

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

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Two sayings of Kant on morality are often quoted and hence rather well-known. One is to the effect that you should only act according to principles that can serve as universal laws for all people. The other that each individual is an end to herself and should never be used as a means to an ulterior one. Both of them are rather abstract and may not give much guidance in concrete situations. In fact they are even more abstract than people generally realize. The first may carry a certain resemblance to the Golden Rule: Only do to others what you want them to do to you. But the latter, at least at first glance, seems to give an easily checked criterion in each specific case. Now the groundwork for this short book is given by the *Magnus Opus* - *The Critique of Pure Reason* - of Kant, and written before the sequel - *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and can be seen as a preliminary study of the latter. The basic problem Kant sets out to solve is to relate *Morals* to *Reason*. He thinks in terms of a pure disembodied *Reason* existing independently of man, thus a platonic form in analogy of the perceived role of mathematics. Thus Kant is not exclusively concerned with man, that is a mere anthropological aspect, and thus *Morals* cannot be obtained from the study of man. In the terminology of Kant it is not a synthetic a posteriori. It is noteworthy that he points out that a general law cannot be obtained from experience, it is not a synthetic a posteriori. This ties in with the skepticism of a Hume and its modern presentation due to Popper. What is important in morals is a good will, and by that Kant means something different from what one may at first think. To do good deeds because you have a natural inclination to do so and that it gives you pleasure, has nothing to do with morals. You do a good deed because you will it, meaning that it is a duty, and you will in conformance with this duty. You do not do it because it is in your interest or that it serves some ulterior motive, you do it because you have to. It is the law and you obey it. At the face of it, it seems to have little to do with morality blindly obeying a law. In real life the motive for an act plays an important role in our assessment of it. If you do a good deed out of love and inclination, it tends to enhance the deed and certainly not detract from it. To make sense of it you need to look at a specific situation. One such is the much vaunted freedom of expression. When Rushdie was subjected to the Fatwa many people came to his support. Their support was in favor of free expression of course, but they went further, they explicitly lauded the merits of the book and assured that it really did not offend religious sensibilities. In other words they were not supporting free expression at all, only supporting Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses' because it was worthy of being expressed and printed. In other words they supported it because of their natural inclination. Had they supported it, and thus ostensibly free expression, if they had not liked the book? Their acts were not moral but partisan, Kant would have said. If you really support free speech you do it out of duty regardless whether you like the expression or not. It is easy to support free speech when it entails expressions you like and want to have expressed, but in reality you are then not supporting free speech as such, only using free speech as an excuse

to further your interest, namely that of the right of a certain expression to be expressed. Thus supporting free speech is a duty that transcends personal inclinations, because free speech and expression is an objective moral law, and being moral means that you will it, and thus that your will is in conformity with what is right, and transcends petty personal considerations. Thus someone who wills the principle of free expression is not merely blindly following an arbitrary law, in fact there are two things going on. On one part the approval of the principle of free expression as a meaningful law not just as an arbitrary one, connecting to an objective morality, and on the other hand a commitment to duty even when it goes against your own interests. There is morality to be found in consistency. This ties in with another tacit assumption of Kant, namely that morals are objectively based, in particular that they provide a consistent system with no contradictions. It is symptomatic that when he provides a concrete example to his first maxim, he chooses the need to make promises not to be held in order to extricate yourself from a precarious situation, say that you take a loan promising to pay the money back but having no intention of so doing, in order to extricate yourself from financial ruin. As we would say the situation is very extenuating, you avoid a major catastrophe by committing a minor transgression, and to do otherwise would be very inflexible. Not so for Kant. If you would make the breaking of promises when you are in dire strait a universal maxim then promises as such would be devalued to the point that you no longer can hold out a promise in order to avoid a threat. This leads to a self-contradiction, in modern evolutionary parlance the maxim would not be viable but die out. Thus the argument against lying is not against lying as such but that it is not logically sustainable. If Moral is Truth, the same kind of attitude would hold towards Morals as it does to Truth. It is a duty to uphold Truth and not to compromise on it on grounds of expediency; if you do so the whole Edifice of Truth will come tumbling down. Furthermore Truth is not arbitrary, it is not a matter of convention, but has real meaning. The same with Morals, it is not a matter of blindly obeying orders, the orders obeyed are part of you, internalized by your good will, just as Truth is discovered by the good will of finding out the Truth and recognizing it as such, and not to betray it for personal or other expedient reasons.

