

Lecture 8.1: KANT - ETHICS

NOTE: To get an understanding of Kant's conception of human nature, we can take a look at his ETHICS. This e-lecture is based on Kant's work titled **Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals** (Cahn/Markie, pp. 323-348).

1. For Kant the **good will** is the only thing that is **good without qualification**, that is, absolutely good, good in itself, unconditionally good. There are many things that are good (i.e., desirable) but these things are not good without qualification. Kant classifies these things that are good but not good without qualification into 3 kinds:

- **Talents of the mind** – intelligence, wit, good judgment, etc.
- **Qualities of temperaments** – courage, prudence, perseverance, etc.
- **Gifts of fortune/nature** – health, power, wealth, good looks, etc.

All these are good (in that these are desirable to have in person) but these are **NOT good without qualification** because, according to Kant, these are **ONLY GOOD** when the person having these goods has **GOOD WILL**. **It is the presence of good will that makes these goods 'good.'** Without good will, these can become bad. Kant uses the example of a **villain** (whether in real life or in fiction). The villain may have many wonderful qualities (like intelligence, power, wealth, good looks, charm, etc.) but is lacking in good will.

2. But we ask Kant: **What makes the will a good will?** Kant claims that the good will is good **NOT** because of what it accomplishes, or what it achieves or the results it brings about. Rather, **it is good because the willing (intention) is good in itself**. In other words, for Kant it is the **purity of the intention/willing** that makes the will a **good will**.

NOTE: It is evident from this claim of Kant that his ethics is what is called **non-consequentialist ethics** as opposed to a **consequentialist ethics**. According to **consequentialist ethics** it is the consequence (or outcome) of the act that makes the act good or bad. If the act will bring about good consequence (like pleasure or happiness) then the act is good/right. If the act will bring about a bad consequence (like pain or unhappiness) then the act is bad/wrong/evil. For the **non-consequentialists (like KANT)**, it is NOT the consequence of the act that makes the act good/right or bad/wrong. In the case of KANT, it is the purity of the intention that makes the act good/right. If the intention of the agent in doing the act is pure, the act has **moral worth**, regardless of the outcome or result that act may bring about.

3. If it is the purity of the intention that makes the will a good will, we now ask Kant: **How do we know if the intention is pure?** To answer this question, Kant makes a distinction

between **acting from duty (acting for the sake of duty)** and **acting according to duty (acting in accordance to duty)**.

To explain the difference between these two, Kant introduces the **example of a merchant or grocery store owner**. This merchant is thinking of ways by which he can increase his profit. He is considering increasing the price of the goods he is selling in his store (i.e., **overcharging his customers**) to make more profit. As he ponders on this option, he realizes that his store is located in a neighborhood that is not wealthy, and many of his regular customers are the children in the neighborhood and they do not have lots of money. He realizes that if he increases the price he is charging them, they would not be able to afford the goods he is selling, and they would rather from another store whose price they can afford. And if that happens, he would lose his regular customers, and lose money. As he ponders on this situation, **he comes to the realization that in the long run it would not be good for his business to overcharge his customers**. So, he decides in the end not to overcharge his customers. Kant claims that in deciding not to overcharge his customers, the merchant **is doing the right thing**. However, even though he is doing the right thing by not overcharging his customers, **his act still has no moral worth** (i.e., his act is still not good, according to Kant).

BUT WHY IS THAT SO? Because, according to Kant, the merchant is **just acting according to duty**. He is **NOT acting from duty**. For Kant, **acting according to duty** is doing the right thing **but not** for the right reason. **Acting from duty** is doing the right thing **for** the right reason. For Kant, the merchant did the right thing (by not overcharging his customers) but NOT for the right reason because he did it only because that is what will be good for his business in the long run. He did not do it simply because it is the right thing to do (that is, he did not do it with **purity of intention**). So, according to Kant his act has not moral worth.

Therefore, for Kant, it is only when a person is acting from duty (**not simply** acting according to duty) that his/her act is done with purity of intention and, hence, done with a good will.

