

Immanuel Kant's Ethics of Duty

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Immanuel Kant is the pre-eminent philosopher of the rational enlightenment of the 18th century. His goal was to establish an ethical system based entirely on formal reason, without the need of any religious convictions or even any empirical or scientific knowledge of the world. His result is an ethic of virtue and duty that gives many insights into how to live a good and fulfilling human life, no matter what our beliefs or the conditions of our life may be.

Kant believed that morality can be summed up in one ultimate principle, from which all our duties and obligations are derived. He called this principle the *categorical imperative*.¹ Kant presented the principle in three forms, but it's really just one rule. In this lecture I'm only going to deal with the first two forms. The third form relates more to the political community and the common good than to individual moral choice.

According to Kant there are two fundamental moral facts about us human beings. The first and most important fact is that we possess autonomy; we have the ability to make our own decisions and to live by them rather than being totally subject to determination by the laws of natural causality like other agents in the world. Here he is following Aristotle, who observed that all of nature is moved by causes. Inanimate objects are always moved by an external cause; a rock only moves if something pushes it in some way. Vegetation moves by more subtle forces, but it still is moved from without. Animate beings or animals, from the Greek *anima* meaning "soul", are self-moving beings, though they do not make choices but move themselves according

¹ Roger J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29.

to passion, instinct and desire. Animals are auto-motive, but the rule or law, Greek nomos, of their actions is not something they can change. But humans are auto-nomous, a law unto themselves. Humans can choose their behavior according to reason. Unlike any other creature, humans can imagine different possibilities and can choose among the possibilities on the basis of reason and logic, not just by instinct or passion. Moreover, humans can choose to move other things like rocks and plants, and can lead animals. We are self-moved movers, says Aristotle, who can choose their own path of action.

Aristotle also reasons that there must be one other kind of being. If there are moved unmovers (the inanimate world); self-moved unmovers (plants and animals); self-moved movers (humans); then there must also be an unmoved mover, a being that establishes law and causation for everything else but is not himself subject to law and cause. This being must exist or else the whole hierarchy of causation that we experience is irrational. Nothing can have created this being, but this being must have created everything else. Such a being does not exist for the purpose of anything else, but everything else exists for the purpose of this being. So, centuries before Christ, in a pantheistic culture with no knowledge of monotheistic religion, Aristotle proves the existence of God by reason alone.

Kant wants to do the same thing for morals. He wants to present us with an understanding of the moral life that is not based on any religious belief or doctrine, but only on reason. The first form of the categorical imperative, therefore, is simply a formal rule of rational action:

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

This rule begins, in essence, with the recognition that humans have the power of making self-defined rational choices, of being self-moved movers in Aristotle's sense. Sullivan calls this the

Principle of Autonomy. For Kant, autonomy is the most fundamental moral fact about us as human persons.²

You might think of this as a universalization of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule holds that I should treat others as I want them to treat me. Kant says to treat others as everyone always should treat others. Some have called this the objectification of reciprocity. I don't assume that everyone would necessarily want to be treated as I do, so I seek to treat others as I think is consistent with the dignity that I recognize both in others and in myself. I treat others as every human being, including myself, should be treated just because they are human.

Kant calls the moral demand to do this this "categorical" to express that this imperative is absolute. There are never any exceptions to it. All of our actions must recognize the "I"-ness of every person, including and first and foremost ourselves. Kinlein says that the exercise of "I"-ness is ineluctable.

Not only do we have the duty to treat others and ourselves in accordance with dignity, but we must do so just because it is our duty to do so. If we treat others as they should be treated from some other motive than that it is our duty, we cheapen our moral actions and degrade our own dignity.

