



Deontology and Its Discontents: A Very Brief Overview of Kant's Ethics

Michael S. Russo
Department of Philosophy
Molloy College

The deontologist, like the utilitarian is looking for an objective basis to ground all moral actions. Unlike a utilitarian, though, a deontologist would completely reject the idea that the goodness or badness of an act can be determined by its consequences. For the deontologist there must be something intrinsic to the act itself that determines its moral status.

Kant's Deontology

The most important attempt to construct a deontological approach to ethics is found in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant begins this work by observing that only the good will is unconditionally good. "It impossible to conceive of anything in the world," he writes, "or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will." (Kant 61). This starting point of the *Groundwork* should make us pause a bit. What about intellectual qualities such as intelligence or good judgment or qualities of character such as courage or perseverance? Aren't these also good without qualification? Kant's answer to this question is a firm no. Although such qualities are good in many instances, they can also be used for evil purposes as well. It was precisely the great intelligence and courage of Shakespeare's Richard III, for example, that made him all the more effective as a villain.

So we can accept that the good will alone is good without qualification. But what exactly does Kant mean by a good will? He immediately rejects the idea that a will is good because of the effects that it produces. A person, Kant maintains, can only be held responsible for things which are completely within his control. Although our acts of willing are in our control, the outcomes of our acts are certainly not. Similarly, a person of good will is still deserving of praise, even if his actions fail to produce less than positive consequences. Thus we can imagine an anonymous Salvadoran peasant woman who stands up against injustice in her native land only to find herself and her family imprisoned and her home burned to the ground. Even if her actions produced no positive results for herself or those around her, this in no way diminished the praiseworthiness of her actions.

For Kant it is having the right intention that makes the will good. But what kind of intention? He replies that a good will is one that acts solely for the sake of duty. In order to

demonstrate the difference between acting for the sake of duty, acting out of self-interest and acting through inclination, he provides us with an everyday example. Imagine a certain grocer, he says, who always treats his customers honestly, never overcharging even inexperienced customers or children. The reason that he is so honest, however, is simply because there is so much competition in the area where his shop is located that he believes that if he is scrupulously honest, customers will prefer to do business with him rather than his rivals. Kant's grocer is honest, then, not because it is his duty to be, but simply because it serves his own interest, and an act motivated by self-interest is not a moral act. Another possibility is that the grocer might be honest because of an inclination—that is, because honesty comes naturally to him and he derives pleasure from it. Once again, however, for Kant acts performed because of some inclination are also not moral acts per se. The problem with inclinations is that they are completely irrational and unreliable, since we typically follow them out of whim rather than because of reason. The same emotions that inspire us to great acts of kindness can also inspire us to engage in incredible acts of violence and cruelty (Kant 65).

The person of good will for Kant is precisely that person who performs good acts simply because it is his duty to perform them and perhaps even despite his inclinations to do otherwise. Thus the man who is naturally generous is not behaving morally, when, because of a feeling of pity he gives money to a woman begging. On the other hand, the person who is inclined to be stingy, but who gives to this same woman out of a sense of duty, is the truly moral person for Kant.

The next question that Kant raises is, “how do we know where our duty lies?” The answer is that our duty lies in obedience to a particular rule, principle or law regardless of inclination, self-interest, or consequences. It lies in following a command that must be obeyed for its own sake. Kant calls this supreme principle of all morality the Categorical Imperative. The first formulation of this Categorical Imperative is: “I ought never to act except in such a way that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant 70). For each act that I am planning to perform, then, I have to ask: (1) what is the rule authorizing this act that I am about to perform and (2) can it become a universal rule for all human beings to follow? Thus an act would be considered immoral for Kant if the rule that would authorize it (the maxim) cannot be universalized—that is, turned into a general rule for all to follow. To put this in another way, if we cannot affirm that everyone ought to act in the same way that we have done, we know our action is wrong.

