

What is the Right Thing to Do?

The Fifth Session: Immanuel Kant

Friday, September 21st, 2108

Morality is all about internal motive not external results. Only when we act out of duty, because something is inherently right, do our actions have moral value.

Immanuel Kant takes a very different approach to the question of what is moral. In particular there are three works that stand apart in his philosophical and moral thought: “The Critique of Pure Reason”, “The Critique of Practical Reason” and “The Metaphysics of Morals”.

Sandel makes a number of pertinent observations with regard to Kant, that take us quickly into the very heart of Kantian thought. We note them here sequentially.

First, Kant fundamentally disagrees with the Utilitarians, Bentham and Mill in terms of how ‘the moral’ is understood. That said, Kant acknowledged that the Utilitarians were half-right in as much as pain and pleasure are significant players in human life, and do shape us: we do seek to minimize pain and maximize pleasure (welfare). However, Kant challenges Bentham’s idea that pain and pleasure are our “sovereign masters”. In contrast to the Utilitarians, Kant suggests that it is our rational capacity that *sets us apart from* the rest of the created order, our rational capacity that helps us transcend matters of *mere appetite*. This insight lifts human beings above the daily humdrum, the routine. Instead the person becomes transcendent, and this in turn, has implications for his understanding of freedom. He argues that when we seek after pleasure or the avoidance of pain, we are not acting freely, but as the slaves of those appetites and impulses, the product of natural necessity. To act this way is not, for Kant, to be genuinely free. Kant holds that to act freely is to act *autonomously*: in other words, according to the law *I give myself*, not the laws of nature. The opposite of autonomy is *heteronomy*: this is when I act according to an inclination or desire, that I have not chosen for myself. So, to act freely is not to choose a means to a given end, but to choose the end for its own sake. As long as we act on inclination we are mere instruments of ends given outside of us (heteronomy). As we act autonomously, Kant tells us, we become ends in ourselves. This autonomy is what gives human life its dignity.

Second, Kant asks, what gives an act its moral worth if it cannot be derived from utility or consequences? What makes an action morally worthy consists not in the actions or consequences that flow but the motive, the intention behind what is done. What is crucial is that the person do the right thing for the right reasons. An action must not just conform to the moral law, says Kant, but be done for the sake of the moral law. Fundamental to this is “duty”. Kant furnishes some examples to explain what he means: first a shop-keeper who knows he could cheat a customer but chooses not to, in order that he not spoil his reputation. Does this action have moral worth? Kant says no, because the shop-keeper acts from self interest alone. Second, Kant also draws upon the example of a person who refuses to suicide, despite an horrendous life, because of his sense of duty to preserve himself. A third example, taken up this time, by Sandel, concerns a real live add in the New York Times. In it, the “Better Business Bureau” argues that honesty is more profitable. For Kant, this business motivation has no real moral worth.

What matters is the character of the motive and this must be duty, not inclination: neither self-interest, nor even sympathy or altruism. Only through detached (my term) duty, am I able to act freely or autonomously.

Question 1: What if the shopkeeper acts morally because he wants to be a moral shop-keeper. Does that not mean that he is robbed of his autonomy? Kant does acknowledge that there has to be some incentive to obey the moral law, but not an inclination or self-interest, but rather reverence for the moral law, which is what this example raises.

Question 2: What stops morality from just being totally subjective? May not the law I give myself be totally different to the law others give themselves? For Kant there is only one moral law for us all; it is not just a question of subjective conscience, but reason we share as human beings; it is not idiosyncratic. It is the same capacity for reason independent of our individual histories and cultures: what he calls the supreme principle of morality.

These are the questions that end the first lecture on Kant. They lead to the fundamental question that takes up Sandel's second lecture: what is the supreme principle of morality?

