Ethics // Spring 2019

Handout 2

Kant: Apriority of morality

Experience and morality. Kant acknowledges that in reasoning about duty and good will we used our intuitions (concepts) already available to us. But this, he insists, is no sign of their empirical nature. As we saw, we cannot ever be certain that people act out of duty. So if we follow experience, we might as well doubt the reality of duty (and good will). That some actions, or even all actions, merely conform to duty (morally permissible) is of no consequence. As we can always discover the 'dear self' ultimately motivating our actions, we might as well think that morality is an illusion. In short, our concern should not at all be with the course of experience, but only with the question what, if anything, is commanded by reason (itself insulated from experience). 406 407 408

Examples, theory, metaphysics. Concocted examples, or actual historical examples, cannot be the basis of moral theory. Even God, boldly says Kant, should be evaluated by moral reason. We can only understand that God's actions are good by having a prior idea of moral perfection (moral good) in our reason. 408, 410

We cannot, in other words, begin with a 'paradigmatic example' of good and bad, right and wrong. We cannot say that an action *A* is right simply because performed by God, or Abraham, or Cato, or George Washington. And we cannot say that *A* is right because I can 'see' it is so, or because every one agrees that it is. Only our own moral theory can decide that *A* is right.

On the other hand, we can of course use examples, as Kant himself does, to *illustrate* the already developed theory. Yet first, we have to be sure to develop our moral theory in accordance with metaphysics—i.e. with the proper view of the place of practical reason. 409

Furthermore, duty has a much more certain effect on our behaviour. Other incentives incline us in this direction, or in that direction, whereas duty can chart a single course of action. 410-11

The role of reason. Kant ends this excursus with a terse summary of his methodology. (1) Moral concepts are rational and a priori. (2) They cannot be derived, or abstracted, from experience. (3) Their rationality and apriority is in fact the source of their dignity—i.e. of the moral feeling of respect we have for them (see earlier discussion of respect). (4) There is a concrete implication for this method, since duty has a more certain effect on action than inclinations. 411

Laws and imperatives. All natural objects obey laws. Rational beings, being not part of nature, have the unique capacity to act in conformity with 'representations of laws', which are 'principles'. So principles are formulations of laws, and reason, by having the will, is able to follow these formulations. There are two roles for reason here. First, principles must be formulated. No natural object evidently has a similar capacity. Second, people are able to act on these principles. 412

Kant attempts to elucidate how acting on principles proceeds, but his conceptual inventory is questionable. A command of reason is a representation of an objective principle. However, principles are themselves representations of laws. Should commands of reason be representations of representations of laws? What does this mean? 413

Further, imperatives are said to be a 'formula' of command. This suggests that imperatives encode commands in a particular way, like a chemical formula H_2O encodes the ingredients of a chemical composition (water) and relations between them. It is then tempting to think that imperatives are simply statements in imperative mood, like 'Go!' or 'Run!' But this idea is false, as we will see in a moment.

Though Kant's presentation is convoluted and possibly incoherent, it is not difficult to get what he is after. If we merely follow our desires, then we exhibit a lawlike behaviour, a behaviour in accordance with psychological or physiological laws. But when

we act willingly, when our actions are determined by our will, then a number of other conditions are satisfied. First, we set laws for ourselves. Second, we comply with these laws. Third, we comply with them also willingly (rather than accidentally). The metaphysical ground is evident in this account: the will is not part of nature and is thus not subject to the laws of nature.

Though humans are able to act on principles, they do not act on them necessarily. 412-13
That is, they can be swayed by desires (inclinations). There is, however, 'holy will' which
is necessarily determined by reason. A being endowed with this will is not commanded 413fn, 414
to act in accordance with reason: such a being will act out of its own nature, and not because of a command. Commands would simply be superfluous. But they are not superfluous for human will, as it has to overcome the influence of inclination.

Remark 1. Kant's remarks on 'holy will' can be compared to Aristotle's notion of 'godlike' people in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1.

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