Examples

Two examples would help to illustrate how Kant's system works. In the first example, Johnny Scollazo borrows money from a friend and promises to pay it back, although he has no intention to do so. Having some conscience he wonders if such an act is morally correct. Remembering what he learned about Kant in his college ethics class, he turns this into a rule, “Whenever I am short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I will never do so.” He then turns his rule into a universal law to see if it is right. What would happen, he wonders, if everyone broke their promises to repay money? The answer is that no one would ever lend money to anyone else, because they would never trust anyone's promises to repay the money they borrowed. Johnny immediately realizes that his act cannot be universalized without contradiction, and therefore

it is not right.

In the second example, Eddie Dougherty, a lazy fellow, who is not really interested in working, is thinking of stealing from others to get what he wants. The rule for the action he is considering would be something like the following: "I shall never work but steal from other human beings." If this rule were universalized it would become: "no human beings should ever work but should steal what they need from each other." The reason why this rule cannot be universalized is fairly apparent: if no one worked, there would be no one to steal from and nothing to steal. Thus Kant would say that the action that Eddie is contemplating is immoral because it cannot be universalized without contradiction.

Evaluation

At first glance, the Kantian approach to ethics certainly seems preferable to that of utilitarianism. In fact it is probably the best approach that modern philosophy has to offer. Unlike utilitarianism, the Kantian approach, in rejecting positive consequences as the basis for moral decision making, has a much better chance of preserving the rights of individuals and minorities than the utilitarian approach does. Indeed Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which states that one ought never to treat any individual merely as a means but only as an end in themselves, assures that the unjust treatment of any individual, for whatever reason, must be considered wrong. We shall return to this second formulation later in the course.

Despite the fact that the Kantian approach is indeed preferable to a utilitarian one from a Christian perspective, there are some subtle problems with this approach that cannot be overlooked. Richard Taylor, for one, objects to the fact that Kant substitutes concrete duties that we ought to have towards specific individuals for an abstract duty not directed towards anyone or anything. Thus in Kant's system we do not help others in need because God has willed us to do so or simply because we care deeply about them and want to relieve their suffering, but simply because it is our duty to do so. This transforms ethics into something so abstract that it has little to do with the real concerns of ordinary human beings. Taylor also finds difficulties with Kant's rejection of compassion or love as a motivation for moral action. Suppose a person goes out of his way to help someone who is sick, and does so because he is motivated out of compassion or love. Kant treats this motivation as "pathological" because it is not motivated by the desire to do one's duty for its own sake. Because the motivation is not purely rational, it suddenly becomes a defective basis for moral action: "To be genuinely moral [according to Kant] a man must tear himself away from his inclination as a loving human being, drown the sympathetic promptings of his heart, scorn any fruits of his efforts, think last of all of the feelings, needs, desires, and inclinations either of himself or of his fellows and, perhaps detesting what he has to do, do it anyway—solely from respect for the Law." (Taylor)

Thus, despite the improvements that a deontological approach like Kant's makes over that of utilitarianism, it too is an inadequate basis for a Christian ethic. When Augustine advised the Christians of his time to "love first and then do what you will," or when Saint John tell us that "God is love and he that abides in love abides in God," both are implicitly acknowledging that the ground of Christianity is indeed sentimental in the best sense of the term: it is, in other words, founded upon such feelings as love, compassion and pity. When Christ multiplied the loaves and fishes or when he raised Lazarus from the dead, he

didn't ask whether these actions could be universalized; he acted out of pure compassion for those around him. In both cases we read that he was moved to pity by the sufferings he witnessed.

There is also something far removed from the spirit of Christianity about an ethical approach that would dismiss the deeds of human beings "so sympathetically constituted that...they find inner satisfaction in spreading joy, and rejoicing in the contentment of others which they have made possible." The Christian ideal is precisely the person in whom the tendency to charity and kindness is so innate that he does not even have to ask whether what he is doing is right or not. It is the person who is capable of seemingly "automatic" acts of goodness that we would describe as being an authentic illustration of the Christian life, not Kant's rigid man of duty, whose is compelled to do what is right often against his own base inclination.

For Further Reading

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For more information contact us at info@sophiaomni.org.