

20. Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

IN 1785 one of the most important books ever written was published in Prussia, and yet more than 200 years later very few people have ever heard of it. The work in question laid the foundation of the modern belief in universal rights. Its author suggested that morality is based, not – as western Christendom had maintained for centuries – on divine commands, nor – as political theorists like Machiavelli had argued – on the principle of utility or self-interest, but on human reason. The author was Immanuel Kant, and the work was *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* the philosopher David Hume had rejected both divine commands and self-interest but advocated another approach. Morality, he said, is based on natural feelings of sympathy, and reason is “and ought only to be the slave of the passions”. In other words, reason concerns only means, not ends. Kant, who said that Hume interrupted his ‘dogmatic slumber’, seeks instead to demonstrate that reason refers to ends as well as means.

Now, it is a big claim indeed to argue that morality is derived solely from our reason. It implies that our own desires, hopes and interests are irrelevant and that the action itself commands us to do it. There are *imperatives* of action which derive from the dictates of reason. This would seem to suggest that we have no freedom of choice in the matter. On the contrary, argues Kant, it is only when we are truly free that we can make rational decisions: for him, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. And when we discern what the rational course is, we realise that it is our duty to follow it. Thus we have 3 key concepts linked together: freedom, reason and duty. Our free will tells us that it is our duty to obey rational imperatives. And if we follow these imperatives we will realise our freedom, which is “the property that a will has of being a law to itself”. Freedom is therefore the ability to be governed by reason.

Kant distinguishes two kinds of imperative. The first are hypothetical imperatives, which depend on certain ends to be achieved. For example, if I want to acquire knowledge, then I must study and learn – this is a logical ‘ought’. Or we might believe that murder is wrong because it does not maximise social good – this is a utilitarian ‘ought’. For Kant, these are not concerned with morality at all but only with desires. It is the second kind which are *categorical imperatives* – absolute and unconditional moral commands, based on reason, whatever the consequences. They are, in fact, universal moral laws, governed by the ultimate or basic moral law, namely that you should “act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”. Thus the principle of universalisability, sometimes called ‘the Formula of Universal Law’ (FUL), may be described as *the* ‘categorical imperative’, upon which all others are based.



In short, we should only act on rules or maxims that we would want to apply to everybody. Examples include making false promises, lying or stealing. To break our promise would result in trust breaking down so that we could not act on our initial maxim of promising falsely. Similarly, if people lied when they thought they could get away with it, we would never know when anyone was telling us the truth and there would be no way to tell a truth from a lie, so its universalisation would generate a contradiction. And the universalisation of ‘steal when you can’ would create a world in which no one’s property would any longer be rightfully theirs, but without private property there can be no stealing either.

Is the Formula of Universal Law the same as the Golden Rule found in Confucius, Jesus and others: “do (or do not do) unto others as you would (or would not) have them do unto you”? Is FUL the Golden Rule with philosophical knobs on? We might say no, because the Golden Rule is based on subjective preference – what we *want* – whereas FUL is based on objective *duty* – what is rationally necessary, irrespective of what we want. The weakness of the Golden Rule, according to Kant, is that what you would want done to you might not be what another person wants done unto them. People have different wants. For example, a sadist or a masochist would be justified in causing or receiving pain. The categorical imperative is thus arguably an improvement on the Golden Rule because it says that you should act as you would want all other people to act towards all other people.

Yet we could reasonably argue that the Golden Rule merely personalises a universal principle. Is there really any significant difference between saying: “Do what you think everyone should do” (FUL); and: “Do what you think the other person should do” (Golden Rule)? Moreover, what you want another person to do is not a matter of taste if you want them to act ‘rationally’. In other words, if we rewrite the Golden Rule as: “do unto others as you would want them rationally to do unto you”, then there is no significant difference and the categorical imperative is essentially the Golden Rule in philosophical dress.

A second categorical imperative, derived from FUL, is: “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”. In other words, we should show respect to others and never treat them as a means to our own ends. This is sometimes called the Formula of the End in Itself. It implies that our freedom is constrained by respecting the freedom of all, for how else can our freedom issue in universal laws?

This second formulation of the categorical imperative is immediately compelling and it also has had the greatest cultural impact on western thought and politics, but is it really implied by the Formula of Universal Law?

Arguably no, because the first principle is actually only a formal rule which does not really tell us whether an action is good or bad. A universal rule that we should kill anyone who gets in our way is not self-contradictory and would therefore fulfil the Formula of Universal Law, though clearly it would run completely against the Formula of Ends in Themselves, which is a substantive principle of respect for the dignity of persons. Nevertheless, a universal law, though morally neutral, if combined with the Formula of Ends in Themselves, does enable us to reach a position not far removed from a modern liberal humanist ethic.

Modern humanism does indeed propose that there are certain universal principles relating to freedom and human rights which transcend local cultures and customs. The United Nations embodies this approach in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, we have to acknowledge that such rights cannot be applied rigorously in all circumstances. Children, for example, cannot have the same rights as adults and animals do not have the same rights as humans (Kant accorded animals no rights, on the grounds that they weren't rational beings).

And what happens when our duties clash or when universalisation conflicts with respect for persons? We might think it is wrong to lie but also that it is wrong to co-operate in cruelty to others. A common illustration is the man who is harbouring a Jew from the Gestapo. He might well consider that he should lie in order to prevent an innocent person from being murdered. And what about the father who thinks it is right to steal a loaf of bread in order to feed his starving children?

Kant's ethics are often called deontological because they focus on the rules and duties (Greek 'deon' meaning 'duty') that serve as imperatives for our actions. This approach is often contrasted with teleological or consequentialist ethics which focus on the outcomes of actions. A strict adherence to the latter implies that the end justifies the means, a position Kant completely rejects because he regards morality as entirely a matter of intentions. Yet an obvious deficiency of basing an ethical theory on intentions alone is that someone cannot be held morally accountable for what they do, but only for why they did it. Hence, if a person *were* to steal a loaf of bread, we would really have to delve into their motives and put their heart on trial, something which, at the moment, we are unable to do.

Kant's ethics have a certain rigidity and are open to misinterpretation. Adolf Eichmann declared at his trial that he had lived his life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. As Hannah Arendt says, "this was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p136). Eichmann had interpreted the categorical imperative to mean that he should act as if his principles were the same as that of the state legislator, i.e the Führer.

We cannot ignore the consequences of our actions in formulating moral rules. Yet, despite this and other weaknesses, Kant's ethics were the first and remain the most influential attempt to vindicate universal moral principles without reference to preferences or to a God. It is we ourselves as practical rational beings who give moral laws to ourselves. As he himself declares in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793): "Morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability, but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason".
