

Lecture from Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

1. ^{73a}Kant points out that the only thing which can be regarded as good without qualification is a good will for it is only by means of this good that any of the other virtues can be good.
2. Attributes of the mind like wit, intelligence, judgment, attributes of character like courage, perseverance and resolution, and attributes of fortune like power, riches, honor and health are usually thought of as goods in themselves, but are in fact extremely bad if not guided by a good will.
3. Consider that an evil person who happens to be witty, intelligent, possessed of good judgment, and filled with courage, perseverance, resolution, and who happens to have power, wealth, honor and health would be that much more to be feared than one who did not have these characteristics.
4. This person might even be content in his life, that is happy. But without a good will, we cannot say that his life is worthy of happiness.
5. ^{74a}"A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself."(Kant page 930)
6. When a good will is regarded itself apart from anything else, it is esteemed higher than anything else, for even if a person with a good will, because of bad fortune, is not able to affect any positive thing, the worth of his good will shall shine with its own light for it is a good in itself. " Its usefulness or fruitlessness can neither augment nor diminish this value" (Kant page 930)
7. ^{75a}At this point, one might object that it is unlikely that there can exist in nature something called a good which only has value apart from any useful results.
8. To help answer this objection, let us consider the organization of a living being. Let us assume that in a living being there cannot be found an organ which is not made in such a way to fit the purpose for which that being was made.
9. Furthermore, let us say that its purpose is its welfare, preservation or what we might call its happiness. It would be a poor arrangement for nature to use reason for fulfilling this purpose, for reason is a poor guide in matters of pure survival and often has mistaken impressions of the world.
10. Pure instinct would do a much better job of guiding this being to achieve its welfare.
11. And if nature had decided to give this creature reason anyways, as some kind of strange adornment, the only purpose it could serve would be " to contemplate the happy constitution of his nature, to admire that nature, to rejoice in it, and to feel grateful to the cause that bestowed it;
12. but reason would not have served him to subject faculty of desire to its weak and delusive guidance nor would it have served him to meddle incompetently with the purpose of nature." (Kant page 930) In such a creature, which has as its only purpose its welfare, nature would have taken care to make sure that reason would not interfere with instinct in the successful attainment of this purpose.
13. ^{76a}But people are endowed with reason and so we must have a purpose beyond mere successful survival. This means that we have a purpose beyond happiness, a purpose which is more important.

14. Reason is not competent enough in satisfying our needs as previously mentioned, but " its true function must be to produce a will which is not merely good as a means to some other end [instinct would have been much better for such a purpose], but is good in itself" (Kant page 931)
15. Something which is good in itself is necessarily of higher worth than something which is a good only insofar as it serves to obtain some other good. Since a good will is the only thing which is unconditionally (does not depend on any other factors for its goodness) good in itself, it is " the highest good and the condition of all the rest, even desire and happiness." (Kant page 931)
16. Therefore, there "is nothing inconsistent with the wisdom of nature that the cultivation of reason, which is requisite for the first and unconditioned purpose [to follow the moral law], may in many ways be restricted, at least in this life, the attainment of the second purpose, viz., happiness, which..." (Kant page 931) is always dependant on other things.
17. Since the establishment of a good will is the highest good, and depends on nothing else for its goodness, it does not matter if happiness must be sacrificed to obtain it.
18. ^{77a}We have noted that reason is something inherent in human beings and that reason is necessary to obtain the highest goal which is a good will. "... the pre-eminent good which is called moral can consist in nothing but the representation of the law itself...[and this is] the determining ground for the will.
19. Since this law must be deprived of any motivations for following it other than itself, there is nothing left to serve as such a law "... except the universal conformity of its actions to law..." (Kant page 935)
20. Such a law would be "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim [personal law of conduct] become a universal law." (Kant page 935) This, of course is the Categorical Imperative, from which all the universal moral laws of conduct can be derived, such as do not lie, cheat, steal etc.
21. Mere conformity to this law is only thing which is necessary to achieve this good.
22. Imagine that you are in great need of money and the only means available that you have to obtain it is to give a false promise to a friend, that you will pay it back in a certain period of time.
23. You know perfectly well that you will not be able to pay back this loan in that period of time, but making the false promise is the prudent thing to do. Thinking to yourself, you can certainly justify making this false promise on the grounds of prudence.
24. Thus you come up with the maxim, I ought to give my friend a false promise in order to obtain the money that I need.
25. But can you universalize this maxim, that is that can you wish that all other people should also give false promises for the sake of prudence? You will immediately recognize that you cannot, for in such a world no one would take any promise seriously.
26. We do not need any special knowledge of the external world in order to figure out what is the right thing to do morally speaking, we need only ask ourselves if we would want everyone to do the action that we are contemplating.

