might have in view in it, since no one would consider that anything was promised to him, but would ridicule all such statements as vain pretenses.

The second of these cases poses a different kind of challenge to the would-be rationality of one's moral thinking. In what respect would the suicidal maxim violate standards of rational law?

A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes feels wearied of life, but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he inquires whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim is: From self-love I adopt it as a principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction. It is asked then simply whether this principle founded on self-love can become a universal law of nature. Now we see at once that a system of nature of which it should be a law to destroy life by means of the very feeling whose special nature it is to impel to the improvement of life would contradict itself, and therefore could not exist as a system of nature; hence that maxim cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature, and consequently would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty.

The final two cases are similar in structure to the second.

A third finds in himself a talent which with the help of some culture might make him a useful man in many respects. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to indulge in pleasure rather than to take pains in enlarging and improving his happy natural capacities. He asks, however, whether his maxim of neglect of his natural gifts, besides agreeing with his inclination to indulgence, agrees also with what is called duty. He sees then that a system of nature could indeed subsist with such a universal law, although men (like the South Sea islanders) should let their talents rest and resolve to devote their lives merely to idleness, amusement, and propagation of their species in a word, to enjoyment; but he cannot possibly *will* that this should be a universal law of nature, or be implanted in us as such by a natural instinct. For, as a rational being, he necessarily wills that his faculties be developed, since they serve him, and have been given him for all sorts of possible purposes.

A fourth, who is in prosperity, while he sees that others have to contend with great wretchedness and that he could help them, thinks: What concern is it of mine? Let everyone be happy as Heaven pleases, or as he can make himself; I will take nothing from him nor even envy him, only I do not wish to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in distress! Now no doubt, if such a mode of thinking were a universal law, the human race might very well subsist, and doubtless even better than in a state in which everyone talks of sympathy and good-will, or even takes care occasionally to put it into practice, but, on the other side, also cheats when they can, betrays the rights of me, or otherwise violates them. But although it is possible that a universal law of nature might exist in accordance with that maxim, it is impossible to *will* that such a principle should have the universal validity of a law of nature. For a will which resolved this would contradict itself, inasmuch as many cases might occur in which one would have need of the love and sympathy of others, and in which, by such a law of nature, sprung from his own will, he would deprive himself of all hope and the aid he desires.