NOTE: Kant **defines DUTY** as the necessity to act out of respect for the law. For example, if a citizen pays his/her taxes only because one is afraid of the consequences of being caught not paying taxes, then one is acting only according to duty, one is not acting out of respect for the law. For Kant, **to act out of respect for the law is to act from duty**. If a citizen pays his/her taxes because that is the right thing to do (**not simply** because one is afraid of the consequences of not paying taxes), then one is acting from duty and therefore acting out of respect for the law.

4. **The next question to ask Kant then is: How do we know if something is the right thing to do?** (Or, when is something our duty? To answer this question Kant introduces the concept of **MAXIM**. Kant defines maxim as **the subjective principle of action or volition**. To understand this better, let us look at the **example** Kant presents to show **how a maxim is generated or how it arises**.

The example Kant presents is **the case of a person who finds himself in a financial difficulty**. He needs to find a large amount of money to meet his financial obligation, which if he couldn't then he would be in far more trouble. So, he thinks of ways to find the money he needs. He has a friend who has the money from whom he can borrow the money. His friend will lend him the money he needs on condition that he pays it back. That's where his dilemma begins. He knows that he would not be able to pay it back. So, if he makes that promise to his friend that he would pay it back (knowing very well that would not be able to do so), he would in effect be making a false promise (in other words, he would be lying). But if he does not make that false not make that false promise, his friend will not lend him the money that he needs to get him out of his financial difficulty. So in this case, the person **makes the maxim of making a false or lying promise**. By making this maxim, the person is in effect making an exception for him/herself. The person is in effect saying that making the false promise is only for this one time and only because of the extreme difficulty that the person finds him/herself in. If his person were not in this circumstances, this person would not have generated or formulated the said maxim. In other words, there is already a realization here that making a false promise is not something that should be done.

From this example, we can see that for Kant a maxim is an act that we propose to do because we find ourselves in such grade difficulty and it is what we see to be the solution (way out) to our present difficulty. If there were another alternative to deal with the difficulty we would not even recommend it for our self to do.

5. Now that the maxim has been formulated, it needs **to be tested whether it is really the morally right thing to do**. To test the maxim (in this case the maxim of making a false promise), Kant says that we must apply to the maxim an **imperative**. An imperative is something that must or ought to be done. It is important, and pertains to serious matters (not something trivial). If it is not done, then there will be dire consequences.
6. For Kant, there are **2 kinds of imperative**: the **hypothetical imperative** and the **categorical imperative**.

The **hypothetical imperative** has the **format** of "If I want X, then I must or ought to do Y." It is conditional on what the person wants or desires. As such, it does not apply to

all individuals or persons. It is imperative only for the person who desires that end or purpose. For example, **If I want to be a lawyer** (that's the X) then I must do the following (that's the Y): must graduate and have a Bachelor's degree, must have an excellent GPA, must pass the LSAT and score high on the LSAT, must be accepted into a reputable Law School, must study law for 3 or 4 years to get the Law degree, and must pass the bar to be able to practice law. All of these (the Y's) are imperatives (i.e. must or ought to be done) IF I want to be a lawyer. BUT it is only an imperative for me (not for all individuals) because I want to be a lawyer (not for those who do not want to be a lawyer); and it is only an imperative for me for as long as I want to be a lawyer. If I decide that I do not want to be a lawyer anymore, then even to me it is no longer imperative to do all those Y's. Thus, **a hypothetical imperative does not all apply to all persons, and does not apply at all times and under all circumstances.**

7. That is NOT the case with the **categorical imperative**. By **categorical** Kant meant something that is **without any exception**. The **format of the categorical imperative** is: **Do X** or **Do Y** (**NOT** if you want X then you must or ought to do Y). Thus, (unlike the hypothetical imperative) the categorical imperative does not depend on what a person or individual wants. Regardless of what the individual or person wants, it must or ought to be done. Thus, **the categorical imperative does not admit of exception, and is applicable to all persons or individuals at all times under any circumstances.**
8. For Kant, **it is the categorical imperative that is the imperative of morality** (i.e., it is the **moral imperative**). It is the categorical imperative that is to be applied to the maxim to determine if indeed the maxim a person has formulated (like the maxim of making a false promise) is the morally right thing to do.
9. For Kant, there is **only one categorical imperative but it has three formulations**. Each formulation emphasizes a certain aspect of the categorical imperative that Kant wants to emphasize.
10. The **1st formulation of the categorical imperative** is called the **Universality Principle**, which states: **Act only according to the maxim that you are willing to make into a universal law**. By **willing to make a maxim a universal law**, it means for Kant that you are willing to allow anyone at any time to do the maxim you are proposing for yourself, even if they are not in the same circumstance or difficulty that you find yourself in. If you are willing to universalize your maxim in this way, then it is morally right to do our maxim. Now, **let us apply this formulation of the categorical imperative to the maxim of making a false promise**. Would you be willing to universalize that maxim (meaning, would you be willing to allow anyone to make a lying or false promise at any time and under any circumstances? What would happen if you were to universalize this

