

Phil 114, March 14, 2012

Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals: Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals*

If forced to say what the core of Kant's moral philosophy is, one could do worse than to say that is his claim that the following are in a deep sense unified, perhaps even one and in the same:

1. practical reason (that is, reason as applied to choice, rather than belief)
2. freedom, and
3. morality.

1 and 2 are unified, because freedom just is the exercise of pure practical reason, and the law of freedom (the law of "followed" by a free causality) is the principle of pure practical reason. 1 and 3 are unified, because the principle of pure practical reason just is the moral law. And 2 and 3 are unified, because the moral law just is the law of freedom.

Moral laws are:

- *necessary, as opposed to contingent*: both in that (i) they say what one *must* do and (ii) they do not depend on any contingent factor (something that might or might not be the case)
- *universal, as opposed to particular*: they apply to every rational and free being (a potentially broader class than *all human beings*), and
- *categorical, as opposed to hypothetical*: they are not conditional on one's inclinations (although perhaps this follows from their necessity in sense (ii)).

Kant takes it to follow from (all? some?) of these properties that moral laws must also be:

- *a priori, as opposed to a posteriori or empirical*: it must be possible to establish moral laws independently of experience.

This follows that the doctrine of morality cannot be the doctrine of happiness, as Epicureans claim. For example, the basic moral law cannot be: "Do what gives you pleasure." This is because what makes us happy can only be learned on the basis of experience.

(One worries that, unless Kant says more, this is unfair. Can't the claim "You ought to do what gives you pleasure" *itself* be *a priori*? Granted, whether it implies "You ought to do drugs" will depend on whether drugs give you pleasure, which is *a posteriori*. But mustn't Kant's moral law *also* be *applied* to facts knowable only *a posteriori* too?)

Instead, the doctrine of morality will be a "metaphysics": "a system of *a priori* cognition from concepts alone." A "metaphysics of morals" would such a system starting from the concept of the object of practical philosophy. What is that object? *Freedom of choice*. Thus, a metaphysics of morals will be a system of *a priori* cognition from the concept of freedom of choice alone.

For Kant, there are two kinds of judgments knowable *a priori*. There are:

- *analytic* judgments, which are roughly "true by definition," or more accurately judgments in which the concept predicated is "contained" in the concept of the subject predicated of, such as, "Bodies are extended," "Bachelors are unmarried."

However, distinctively Kant believes that some, but not all:

- *synthetic* (i.e., non-analytic) judgments are *also* knowable a priori. For example, the truths of arithmetic and geometry, and importantly, the moral law itself. These judgments do not simply unpack what is already contained in the concept of the subject. How synthetic a priori judgments are possible is a question that arises again and again in Kant's philosophy.

Faculty of desire: “the faculty to be, by means of one’s representations, the cause of the objects of those representations”

Faculty of choice: the faculty of desire in accordance with concepts “insofar as the ground determining it to action lies within itself,” i.e., not an ineffective wish or hope, but instead what might actually bring an action about.

Will: “the faculty of desire whose inner determining ground... lies within the subject’s reason.”

- The will’s object is not *action* (as with choice).
- Instead, the will’s object is “the ground determining choice to action.” I.e., a *maxim of choice*: a policy that one might express by saying, “I will do X for purpose P in circumstances C.” The will *adopts* such maxims.

Human choice: “a choice that can be affected but not determined by impulses, and is therefore of itself... not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure will.”

Kant works with two (compatible) notions of freedom of choice:

1. *Negative:* A choice is free insofar as it is *not* determined by sensible impulses.
2. *Positive:* A choice is free insofar as it *is* an exercise of *pure* practical reason: insofar as it follows a principle that practical reason gives to itself.

When would a choice be free?

- If I adopt a maxim because of its *content*, then I am determined by sensible impulses.
 - For example, I adopt the maxim, “I won’t shortchange even unwary customers in order to ensure the reputation of my business.” Here the choice is determined by sensuous impulses (presumably impulses excited by the perceived benefits to my business).
- So my choice is *negatively free* only if I adopt a maxim on *some* other basis.
- What other basis? On the basis of the *form* of the maxim: in particular, on the basis of their having a law-like form, on the basis of their “fitness... to be universal law.”
- So my choice is negatively free only if I choose maxims solely on the basis of whether they could be willed as universal laws.
- But such a choice is also *positively free*, because it is an exercise of pure practical reason. In this case, practical reason is simply following a principle that it gives itself, without input from anything external to it: namely, choose only those maxims that could be willed as universal laws.
- *And this principle just is the moral law itself.*
- Wait, why does it make sense to equate the principle of pure practical reason with the moral law?

- In part, because this principle ends up implying intuitive moral duties. For example, why is it wrong to make a promise to repay you know you won't keep in order to get a loan? Because this maxim couldn't be willed as a universal law. (If it were a universal law, no one would make loans in the first place.)
- In part, because, as we already know, the moral law is necessary, universal, categorical, and a priori. And how could it be, unless it were the principle of pure practical reason?

Why are we entitled to think that our choices are free?

1. *Negative point:* We cannot have any *theoretical* knowledge of freedom. Whether we have or lack freedom is not something about which we could have any possible experience. But, by the same token, we cannot *theoretically* know that we *lack* freedom.

2. *Positive point:* In part because we cannot *theoretically* know that we *lack* freedom, we are entitled to apply the concept of freedom to our choices *practically*. Insofar as we are trying to *choose what to do* rather than to *know what is the case*, we are entitled to apply the principle of pure practical reason—and so the concept of freedom—to our choice. We can't say: "I know that I am free." But we can say, "My choice must satisfy the moral law," in which, for the purpose of choosing, we treat our choice as free, as "following" the law of a free causality.

"Obligation": the necessity of a free action under a categorical imperative of reason.

"Categorical imperative": an imperative—a rule that makes a *contingent* action *necessary* so applies only to creatures, like us, "whose choice is sensibly affected and so does not of itself conform to the pure will but often opposes it"—which is not conditional on our *inclinations*.

"Duty": what is obligated.

Juridical laws

1. Require only *external* actions, without regard for their motives.
2. Concerns freedom in the *external* use of choice.
3. The "lawgiving" can be *external*: these laws can be coercively enforced or provide external incentives for compliance.
4. What establishes a juridical law? That it is necessary for *equal freedom in the external use of choice*.
5. Conformity with juridical laws is *legality*.
6. Create duties of "right."

Ethical laws:

1. Require not only the external action, but also a specific motive: that law *itself* be our reason for compliance.
2. Concerns freedom in the *external* and *internal* use of choice.
3. The "lawgiving" must be *internal*, because they require a specific motive.
4. What establishes an ethical law? That maxims incompatible with it *cannot be willed without contradiction as universal laws*.
5. Conformity with ethical laws is *morality*.

6. Duties of ethics are either duties of *right* or duties of *virtue*.
 - a. Every duty of right is also a duty of ethics: that is, there is an ethical law to perform the duty of right from the motive that it is a duty, even without external constraint or incentive. (Recall that there can be *different obligations* to perform the *same duty*, i.e., the same action.)
 - b. Some duties of ethics are not duties of right, but duties of virtue. These duties *cannot* have any external lawgiver; the lawgiver *must* be internal. This is because duties of virtue are duties to have certain ends.

Review Questions:

1. Why, according to Kant, is the utilitarian thesis, “One must do what produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number,” a non-starter as a candidate for the moral law?
2. Find an example of an analytic proposition and an example of a synthetic proposition. For each: Is it necessary or contingent? A priori or a posteriori? Explain.
3. Why am I *negatively* free when I choose maxims only insofar as they can be willed as universal laws?