

Phil 104, February 1, 2007
Kant: Acting from Duty

Preface: What is our topic?

Formal: concerns only the form of thought.

- Logic

Material: concerns determinate objects of thought.

- Natural philosophy/physics: studies the laws of nature
- Moral philosophy/ethics: studies the laws of freedom.

Empirical: based on experience

A priori/pure: not based on experience.

- Moral philosophy has both an empirical and an a priori part.
- The a priori part is the “metaphysics of morals.” This is the topic of the book.

The aim of the book is to identify and to justify “the supreme principle of morality.” Kant thinks that this principle is implicit in our common ideas. We just need to make it explicit. The first two sections aim to do this.

Section I: Good will the only thing good without limitation

“It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.”

- Means, such as personal traits and external goods, can be used for evil, and then we do not consider them good.
- Happiness? If evil people are happy, then that is not good.

The claim is *not* that these things are not good. The claim is these things are good *only when* they are limited by a good will.

- Means are good only when they are *guided by* a good will.
- Happiness is good only when one *merits it through* her good will.

Objection: Isn't a good will *good* only when it produces good effects?

- If so, then a good will is itself good only with limitation,
- and so *nothing* is good without limitation.

Kant's reply: A good will is good whether or not it produces good effects.

Section I: Acting from duty

When do we have a good will? = When do our actions have moral worth?

We have it when we act *from duty*. But what is it to act from duty? (Suppose we have a duty to X.)

- We don't act from duty when we refuse to do X: when we do what is *contrary to duty*.
- We don't act from duty when we do X, but we are *not* moved by *immediate* inclination to do X. In such cases, we have inclinations to achieve some other purpose Y, and we believe that X-ing serves Y-ing.
- We don't act from duty when we do X because we *are* moved by *immediate* inclination to do X.
 - Example 1: Preserving oneself is a duty, but we preserve ourselves because we are immediately inclined. This has no moral worth. Contrast someone who loses his love of life, but preserves himself from duty. This has moral worth.
 - Example 2: Beneficence is a duty. Consider the person who is immediately inclined to make others happy, and not for any other purpose. This has no moral worth. Imagine that he loses this inclination, but does it from duty. This has moral worth.

Kant's view is *not*: If one is immediately inclined to X, then one's action does not have moral worth.

To see this, we need to understand Kant's moral psychology

- *Inclinations*: Propose to us various purposes.
- It is up to us whether or not we accept these proposals, and act to achieve them. In accepting a proposal, we choose a *maxim*.
- *Maxims*: The contents of possible choices. "I will do X in order to achieve purpose P."
- *Motives*: Maxims that we have actually chosen.

Kant's view is: One's action has moral worth if and only if one's *motive* was to do it in order to *do one's duty*.

- Therefore, *having* the inclinations does not rob one's action of moral worth, so long as one's *motive* was *not* to do it in order to *satisfy those inclinations*.

Section I: From acting from duty to the supreme principle of morality

1. The supreme principle of morality is the principle of my will—the highest-order maxim for choosing maxims—when I act from duty.
2. When I act from duty, my principle of will is not to choose the maxim because I *have an inclination* for its purpose.
 - a. Acting from duty and from immediate inclination are exactly alike except for the principle of will.
 - b. Therefore, they must have a different principle of will.
 - c. When I act from immediate inclination, my principle of will is to choose the maxim because I have an inclination for its purpose.
 - d. Therefore, when I act from duty, my principle of will is not to choose because I have an inclination for its purpose.
3. Therefore, when I act from duty, my principle of will is not to choose the maxim because of *anything to do with* its purpose. (?)
4. Therefore, when I act from duty, my principle of will is to choose the maxim because of its *form alone*...
5. ...which is simply the form of a law.
6. Therefore, when I act from duty, the principle of my will is: "I will choose only lawlike maxims," or, put another way,...
7. "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also *will* that my maxim should become a *universal law*."
8. Therefore, the supreme principle of morality is: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law."

Objection: How do we get from 2 to 3? Why can't my principle of will be: to choose maxims because they have good purposes, whether or not I have any inclination for them?

Kant's (implicit) reply?:

1. A good purpose would have to be a good will, or something limited by a good will.
2. Therefore, a good will just is a will whose principle is to choose maxims because they would produce a good will or something limited by a good will.
3. This is circular, or unilluminating. It doesn't tell us what a good will is.