

Chapter 7

Kant's Ethics

Immanuel Kant is widely regarded as one of the most important thinkers in the history of Western philosophy for his contributions to both epistemology—the study of what there is to know and how we can know it—and ethics—what we generally understand to be the study of right and wrong. But for Kant, ethics is closely tied to epistemology, rationality, and the characteristics of rational beings. Instead of focusing on whether certain *actions* are right or wrong and why they are right or wrong, Kant's moral philosophy focuses on the principles underlying those actions, how they are adopted, and whether or not they are consistent with individual freedom or autonomy.

If you've already encountered Kant's moral philosophy through an undergraduate course, you likely remember that Kant's *categorical imperative* is at the heart of his deontological or duty-based ethical theory. A "categorical imperative" is simply a rule (i.e., an "imperative") that all people ought to follow under all circumstances (i.e., it is "categorical"). For Kant, this rule is that whenever we perform an action that has moral significance, we ought to act (1) as if everyone will adopt the principle upon which we are acting, and (2) everyone adopting this principle and acting in accordance with it would appropriately recognize and respect the moral worth of all rational beings. Kant's ethics is deontological or duty-based because he believes we have an obligation to adopt principles for action that are consistent with this rule.

But to whom is this obligation? In many discussions of ethics, when we think about right and wrong behaviour it is in the context of the person being affected by that behaviour. Consider the Golden Rule, which for many people is what comes to mind when they think of an ethical principle. The Golden Rule tells us that we ought to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us. It asks us to put ourselves in the position of the person who will be affected by our actions and to think about if we would appreciate being affected by

someone else's actions in that way. For ethical theories that focus on actions and the people affected by those actions, removing other people also removes morality. For example, morality would not be relevant if you were living on a deserted island and in no way could any of your actions affect other people.

Not all approaches to morality focus on the people who will be affected by actions to determine if those actions are right or wrong. Some religious approaches to ethics, for example, understand morality as an obligation that an individual has to God. Here, just because someone is living alone on a deserted island does not absolve him of his moral duties. While a duty to not covet thy neighbour's wife would not be relevant, that person might still be under a dietary obligation, such as not consuming seafood that does not have fins or scales. If God has laid down certain rules that must be followed, an individual has a duty to God to obey those rules. But if God does not exist—either because God never existed or because God has somehow ceased to exist—then all things would be permitted, a point made famous by Dmitri Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

For nearly all approaches to ethics, doing the right thing is something we owe other people (who are affected by those actions) or God (who has commanded us to act in certain ways). But Kant's moral theory does not operate in this way. For Kant, the obligation to do the right thing—by which Kant means adopting principles of action that are consistent with the categorical imperative—is not a duty to God (ever) or to other people (first and foremost), but rather it is a duty I have to *myself*.

For example, Kant argues that lying is always morally wrong. Lying fails when tested against the categorical imperative because adopting the relevant principle of action contains a contradiction in conception. An individual who lies acts on a maxim similar to the following: "When it is to my advantage to do so, I will make a false statement to someone else when he believes that this false statement is true." What makes lying wrong is not that I cannot conceive of a world in which this principle can be universalized, but rather that universalizing this principle is self-defeating. That is, in a world in which everyone lies when it is convenient, lying serves no purpose because a lie is likely not to be believed.

Lying for Kant is wrong, therefore, not because it is harmful to someone else, but because it is behaviour inconsistent with reason. It requires me to adopt a principle of action that is self-defeating. That I would act in such

a way is a failure to respect my dignity as a rational being. Although the liar may possess the external freedom to act how he sees fit, he has chosen to act from a principle grounded in something other than reason. Thus, while the liar possesses negative freedom because he is not under significant influence from external factors and is able to adopt moral, immoral, or non-moral maxims, he is not completely free because he fails to display reason by choosing to adopt moral maxims.

There are two relevant terms at play here: *reason* and *autonomy*. *Reason* is the capacity to draw logical inferences. Since reason generates the Categorical Imperative or moral law, reason and morality are closely connected. Rational beings have wills. A being with a will has the capacity to identify and pursue ends. *Autonomy* is the characteristic of a will to adopt principles of action that it sets for itself using reason, instead of those principles being determined for me by something that is separate from my reason. An autonomous will is a free will.

Suppose someone puts a gun to my head and tells me to do X or he will shoot me. Overcome by fear, I choose to preserve my life, and so I do X so that I don't get shot. In this case, I have not willed to do X freely. Similarly, imagine I am at the point of extreme starvation such that the chemicals in my brain are affecting me in a way that alters my normal decision-making process. As in the previous example, my willingness to do anything under these circumstances is not free, even though, in this second example, the source of this thing influencing my will is not external to my body.

That what I have willed in either of these cases has not been willed freely says nothing about the goodness or badness of the actions I have performed, but it may say something about the goodness or badness of my will and the strength of my own character. For Kant, wills are good if they adopt principles of action consistent with the moral law because doing so is morally right (i.e., there's a duty to do so). A will that falls short of this ideal is evil, and evil comes in degrees.

