KANT, MORAL DUTY AND THE DEMANDS OF PURE PRACTICAL REASON

The law is reason unaffected by desire.

— Aristotle, Politics Book III (1287a32)

Kant’s goal in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant seeks to demonstrate that there are moral laws that govern our conduct in virtue of there being a foundational or first principle of morality. As he says, “The present groundwork is...nothing more than the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality...” (AK 4:392). (Notice that this reveals Kant’s commitment to ethical foundationalism.) What is more, Kant tells us that the focus of the *Groundwork* is to show that the supreme principle of morality is a necessary, synthetic *a priori* principle. (He calls that principle *The Categorical Imperative* [hereafter CI].) As we will see, Kant argues that CI is a necessary, synthetic *a priori* principle since it governs the actions of rational creatures (whether human or otherwise).

Why does Kant think this about CI? He contends that since CI is a moral principle that legitimately binds all rational creatures (not merely creatures with specific biology), any inquiry into CI is really an investigation into the metaphysics of morals, and not, as others argue (e.g., Mill), an inquiry into practical anthropology. To make sense of this, let us consider the taxonomy of the sciences that he adopts from the ancient Greek thinkers.¹

The ancient threefold division of philosophy

- **Physics**: the study of the laws that govern the behavior of physical systems.
- **Logic**: the study of the laws that govern the thought of rational creatures.
- **Ethics**: the study of the laws that govern the action of rational creatures.

Five important distinctions for understanding Kant

To make the above threefold taxonomy clear and direct our attention to the relevant moral investigation, there are a number of important distinctions we need to make in order to understand Kant.

An inquiry distinction: the formal–material inquiry distinction

Kant distinguishes two kinds of scientific inquiries: formal inquiries and material inquiries. What is the difference?

- A formal inquiry is an inquiry of the form of the laws that govern some entities e.
- A material inquiry is an inquiry of the entities—the values of the variable ‘e’—that are governed by the laws.

¹ Notice that Kant describes the disciplines of logic and ethics as kinds of science. He does so because the term ‘science’ historically (at least until the mid to late nineteenth-century) referred to any discipline that aims at developing a comprehensive theoretical understanding of one or more features of reality.
A helpful example is to consider the form–content distinction from formal logic and mathematics. Consider the following example. The argument

All whales are mammals
All mammals are animals
All whales are animals

has both a form and a content (i.e., a material). Its form is the pattern of reasoning; the content is what the argument is about. The same is true of the statement ‘if $5 > 4$ and $4 > 3$, then $5 > 3$’: it’s form is the schema ‘if $x > y$ and $y > z$, then $x > z$’ whereas its content (i.e., its material) are the numbers 5, 4 and 3.

**A reason distinction:** pure vs. impure reason

- **Pure reason:** reason totally devoid of any *a posteriori* content.
- **Impure reason:** reason that involves some *a posteriori* content.

**An epistemological distinction:** *a priori* vs. *a posteriori* (epistemic) justification

Epistemology is that field of philosophical inquiry that is concerned with the nature and scope of human knowledge. As such, epistemologists seek to answer such questions as *Is (human) knowledge possible?* and *If that knowledge is possible, what is required to have that knowledge and what kinds of things can be known?* To answer such questions, we must inquire into the necessary conditions for a human being to have knowledge. One such condition is the epistemic justification condition (where a belief $b$ is epistemically justified if there is some condition $c$, such that $b$ satisfies $c$). What is the requisite epistemic justification condition? Although philosophers disagree about the details of that condition, they agree that condition recognizes two broad types of epistemic justification: *a priori* epistemic justification and *a posteriori* epistemic justification. But first

- **A priori epistemic justification:** a person $S$ is epistemically justified *a priori* in believing that a proposition $p$ is true only if (i) $S$ has some justifier $j$ for believing that $p$ is true, and (ii) $S$’s having $j$ *does not* require that $S$ be able to appeal to a particular sensory experience $e$.

Putative examples of propositions that a person might be epistemically justified *a priori* to believe: that all red apples are red, that all Euclidean right triangles satisfy the Pythagorean Theorem (i.e., $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$), etc.

- **A posteriori epistemic justification:** a person $S$ is epistemically justified *a posteriori* in believing that a proposition $p$ is true only if (i) $S$ has some justifier $j$ for believing that $p$ is true, and (ii) $S$’s having $j$ *does* require that $S$ be able to appeal to a particular sensory experience $e$.

Putative examples of propositions that a person might be epistemically justified *a posteriori* to believe: that there are more than two people in the room, that the atomic number of gold is 79, that water is $H_2O$, etc.

**A linguistic distinction:** analytic vs. synthetic truth-values

This is a distinction regarding what makes a sentence true, the truth-maker as it were. To be sure, the straightforward answer is that facts are the truth-makers. However, there are different kinds of facts. For simplicity, let us distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic facts. Analytic statements are made true by the former; synthetic statements are made true by the latter.
Analytic: a statement $s$ is analytically true only if (i) $s$ is true and either (ii) $s$ is true in virtue of the form of $s$ or (iii) $s$ is true in virtue of the predicate concept of $s$ being “contained in” the subject concept of $s$.

Putative examples of propositions that are analytically true: that red apples are red, that bachelors are unmarried, etc.

Synthetic: a statement $s$ is synthetically true only if (i) $s$ is true and (ii) $s$ is true in virtue of the predicate concept of $s$ “extending” the subject concept of $s$.

Putative examples of propositions that are synthetically true: that whales are mammals, that the atomic number of gold is 79, that water is H$_2$O, etc.