Turning to the second lecture, Sandel unpacks Kant's question and answer by lining up three contrasts:

Contrast 1 – Morality: Duty vs Inclination

Contrast 2 – Freedom: Autonomy vs Heteronomy

Contrast 3 – Reason: Categorical vs Hypothetical Imperatives

Contrast 1 – Morality: Duty vs Inclination

Only one kind of motive is consistent with morality – duty – doing the right thing for the right reason. Other motives are summed up as inclination: the desire to pursue some interest or desire or preference. A question is asked as to mixed motives: always we are motivated by some self-interest. Kant accepts this, answers Sandel, but argues that in so far as our actions confer moral worth at all, it is the capacity to rise above self-interest and inclination that matters. Sandel explains this through the example of a young boy (Andrew) in a national spelling bee who admitted that he had misspelled a word – “echolalia” – but had been mistakenly awarded the championship. He admitted his error to the judges and became a national hero for his honesty. When asked why he had admitted his error, he acknowledged that it was partly due to a sense of shame – he would have felt a “slime”. What would Kant say? One student explains that while Andrew may have other motives and sentiments, that is alright as long as they do not provide the prime motive for acting, which must be disinterested duty.

Contrast 2 – Freedom: Autonomy vs Heteronomy

For Kant, there is a connection between duty as the only adequate expression of morality and one's freedom. This freedom, to be genuine freedom, cannot be imposed from any outside force or influence (heteronomy). Rather, to decide freely is to decide autonomously – according to a law I give myself. But where could such a law that we give ourselves come from? Kant answers, reason. But how does reason determine the will?

Contrast 3 – Reason: Categorical vs Hypothetical Imperatives

There are two different commands of reason, what he calls imperatives or *ought*. Hypothetical imperatives use instrumental reason: “if you want X then do Y...if you want a good business reputation then do not short-change your customers”. Kant distinguishes hypothetical and categorical reason as follows: “If the action would be good solely as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; if the action is represented as good *in itself*, and therefore as necessary...for a will which of itself accords with reason, then the imperative is categorical”. So categorical reasoning is independent of any other purpose.

Accordingly, there is the connection between, these three contrasts: I am motivated by *duty*, which by definition is free of other influences. My will is shaped *autonomously* – by the law I give myself, not any other. And my reason is determined categorically – as good in and of itself. There is then a sort of radical *independence of the human spirit*: duty, autonomy and categorical reasoning.

Finally, Sandel goes to the final challenge: what is the Categorical Imperative? What is the Supreme Principle of Morality?

Kant gives three versions but two are predominant:

- 1. The Formula of Universal Law: “Act only on that maxim (principle) whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”.** Sandel raises the example of one who needs \$100 dollars and promises another that he will pay it back when he cannot or will not. Is that consistent with a categorical imperative? No, it is not, because it cannot be universalized. If everyone made false promises of this type, no-one would lend and the maxim would be undermined. It points to the testing question: “am I privileging my needs and interests over those of others?”
- 2. Treat Persons as Ends.** Kant understands that we cannot base a moral law on any particular interests because then it would only be relative to the person whose interests or ends they were. But, he asks, “suppose there were something whose existence has in itself an absolute value” that it were an end in itself. “Then in it, and in it alone, would there be the ground of a possible categorical imperative”. Kant

finds that which has an absolute value in humanity. He says, “I say that the human being, and in general, every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will”. This, Kant tell us, is the difference between persons and things. Persons are rational beings. They don’t just have a relative value, but if anything, an absolute value, an intrinsic value. In other words, persons have dignity. This leads to the categorical conclusion: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person, or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”.

Looking at the question of the promise raised earlier: when I promise to repay you \$100 knowing that I won’t, I am manipulating you, using you as a means to my financial solvency, not treating you as an end worthy of my respect. In the case of suicide, the same case is held against it as against murder. In the case of murder, I take someone’s life for the sake of my own interest, reducing them to a mere means to my particular end or purpose. Similarly, Kant would hold that suicide involves reducing myself to a means for the relief of my own suffering. But that is precisely the point: I in myself am more than that. I am not just a thing.

Questions

- 1. What do you find persuasive in Kant’s thought: what do you like?**
- 2. Do you think the conviction that human beings are ends not means, is practical, possible?**
- 3. Are there points of continuity with Jesus’ teaching as recorded in the Gospels?**
- 4. Libertarianism and the ‘children of Locke’ argue that we own ourselves. Would Kant agree?**