

A Romp Through Ethics for Complete Beginners

**Session Five:
Deontology: Kant, Duty and the Moral Law**

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Last week we:

- **reflected on the differences between ‘reason’ and ‘passion’ ;**
- **considered the roles played by reason and passion in the production of action;**
- **wondered whether we agree with Hume that reason is the ‘slave of the passions’ ;**
- **examined the implications of Hume’s view of mind for Aristotle’s ethics;**
- **learned about Hume’s positive views on the nature of morality**

This week we will be:

- **learning about categorical and hypothetical imperatives**
- **reflecting on whether the categorical imperative is central to morality**
- **comparing Hume's account of moral motivation with Kant's**
- **considering the differences between Kant and Aristotle**
- **reflecting on whether you side with Kant or Hume**

A deontologist believes...

... that the right action is the action that is performed...

... because it is required by the moral law.

There are different types of deontology...

... depending on different accounts of the moral law....

Anyone who believes that morality consists in...

**... obeying the Ten Commandments is a
deontologist**

But as we shall see there are deontologists of other kinds...

The most famous deontologist...

...is Immanuel Kant...

...who lived from 1724 to 1804.

Kant believes that an action...

... that is motivated by passion cannot...

...for that very reason be moral....

....so he disagrees with Hume

But he also rejects Aristotle's view...

.... that happiness is the purpose of our existence...

...to Kant what is important is...

.... that we are *worthy* of happiness

Kant believes Hume is right...

... about every action...

... *except* moral action...

...*no* action can be moral, says Kant...

...if it is motivated by passion

Kant believes that all our actions are performed for one of two reasons:

- **to achieve an end we find desirable**
- **to fulfil our obligations under the moral law.**

Acts we perform to achieve an end we find desirable...

....are motivated by inclination (a form of passion)....

...for Kant this means they are *not* moral actions

Such actions may:

- **be forbidden by the moral law**
- **conform to the moral law**

but even in the second case they are not *moral*

This is because no action...

... performed with the purpose...

... of satisfying an inclination of our own...

...can be moral...

As you can see Kant believes..

...with Aristotle...

...that an act can be virtuous...

... without the agent' s being virtuous

An act can only be a moral action...

... according to Kant...

... if the agent performs it because he believes...

.... it is required of him by the moral law

To perform such an act...

... an agent puts all his inclinations to one side....

...in doing this he manifests a *good will*.

Our actions, therefore, are moral...

...only insofar as our intentions are good...

... and our act conforms to the moral law

To Kant the only thing that is intrinsically good...

...good *in itself*...

... is a will that acts ‘out of respect for the law’

In support of Kant's claim he gives us examples of actions...

...in which there are two possible reasons for the agent's action...

...one reason is an inclination...

...the other is a belief that the act is required by the moral law

**So imagine that Ian and Joan are walking down
Brasenose lane...**

...there is a beggar at the half way point...

...and they each give the beggar £1

But Ian gives the beggar £1 because...

... he wants to impress Joan...

...and Joan gives the beggar £1 because...

..she thinks it is the right thing to do

Which person has acted morally?

Kant would say that although Ian's action...

... conforms with the moral law...

...it is not a moral action...

...because it was performed to fulfil an inclination of Ian's...

...rather than out of reverence for the law

Kant is *not* saying that if we are inclined to perform an action...

... that action cannot be morally right.

He is saying only that if an action was *motivated* by an inclination...

...then the agent cannot be deemed to have acted morally.

Central to Kant's theory of ethics...

...is a distinction between...

...motivations for actions...

...these he calls 'maxims'

Maxims are like little arguments...

...or pieces of practical reasoning....

...the conclusions of which are...

...imperatives...

...commands that rationally bind us to act

This piece of reasoning is an example:

I want to get to London by midday

I believe that I will get to London by midday only if I catch the 10am train

Therefore I should catch the 10 am train.

We are rationally bound by this conclusion if we have the desire and the belief expressed in the premises

This imperative is *conditional*...

...upon our having this particular desire...

...if we lose the desire...

...we are no longer rationally bound by...

... the imperative

**The imperative is therefore called a
*hypothetical imperative***

Here is another piece of reasoning:

I recognise it is morally right to keep promises

Therefore I should keep promises

Again we are rationally bound by the conclusion but the conclusion is *not* conditional upon our having any desire

This imperative is called a *categorical imperative* ...

...it binds us solely in virtue of our capacity for reason

I bet you are all thinking....

...' but there is a premise missing' ...

...am I right?