maxim? Then anyone, at any time, under any circumstance would be allowed to make a false promise. If that were so, what would become of promises? Would anyone still take promises seriously when you know that anyone under any circumstance can make a false promise? In other words, would promises still be meaningful in this case? Thus, Kant thinks that **no one would be willing to make the maxim of making a false promise a universal law**. In fact, Kant says, that if the person in the case analyzed before were to make the maxim of making a false promise a universal, it would **contradict** the very reason why in the first place the maxim of making a false promise was generated. Why? Because for the maxim to work for this person, his promise must be believed by his friend who has the money to lend him, but this friend would only lend the money if he (i.e., the friend) believes the promise (meaning, he is not aware that it is a false promise) made to him. Thus, Kant says that since we cannot universalize this maxim, it is not morally right to do this maxim even if it can get the person out of his difficulty. This 1st formulation of the categorical imperative is in effect Kant's version of the "**Golden Rule**."

11. The 2nd formulation of the categorical imperative is called the **Humanity Principle** which states: **Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end and never merely as means**. What Kant is emphasizing here is **respect for person**. For Kant, **persons are not things**. Things have **extrinsic value** in that they are intended to serve a certain function or purpose. For example, a pen is for writing. So long as it does that function it has a value. But its value is only extrinsic because it has a value only insofar as it is serving the purpose or function for which it exists. A human being is a person (and as such, an end in itself) and thus has **intrinsic worth (i.e., dignity)**. Therefore, for Kant, a human being deserves to be treated always as an end and never merely as means. To treat a human **merely as means** is to reduce a human being to the level of a thing, and to disrespect the human being. The example that can be referred to here is the example of **a slave**. A slave is nothing more than a thing or property owned by its master (owner). A master can do whatever the master wants to do with its slave. Thus, in a slave-master relationship, the humanity of the slave is reduced to the level of thing. The master treats the slave **merely as means to whatever ends or purposes the master has in mind**. Thus, for a maxim to be the morally right thing to do it must conform to the humanity principle.

12. The 3rd formulation of the categorical imperative is the **Autonomy-of-the-Will Principle**. This 3rd formulation incorporates what is emphasized in both the universality principle and the humanity principle. This 3rd formulation of the categorical imperative states: **One must act in such a way that through the maxim that one is willing to make into a universal one becomes his/her own law-maker or law-giver**. The emphasis here is in becoming our own moral lawmaker. By being our own lawmaker, we

affirm our **autonomy of the will**. For Kant, the will is **autonomous** if we have the capacity to determine for ourselves what our ends or purposes will be. It is by virtue of this autonomy of the will that human beings are **persons** and thus worthy of being treated not merely as means but always as ends in themselves. The opposite of the autonomy of the will is the **heteronomy of the will**. The will is **heteronomous** when the capacity for self-determination is taken away, as in the case of a **slave**. By being our moral law-maker or law-giver, we manifest our capacity for self-determination. By determining which maxim we are willing to make into a universal law, we become our own law-maker or law-giver, and thus affirm our autonomy and our being a person and not being a thing.

13. For Kant, when we all learn to act in accordance with these formulations of the categorical imperative, we will end up creating what he calls as the **Kingdom of Ends**. This is a community of rational beings who act with good will, whose maxims are in conformity with the categorical imperative and who treat each other always as ends and never merely as means. This is the society that Kant is hoping will be the kind of society we would have. Kant is fully aware that our present society is not yet what the Kingdom of ends is, but what he is hoping for is for us to realize what we need to do and/or change in order to bring into reality this Kingdom of ends.