So, for example, take a man who reserves the possibility of breaking a promise if keeping it would put him at a disadvantage. According to the categorical imperative, he could only will to do this if he at the same time willed to live in a world where everyone reserved the possibility of breaking their word if it was to their disadvantage. But a promise is always to someone's disadvantage; so in such a world no promise would ever be kept by everyone involved with it. Some promises might be kept, but no promise would necessarily be kept, and we would not therefore ever fully expect anyone to keep their promise. But a man making a promise, while

² Ibid., 154.

reserving the possibility of breaking it, expects the other people hearing his promise to believe it and act in accord with that belief. But to expect people to believe a promise in a world where no one ever necessarily keeps a promise is a logical contradiction. A promise-breaker sets up one rule for his own behavior and another rule for everyone else. Most violations of the first form of the categorical imperative can be recognized as setting up such a contradictory double standard.

This leads us to a second fundamental moral fact about human beings, which is that our moral choices usually conflict with our sense of self-love. We are constantly tempted to pursue our own happiness rather than the moral good of others. The first form of the categorical imperative gives us a way to avoid injuring or harming others, but it doesn't lead us to act in a positively good or benevolent way toward them. Someone who is comfortable in life, Kant points out, could choose just to leave everyone alone, and be willing to live in a world where everyone leaves everyone else alone. But this choice would be contradictory because it violates the very possibility of making any choice at all, because the ability to choose is part of the dignity of human beings. This thinking leads to Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, what Sullivan calls the formula of respect for the dignity of persons:

Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.

Kant's more extensive explanation of this is famous for first articulating the idea of human dignity, which is at the root of the international order and our understanding of human rights. It is worth reading at length:

“Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is in turn bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity, for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end. It is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, by which he raises himself above all other beings in the world that are not human beings and yet can be used, and so over all things. But just as he cannot give himself away for any

price (this would conflict with his duty of self-esteem), so neither can he act contrary to the necessary self-esteem of others, as human beings, that is, he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being. Hence there rests on him a duty regarding the respect that must be shown to every other human being."³

Kant argues that because the moral law is the *law of reason*, rational beings are the embodiment of the moral law itself. If there were no rational beings, the moral dimension of the world would simply disappear. It makes no sense, therefore, to regard rational beings merely as one kind of valuable thing among others. Kant concludes that their value must be absolute, and not comparable to the value of anything else. So humans have "an intrinsic worth, that is, dignity" because they are *rational agents*.

By their choices humans can confer value on things, but must recognize worth in one another. Mere "things" (and this includes non-human animals, whom Kant considered unable to have self-conscious desires and goals) have value only as means to ends, and it is human ends that *give* them value. But human is also, like myself, an agent willing his own ends and conferring value on things. So a human can never be treated only as a means to my ends, or else (according to the first form of the categorical imperative) I would be making the choice to live in a world where everyone used everyone else only as a means to their own ends. In such a world no one would be able to choose their own ends because they would be being used only as a means to someone else's end, which is clearly a contradiction.

Now I'm no expert on Kinlein, but it seems to me that this idea of human dignity expressed in autonomy is similar to or compatible with what you call "I"-ness. For Kant we have a duty to recognize and respect our own esteem, or else we can't really recognize anyone else's

³ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209.

esteem or dignity. One's first duty is to oneself, that is, to the humanity in one's own person.⁴ It takes someone who is fully human to treat others as fully human. Sullivan concludes:

“The overriding question should be, What kind of persons are we making of ourselves? And the answer we should be able to give is that we are doing everything we can to cultivate self-respect. More than anything else, that will motivate us to become the sort of person we should be and to live the sort of life we should live.”⁵

I think of this when I'm on an airplane and they go through that boring safety spiel before the flight, and they tell us that if the oxygen masks deploy due to low oxygen in the cabin, and you're traveling with a child, be sure you put your own oxygen mask on before you try to help the child. It makes sense. You really can't be of any help to someone else if you pass out yourself from lack of oxygen. So the first obligation of recognizing and serving the dignity of others is to recognize and serve our own dignity.

