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DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

The main concern of deontological ethics is with *obligation*, and deontological theories are frequently outlined in terms of identifying, classifying, and justifying *duties*. Perhaps the most important philosophical proponent of this view is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's moral theory is dauntingly complex. He works out its main features in at least three different books: the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Metaphysics of Morals* (including the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue*), and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. While the most useful piece of his system for the purpose of practical application – The Categorical Imperative – can be stated relatively briefly, I'm going to begin by spending a little time laying out some of the foundational assumptions on which it depends before I explain what the Categorical Imperative is and how it works.

Kant begins the first part of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* with the assertion that "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*."¹ Other qualities or talents may be good for some other purpose or reason, but the good will is good in itself, and is the thing that may make other qualities or talents good. A supremely clever serial killer, for example, gives the lie to the idea that being supremely clever is an unconditionally good quality, but cleverness can be good when it functions in conjunction with a good will. But what is it that makes the will good? At first glance, Kant's work looks a bit like the Aristotelian approach to character – having a good will seems rather a lot like having the best sort of ethical character. What makes Kant different?

In order to understand what Kant means by *good will*, the best place to begin is with an account of the will itself; note that in this context we are not talking about the feeling or quality of "good will," but are instead discussing what makes the human will (whatever that is) good. For Kant,

the will is the power or faculty of choice – that is, the will is that feature of a rational being which chooses and generates action.² The will is motivated both by reason and by inclinations or urges. Sometimes, inclination is stronger, and one chooses in order to satisfy a desire, with reason working out how that is most effectively done. Sometimes, reason is stronger; in that case, reason drives the choice made, and inclination serves it. Typically, they interact with each other in a number of different ways in any given situation, and it isn't always clear which motivation is acting more powerfully on the will.

Consider the example from the introductory chapter of this book, in which a stranger drops her wallet on the street. In that situation, a person might experience any number of different desires or urges where the wallet is concerned – the desire to take the wallet and keep it, the desire to be helpful, the fear of being thought to be a thief, the desire for approval for returning it, hope for a reward, etc. If inclination is stronger than reason in determining the will, then reason is confined to figuring out how to satisfy some given desire. Reason, in the absence of the influence of inclination, merely asks whether or not it is right to take some given action (stealing the wallet, abandoning it, returning it). Sometimes, inclination and reason agree on a course of action – a choice is both desirable and right. Often they do not, and one is put in the position of choosing either to follow one's urges or to deny them.

Kant's firm conviction is that there is an important difference between a choice driven mainly by inclination and one driven mainly by reason, and it is the latter that may be said to have moral content. That means that even in cases in which urges and reason agree, the choice is only morally valuable if it is reason and not inclination that motivates the will to choose. **A truly good will is one determined by reason, not inclination.** This is what it means for Kant for the will to be motivated by *duty* – our duties or obligations are rationally determined as principles for action.³ This doesn't mean that all rational choices are by definition good. One can quite rationally decide to do rather horrible things, which is typically the result of reason serving the inclinations instead of checking them (this is the rational behavior of a well-organized murderer, for example). Such choices do not count, ethically speaking, as good. In order for some given choice to count as having moral content, the final word on that choice lies with reason, not with inclinations made operational by reason.

How does reason arrive at duty? According to Kant, it does so by way of the *Categorical Imperative*. An imperative is an obligation or a command, and Kant identifies two types: hypothetical and categorical. Hypothetical imperatives – which do *not* give us our duties -- are always aimed toward some other end, and they all have the same conditional form: if I want to achieve goal *x*, I ought to take action *y*. If I want to build a house, for

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example, it is *hypothetically* imperative that I purchase tools and materials and make a plan. It is also hypothetically imperative that I take bids from contractors and arrange financing to pay them. Notice that a great many potentially contradictory things can be hypothetical imperatives, and the nature of the end has quite a lot to do with which means are hypothetically required in order to achieve that end. The things I hypothetically ought to do in order to build a brick house are not the same things I ought to do in order to build a straw house or a wooden one, for example. If my narrower end is to build not just a house, but a brick house, the things I ought to do are determined by that more specific end. A hypothetical imperative is always conditioned on the end I set, and these ends are typically chosen on the basis of some desire or inclination.

For an imperative to demand something categorically, however, is different. It means that the action required is an end in itself, and is not demanded for some other purpose. A hypothetical imperative is an if-then command; a categorical imperative, on the other hand, is absolute, and simply says "do x ." If something is demanded of me categorically, then I ought to do it regardless of the situation or any other ends or desires I might have. Moral content or moral value occurs in choices driven by a categorical imperative, not a hypothetical imperative. This is how, according to Kant, we arrive at the moral law.