**Kant would say that if you want to add the
premise:**

I want to do the right thing

**Then you are manifesting your failure to
understand the moral concept 'right'**

You are implying you might *not*...

...want to do the right thing...

...but if this is a possibility...

...you have not properly understood...

... what 'the right thing' is

To recognise that an action is morally right...

... according to Kant...

.... is *thereby* to believe it should be performed...

...no inclination is needed to motivate...

... an agent whose will is good

For such an agent...

... his recognition that the act is...

....required by the moral law...

... is all the motivation he needs

But what is this moral law?

Different deontologists would give different answers to this question.

Some might cite the Ten Commandments.

Kant offers several ‘formulations’ of the moral law.

We shall have a closer look at two of them:

- 1. the formula of the universal law**
- 2. the formula of the end in itself.**

The formula of universal law

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should be universal law

**When we act intentionally we act on a
'maxim' (or reason)...**

...the first formulation of the moral law...

**... tells us our maxims must always be
*universalisable***

This means that we should ask, of all our possible maxims:

‘what if everyone were to act on this maxim?’

Try universalising the following maxims to see what Kant means:

Maxim One: I will make a false promise to James to get him to do what I want.

Maxim Two: I will refuse to help James because I don't feel like helping him.

If you universalise these maxims you will see that the result would be disastrous:

If everyone made false promises the institution of promising would collapse

If everyone helped others only when they felt like it, life would become very difficult

If we try, and fail, to universalise a maxim...

....says Kant...

.... this tells us we should not act on this maxim

If this maxim is reason for *us* to act, after all...

... then it is also reason for everyone else to act....

...if it would be a disaster if everyone else acted on it...

... then our acting on it is acceptable...

... only if we make an exception for ourselves.

But on what grounds do we make an exception of ourselves?

Are our desires more important than anyone else's?

Are we somehow more important than anyone else?

The formula of the universal law tells us...

... that we should act on a maxim only if we can consistently recommend that *everyone*...

.... placed as we are placed, should act as we act.

The formula of the end in itself:

So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.

Kant believes that every rational being...

**.... in virtue of its capacity for autonomy, is an
'end in itself'**

....no end-in-itself, he argues, should ever...

**.... be treated as nothing more than a means to
the ends of others.**

Only human beings are known to be rational.

**But perhaps dolphins, elephants or Martians
are too?**

**It is not *what* is rational that matters. It is *that*
they are rational.**

Reason and freedom are linked:

A being who acts for reasons must choose between reasons.

A being who chooses his actions, on the other hand, must choose for reasons

**To believe oneself to be able to choose freely
how to act...**

**.... is almost certainly to believe that one has
the right to choose how to act**

On pain of inconsistency such a being must view other rational beings in the same way.

If your rationality confers on you a right, how can you withhold that right from another rational being?

To believe that rational beings have the right to choose for themselves how to act...

... is inconsistent with treating them as *nothing more than* means to your own ends...

...though it is consistent with treating them *at the same time* as a means

The difference between Hume and Kant lies in whether moral judgements like ‘this is right’ and ‘this is wrong’ express:

***a) passions* informed by a stable and general perspective on the world,**

or

***b) beliefs* about what is required of us by the moral law.**

Aristotle believes that the final end of a human being, an end we can't achieve without virtue, is happiness.

Kant believes we can attain happiness without fulfilling our obligations under the moral law and even without exercising reason.

Kant even suggests that one who doesn't exercise reason might be happier than one who does.

For Kant what matters is not whether or not we are happy. He is concerned only that we be *worthy* of happiness

Kant thinks we can be worthy of happiness only if we exercise reason and fulfil our obligations under the moral law.

For Aristotle the only thing good in itself is happiness (eudaimonia)

For Kant the only thing good in itself is a good will

So who are you now tending towards:

Aristotle?

Hume?

Kant?

Can you answer these questions:

- What is a hypothetical imperative?
- What is a categorical imperative?
- What role do categorical imperatives play in Kant's ethics?
- Would a deontologist be committed to either particularism or generalism?
- What is a 'good will' and why does Kant think that only good wills are intrinsically valuable?
- What is it for something to be an 'end in itself'? Are human beings the only 'ends in themselves'?
- Why does Kant deny that happiness is the ultimate end?
- Explain the formula of universal law.
- Explain the formula of the end in itself.

Next week' s reading:

The excerpt from Mill' s Utilitarianism (pages 457-462 of the set text).

You may enjoy the thought experiments on this website:

<http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/trolleys-killing-double-effect.html>

<http://www.utilitarianism.com/>

On this website you will find everything you could possibly want to know about Utilitarianism!