To recognize our dignity is not the same thing, for Kant, as seeking our happiness. Other philosophers have argued that when we act in a moral way we bring about good results and find true happiness and fulfillment. Kant did not disagree with this, but he was very suspicious of happiness as a motivation to do what is right. It's not that happiness is a bad thing, but it is only a natural good, while virtue—that is, having a good will in light of my dignity and that of other people—is the pre-eminent rational good. And if happiness becomes our goal or motivation to do good, we are likely eventually to abandon virtue. What happens when doing what is right involves personal pain and sacrifice? In such a case we must choose to do what is right *instead of* our own happiness. And since we cannot tell for sure in advance which choices may lead to our

⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁵ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*, 154.

happiness and which to our suffering, we must always choose to do what is right simply because it is right, regardless of the consequences.

A famous dilemma illustrates and distinguishes these two approaches to making ethical choices. The dilemma was proposed during Kant's lifetime by Benjamin Constant, a rival philosopher to Kant. Constant asked, "If someone were at your door to murder your friend who was hiding in your house and if asked if he was there, what would you do?" A consequentialist ethicist would tend to say that in such a case you would be justified in lying in order to mislead the murderer. The murderer's evil intent, to murder your friend, overcomes or nullifies what would otherwise be your normal obligation to tell the truth. Even if the lie is wrong, it is a lesser evil than the murder of your friend, and so is justified.

Kant's response to this dilemma was very different. He maintained that any lie would violate the categorical imperative, so it was never justifiable to lie. Therefore, you would have an obligation to truthfully tell the murderer where your friend was hiding, even though you knew that doing so might bring about your friend's death. As Kant saw it, the violation of the moral order entailed in telling a lie was not worth any perceived good, even saving the life of your friend. Moreover, in telling a lie a person degraded their own integrity, wreaking untold harm on their own ability to make future moral choices.

If we can tell a lie to bring about some good result or avoid an evil one, then we are choosing to live in a world where everyone can lie when they think it will prevent a greater evil. Someone lying in such a way would have to be saying the same thing as someone telling the truth; otherwise the lie would not be effective. But then we could never tell who was lying and who was not. And if we couldn't tell the difference between them, then both lying and telling the truth would lose all meaning. So Kant concluded that "although by telling a certain lie I in fact do

not wrong anyone, I nevertheless violate the principle of right in regard to all unavoidably necessary statements generally (i.e., the principle of right is thereby wronged formally, though not materially). This is much worse than committing an injustice against some individual person...”⁶

Making choices in light of their consequences involves another problem: we could be mistaken about the consequences. What if we are wrong? We may, in that case, bring about the very evil we were hoping to prevent. In our example, Kant points out that “if you had told the truth as best you knew it, then the murderer might have been caught by neighbors who came running while he was searching the house for his intended victim, and thus the deed might have been prevented.”⁷ Consequentialist ethics presumes, at some level, that we have certain knowledge about the future, something that is only possible for God. To make moral choices on the basis of their consequences puts us in the place of God, and makes us responsible for consequences that may not be what we intended.

Regardless of our resolution of this dilemma, Kant’s views on happiness and virtue, and his emphasis on duty, underscore two important practical points about the moral life. First, happiness is not something that we find by seeking to be happy, but comes to us as a by-product, as it were, of devoting ourselves to serve the good of others. A person whose life is devoted to herself or himself will never find happiness. Second, most (though not all) moral choices involve some element of denial of our own happiness in the face of duty to the dignity of others or the common good. Therefore, in most moral situations the way of right lies with the more painful and difficult choice. Doing what is right is almost never the easy choice.

By doing what is right, however, we achieve something even greater than happiness: we become good. Although we should do what is right simply because it is right, and not in order to

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, with On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns.*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 64.

become good, by doing what is right we do in fact attain virtue or moral goodness in ourselves. And moral goodness, that is, “good moral character or a good will is a unique, incomparable, unconditional, intrinsic good, far exceeding in value any other good.”⁸ By becoming good ourselves, we not only serve our own best hope of happiness, we also bring everyone in the world a little closer to their fulfillment as fully human, morally good persons.

⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸ Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*, 89.