From bad to worse: (1) A person may attempt to adopt the correct principles because doing so is morally right, yet for whatever reason is too weak-willed to follow through in this way. This weakness is a lack strength possessed by an individual to will in a manner consistent with the moral law. For example, I may recognize that I ought to will the principle, "I will always help people in need" because I understand it is the right thing to do, but I may

lack the strength of will to will that principle on some or most occasions. In these cases, I recognize this failure and am disappointed by my own weakness.

(2) A person may will principles that generate actions appearing to be consistent with morality, but motivated do this not only because it is the morally right thing to do but also because of some other reason (e.g., self-interest). For example, I may adopt the principle, “I will always help people in need,” not just because it is the right thing to do but also because I believe it will be profitable (money, fame, good reputation, etc.) for me to do so. Kant frequently raises the concern throughout his work that it is often impossible for us to know for certain when we have adopted moral principles of action whether we have done so purely out of recognition that morality demands it or because of mixed motivations.

(3) Finally, a person may adopt principles entirely without regard to the what the moral law demands. So, for example, I may adopt the principle, “I will always help people in need,” because I believe it will be profitable (money, fame, good reputation, etc.) for me to do so. In this case, it is just chance that this principle also happens to be consistent with what the moral law demands.

What is worth taking from this discussion is Kant’s commentary on individual freedom and the relationship between reason, autonomy, and what motivates human beings. While I (and, presumably, other human beings) have the capacity for autonomy, that does not mean that I always adopt principles of action that are consistent with the moral law because doing so is the right thing to do. Often things that influence my will but are external to my faculty of reason—what Kant calls “heteronomous impulses”—affect the principles that I either adopt or want to adopt. These influences can come from other people in a variety of capacities, such as the person who held a gun to my held or my religious leader whose views I hold in esteem; society generally, including my desire to do what will make me popular, wealthy, or famous; or my own body, such as my desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain, which may be something I’m actively in control over or something involuntary such as how I may act if I’m on the verge of death by starvation.

Human beings are affected in this way because we have the capacity of reason, but we also possess physical bodies that are influenced by the external world. Our reason, including the principles of action that we adopt, is affected by our senses and desires, which are connected to our bodies and the world around us. Compare the situation for a human being and his will to

the situation for God. For Kant, God possesses a holy will, which means that God is incapable of willing principles that are inconsistent with the moral law.

For God, there is no duty to will moral maxims because God cannot will otherwise. Someone can't have a duty to do something that they do automatically by nature. But someone also can't have a duty to do something that they cannot do. Although human beings are affected by our desires, we are not determined by them in most cases. Attaining a holy will is not possible for human beings because we can never detach our capacity of reason from our bodies. The best we can do is make progress towards attaining a good will, or a will that always adopts moral maxims even if it is pulled initially in other directions by our desires or other external influences.

Kant argues that what allows people to make progress towards a good will is developing strength of character or *virtue*. Virtue is not a characteristic in the sense that people are born with it or not, but rather for Kant it is an ability that people possess. Like other abilities, virtue can be cultivated or made stronger. There are two parts to this process: education and habituation.

Moral education is the process by which individuals come to recognize and understand what type of behaviour morality requires. Keep in mind that Kant's moral theory focuses on individual freedom. If an individual is following moral rules that he has not generated for himself and cannot generate for himself, then the individual who is following those rules isn't free. Kant believed that an individual using his own reason can generate the relevant principles of morality for him or herself. Individuals can then instill those principles in themselves through a method similar to catechistic religious education. If teachers are involved in this process, their role is to help guide the individual towards generating these principles.

Moral habituation is the process by which individuals are able to adopt moral principles consistently. In other theories of ethics or virtue in the history of philosophy—such as the one presented by Aristotle—moral habituation meant that an individual conditioned himself to perform morally praiseworthy acts by performing those acts repeatedly so that it would become a matter of habit. To support this habituation, Aristotle argued that laws could be put in place that would assist people in this process by compelling people to act correctly. While Kant believed that habituation is an important component of morality, an individual is not morally praiseworthy because he has performed actions that he has conditioned himself to perform.

Instead, for Kant, moral habituation aims to condition an individual's emotions to work with rather than against reason, helping that individual to overcome, suppress, or otherwise become apathetic to natural inclinations that prevent him from being able to act from duty. The term Kant uses here is "Ethical Ascetics." "Asceticism" is extreme self-discipline to the point where a person is able to avoid (or deny himself) all forms of bodily pleasures, usually for religious reasons. For Kant, an individual's will is able to make progress towards being good only when that individual is able to combat his natural impulses and master them in cases where they threaten his ability to adopt moral principles of action. Moral habituation helps an individual develop this appropriate disposition.