Kant asserts that there is really only one Categorical Imperative, expressible in at least three ways.⁴ The first is often called the *Universal Law formulation*: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."⁵ That is, only choose what you can at the same time will that everyone else ought to choose, as if it were a universal law. If you cannot will without contradiction that everyone ought to do it, then you should not do it – it is morally wrong. The classic example used to illustrate this formulation is *false promising*. If I ask you to loan me \$100 and promise to pay you back on Tuesday, all the while having no intention whatsoever of paying you back, then I am violating the Categorical Imperative. Why? Because I cannot will that everyone's promises should be false and still expect my false promise to work. In a world in which all promises are false, you would never give me the money in the first place. In other words, I cannot will a universal law to which I am the only exception.

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is called the *Formula of Humanity*: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."⁶ By this, Kant means that we are not to treat other people (rational beings) merely as things to be used to satisfy our own ends. Slavery, for example, is an obvious case in which a person is being used as a means to an end and not an end in him/herself. Paid

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What Does Duty Demand?

How would you respond to Kelly's infidelity to Taylor if you were to think like a Kantian deontological ethicist? In order to discover the best moral decision to make, you have to apply the Categorical Imperative, and in order to apply the Categorical Imperative, you first have to identify the various ends in play.

Kelly is asking you to deceive Taylor in order to preserve your friendship and to protect Kelly's relationship with Taylor. Deception, considered as an end in itself, does not pass the test of the Categorical Imperative. Lies and other forms of deception only work to manipulate someone in a social world in which the expectation of truthfulness is the norm for human communication. If it were a universal law that everyone should always lie or deceive, then it would no longer be possible to manipulate others in this way. Deception also clearly requires using another person merely as a means to one's own end, without any real respect for that person's power to choose as a rational being. Deceiving Taylor, as Kelly has done and is now asking you to do, fails to meet the demands of the Categorical Imperative, and is therefore morally wrong. You tell Kelly you cannot deceive Taylor, and you cannot approve of Kelly's own deceit.

Kelly objects that what you are really being asked to do is not to lie to Taylor – you're being asked to preserve a set of friendships and other relationships (your friendship with Kelly, your friendship with Taylor, Kelly's relationship with Taylor) by not saying anything. Kelly insists that keeping the affair a secret is a better way to salvage things with Taylor than revealing the truth would be, and that this would be the best way to respect their relationships with each other and with you.

Preserving a friendship, as an end, certainly doesn't conflict with the demands of the Categorical Imperative; indeed, it seems entirely conducive to treating humanity in oneself and in one's friends as an end and not merely as a means to an end. Kant himself admits that friendship – "the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect" – is morally important for human beings, especially insofar as it provides a context for the exercise of respect between people.⁹ A moral friendship of the Kantian kind is one in which that rational respect is ultimately more important than the feelings of the participants; such friendships involve "the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect."¹⁰ Friends of this kind should be able to be entirely open with each other, an openness that includes occasional criticism motivated by the demands of duty.¹¹ As such, maintaining the right kinds of friendship amounts to a meritorious or imperfect duty – it improves the conditions for the exercise of morality.

Is your friendship with Kelly a properly moral friendship in which mutual respect is important? You might have thought so before you discovered Kelly's infidelity and were encouraged by Kelly to hide the truth from Taylor. In this case, though, it seems clear to you that keeping the affair secret is no better than lying outright. You would be using Taylor as a means to the end of maintaining your friendship with Kelly, which is clearly not what duty would demand. It is also apparent to you that Kelly would not have told you about the affair in the first place if you hadn't happened upon it yourself, which means that Kelly was deceiving you as well as Taylor. A friendship in which disclosures and deceptions of this kind occur does not appear to be one consistent with mutual respect – Kelly is using you as a means to Kelly's own end (cheating on Taylor), and that end in itself is morally wrong.

After considering things in this light, you decide to stick to your ultimatum, but Kelly still objects. From Kelly's point of view, it looks as if you are forcing Kelly to accomplish *your* end, which would violate the Categorical Imperative. You respond by pointing out that your ultimatum is really more of a courtesy than a threat – you are giving Kelly relevant information necessary to making a choice by describing your own intended behavior. If you are committed to acting as a denizen of the Kingdom of Ends, you must act as if others, too, are bound by the same moral rules that bind you. You must act as if Kelly's will were also determined by reason, not by inclination, and reason has already discerned the wrongness of deception (not to mention the wrongness of infidelity – a classic example of the use of a person as a mere means to one's own end). You cannot promise to hide the truth from Taylor, and you will not help Kelly do so.

NOTES

- ¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:412-4:413. Cambridge University Press, but I have changed the numbers.
- ² Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:412-4:413.
- ³ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:413.
- ⁴ I say "at least three" because the translators about this number.
- ⁵ *Groundwork* 4:421.
- ⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:429.
- ⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:434-4:440.
- ⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:422-4:424.
- ⁹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:440.
- ¹⁰ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:440.
- ¹¹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:440.