A modal distinction: necessary vs. contingent truth-values

In addition to the analytic–synthetic distinction regarding the truth-value of a declarative sentences, the truth-value of declarative sentences is modal: i.e., it’s tied to possible worlds. Some sentences have their truth-value necessarily; some sentences have their truth-value contingently.

Necessary truth: a sentence $s$ is necessarily true iff (i) $s$ is true and (ii) there is no possible world where $s$ is false.

Putative examples of propositions that are necessarily true: that $x = x$, that all red apples are red, that the atomic number of gold is 79, that water is H$_2$O, etc.

Contingent: a sentence $s$ is contingently true iff (i) $s$ is true and (ii) there is at least one possible world where $s$ is false.

Putative examples of propositions that are contingently true: that apples are red, that Obama is a politician, that water is in my cup, etc.\(^2\)

As noted above, Kant thinks that the search for CI—again, the first principle of morality—is an investigation into the metaphysics of morals (i.e., into those moral laws that permit or do not permit the actions of all rational creatures). With these distinctions, we are set to answer why he thinks that is the case.

Kant argues that any inquiry that is material in nature and, hence, based on impure reason can at most teach us practical anthropology (i.e., the application of the moral laws to some particular species, e.g., human beings, hobbits, etc.). Yet, before we can know how to apply the moral laws to some species, we must first know what the moral laws are and only a formal inquiry—which is based on pure reason alone—is capable of providing that knowledge. As such, we can see that Kant is offering the following argument:

**Kant’s argument for the a prioricity of moral duties**

1. In order for a law of morality to specify an actual/genuine moral obligation (i.e., what I actually morally ought to do), it must be absolutely true in all cases.

2. If a law of morality is to be absolutely true in all cases, we cannot discover it by observing either the way human beings behave (i.e., it is not a empirical fact about human psychology), or the kind of situations we find ourselves in (i.e., it is not a social empirical fact).

\(^2\) Note that the same can be stated for falsity. Necessarily false sentences are false in all possible worlds; contingently false sentences are false in some, but not all possible worlds.
Hence,
3. An actual law of morality cannot be sought a posteriori (that is, in empirical facts) via impure reason.
4. Anything not sought a posteriori must be sought a priori.
Therefore,
5. We must seek an actual law of morality a priori.
6. Given (5), an actual law of morality is sought via pure reason.
Accordingly,
7. Since all inquiries via pure reason are formal inquiries, ethics is a formal inquiry.
8. Since ethics is a formal inquiry, it is an investigation into the metaphysics of morals.

The good will

According to Kant, the only thing that is unconditionally good is the good will. As he says, “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will” (AK 4:393).

Three important questions:
A. What is the will?
B. Why aren’t there other things that are good without limitation (i.e., unconditionally good)?
C. What makes a good will just that, good?

Kant’s answer to Question A: on the nature of the will

According to Kant, the will is an autonomous, i.e., self-legislating, faculty of volition only had by rational creatures, that is, the faculty that makes plans and decisions to do (or refrain from doing) certain acts, and it is upon those plans and decisions that rational creatures act.\(^3\)

(One part of) Kant’s answer to Question B: The Bad Use Argument

(1) x is an unconditional good iff x can neither be immorally acquired nor used for bad.
(2) Happiness can immorally acquired.
(3) The virtues (i.e., knowledge, courage, etc.) can be used for bad.
Thus,
(4) Neither happiness nor the virtues are unconditional goods.
(5) The good will can neither be immorally acquired nor used for bad.
Therefore,
(6) The good will is an unconditional good.
(7) There are no other candidates for unconditional goods.
Hence,
(8) The good will is the only unconditional good.

\(^3\) Note that (i) the word ‘intention’ is another term used to refer to the plans and decisions to do (or refrain from doing) certain acts, and (ii) Kant often uses the term ‘humanity’ as another reference to persons/rational creatures.
On Kant’s answer to Question C: The Shopkeeper examples and two (more) important distinctions

- On two kinds of actions: actions done in conformity with duty vs. actions done from duty

- On two possible ways to read Kant’s theory of appropriate motives: actualism vs. counterfactualism
  - Actualism: according to this reading of Kant, a person S’s action A has moral worth iff (i) S recognizes that A is her duty and (ii) S does A in the absence of any inclination to do A (and perhaps in the presence of an inclination not to do A).
  - Counterfactualism: according to this reading of Kant, a person S’s action A has moral worth iff (i) S recognizes that A is her duty and (ii) either S has no inclination to do A or S does have an inclination to do A, but (iii) S would have performed A even if she had no such inclination.

Respect for the moral law

According to Kant, actions that are done from duty—i.e., out of respect for the moral law—derive their moral worth from the maxim that leads a person to try to perform them. We’ll say shortly what exactly makes a maxim a right maxim. For now, the point is that our actions have moral worth if the maxim satisfies the relevant criteria for being a right maxim; they do not derive their worth from (a) successful completion of the action or (b) from obtaining any desired end.

With those details before us, we can understand the basic nature of Kant’s deontological theory via the following argument:

(A) An action A is morally right only if A was done from a good will.
(B) An action A was done from a good will only if A was done from duty.
(C) An action A was done from duty only if A was done from a respect for the moral law (i.e., for no other reason than it was the morally right thing to do).
(D) An action A was done from a respect for the moral law only if A is permitted by The Categorical Imperative.

Therefore,

(E) An action A is morally right only if A is permitted by The Categorical Imperative.⁴

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