But Morals differ from Truth in that free will is involved. In Truth as such there is no free will required. To seek Truth on the other hand is something which you may will or will not, and in that sense seeking Truth is a moral mission. To seek out and establish Truth, is not Truth per se, but a moral choice and act. The freedom of the will is a prerogative for morality, if there is no choice, if your good will is forced upon you by necessities, there is no morality involved. To reason is not just a matter of finding out Truth, it is also a matter of making choices. Kant emphasizes the distinction between reasoning and understanding. The latter is passive, and to a large extent a matter of necessity, in a sense externally enforced as understanding is something that comes to us; reasoning on the other hand is active and involves choices and does not proceed by necessity. To this we will return.

The categorical imperative is another key-phrase that pops up in the writing of Kant. Categorical means categorical, i.e. with no exceptions. If a principle deserves being universal it should suffer no exceptions because if so it would not be universal. Thus, in the parlance of Kant, this is an example of analytic reasoning. Thus duties are duties and should never be shirked. Intrinsic to this is that something may be an end by itself. Moral

laws are ends in themselves, to do something as a means in order to achieve some ulterior end is something else. The imperative in this case is not categorical but contingent, or as Kant would put it hypothetical. It is only good as far as its putative end is. Also, if you will the end, you also will the means, the means necessary to achieve the end, that is. This is another analytic proposition. But you cannot refer indefinitely to other ends to proscribe that something is good, to avoid an infinite recess, you have to assume that some ends are ends in themselves. Such ends cannot be justified a posteriori, they have to be given a priori, just as axioms. But Kant is far too subtle a thinker to assume that morals can be given an axiomatized foundation, as among others Spinoza speculated. Kant would not be Kant if he fell into this trap. He has a problem to solve, and he tries to formulate it precisely and subject it to a relentless logical analysis, which means that his struggles are objective and that the conclusions he draws are preliminary. Unlike many other thinkers he refuses to be drunk on his own rhetorics. In his youth he criticized the various proofs of God's existence as being spurious, and he was careful not to fall fall into this error in his old age. In particular, although questions of morality invariably touches on religion, it cannot be based on it. We cannot base goodness on a perfect will, i.e. on a perfect and divine being, in other words God, because we cannot divine his will, we can only get a conception of it through our own concepts and thus only argue in circles and crudely to boot; and if we do not do this, what would be left for us would to base morality of matters of domination and lust for glory, giving a frightful bland of power and vengefulness, contrary to all our ideas of morality. Thus Kant explicitly rejects the morality of God (Jahveh) as he appears in the Old Testament and cannot have any truck with it. This does not mean that he would reject a more abstract God, as is presented by the scholastics inspired by Aristotle, but only that he can form no conception of it. Thus Kant approaches Morality from the point of view of Reason, with all the difficulties connected with such an approach.

Critical to Kant is the division of the world into the sensuous and the intelligible. This may be thought of as a version of Cartesian dualism, although of course in the hands and thought of a Kant the notion would intellectually be more subtle; or for that matter a division according to Plato, whose influence in Western philosophy remains pervasive. The sensuous world we only know from the outside, that is by its appearances, 'Das Ding an Sich' is, as we all recall, unknowable. While the intelligible world we know from the inside. Something like ourselves we know both from the inside, though our conscious will and mind, and from the outside, as appearances in the sensual world. Those are two different realms and different laws hold sway. In the sensual world the laws of nature, as laws of necessities govern, but in the intelligible one we are to find the moral laws. In this way he can by a sleigh of hand avoid logical contradictions by splitting up the domains, which by less serious thinkers are confused. Intrinsic to this approach is a delineation of the limits of reason, and what we can know and not know, and what we can explain and not explain. Explanations rest on cause and effect, and those are only relevant in the sensuous world. Such a thing as a free will cannot be explained, it is truly a priori, independent of reason as well as experience. In short by drawing lines of demarcation he effectively holds logical conflict at bay. The idea of splitting up a being into a thinking, transcendent part, and a biological one, is rather exciting. In modern scientific reasoning such a division, at least on ontological grounds as opposed to epistemological, is much harder to justify than it was at

Kant's time, 19th century having brought about a triumph of materialism, one of whose consequences is the paradox of a free will. Kant escapes this conundrum by his freedom to posit another world and another set of laws, which, however, pleasing to the intellect, is no longer acceptable.

Kant does not write very lucidly because of honesty and effort in his struggle. Thus the same arguments tend to repeat themselves, at least seemingly so, as if undergoing a slow and tedious process. You need to understand what he wants to do, in order to be able to make sense of what he writes. Everyday vocabulary is not sufficient for the tasks he set himself, and although he invents technical words and terminology, you cannot consistently do so, because then your text would become if not unreadable, at least as impenetrable as a technical mathematical text, but even there, as in Kant, familiar words are given new and often unintuitive meanings, clear to Kant, who may plaintively hope that the readers, caught up in the same complex of problems will automatically follow him.

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