27. We might wish to suspend the moral law temporarily to serve our immediate earthly purpose, but we find it impossible to wish that all others should also suspend morality to serve their earthly purposes, for that would ultimately contradict our own welfare. It would damage our welfare if all other people lied, cheated and engaged in theft.
28. ^{78a}"Man feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which is represented to him by reason as being so pre-eminently worthy of respect; this counterweight consists of his needs and inclinations, whose total satisfaction is summed up under the name of happiness." (Kant page 937)
29. This counterweight may well permeate all of our thinking, and so it is easy to suspect the no human being acts from a purely good will.
30. But the proof that such a will does exist, if only as an ideal, is our ability to recognize that certain acts are morally right or wrong in accordance with whether we would wish that they be performed by everyone or not.
31. ^{79a}Kant states that "...no imperatives hold for the divine will, and in general for a holy will; the ought is here out of place, because the would is already of itself necessarily in agreement with the law" (Kant page 942)
32. What Kant means by this is that someone with a divine will, or perfectly good will, would necessarily do the right thing. Such a being might be God or a saint for example.
33. For such a being, the commands of morality would be expressed using "would" as in "the divine being would not murder his neighbor." But we are finite, imperfect creatures with imperfect good wills that cannot, all the time at least, necessitate us to act in accordance with morality.
34. The commands of morality for us, then, are expressed as "oughts" as in "we ought not to murder our neighbors." Otherwise put, human beings have a "duty" to follow the moral law. A divine being with a perfectly good will has no need for such a duty, for it does the right thing automatically.
35. ^{80a}Kant stresses that the Categorical Imperative must hold true for all rational beings and not just human beings. "For duty has to be a practical [capable of affecting action], unconditioned [not caused by any other motivations than compliance with the moral law] necessity of action; hence it must hold for all rational beings (to whom alone an imperative is at all applicable) and for this reason only can it also be a law for all human wills." (Kant page 950)
36. The Categorical Imperative is valid for all rational beings because it can affect our actions and because it is not affected by any other kinds of motivations that a particular type of rational being might have.
37. We can imagine that many of the things which motivate a rational inhabitant of another planet are quite different from the things which motivate us. But the only motivation that concerns the Categorical Imperative is the duty to follow the moral laws and so this duty can be valid both for us, this alien rational being, and in fact all rational beings.
38. ^{81a}"Now I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. He must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end." (Kant page 951)

39. Here we can see that the Categorical Imperative can be stated in a different way- We ought not to treat other rational beings just as means to an ends but we must also treat them as ends in themselves. For Kant, rational beings are "persons" because they are ends, that is that they have value in themselves.
40. Thus, it is wrong to use other people merely as tools, and so there is a limit to how much we can use other people. We ought to respect such limits. (Kant page 952)
41. The categorical Imperative, then, commands us to respect the personhood, or autonomy, of other rational beings. Rational beings are ends in themselves, that is that they have worth in themselves, because even though they do not have perfectly good wills, they have the capacity to legislate universal laws and to that extent they can participate in the ideal good will which has unconditional worth (Rational beings are autonomous because they can legislate universal laws). (Kant page 955)

Conclusions:

42. ¹⁸The main problem with Kant's moral theory is that different people can use the categorical imperative to come up with different and conflicting moral laws. For example, someone who believes in gun control can come up with the moral requirement that none of us should own guns, and a member of the NRA could come up with the moral requirement that it is our duty to own guns.
43. Another problem that Kant's moral theory has is that it does not help us clearly decide complicated moral dilemmas with so many defining characteristics that they seem to defy being constrained by any universal moral law.
44. Take for example the case of euthanasia for a critically ill patient. If we say that it is ok for the patient to be euthanised, then have we just come up with a universal law that states that we should euthanise all helpless, innocent terminally ill people? And no matter how we try to "adjust" the moral law by taking into consideration additional factors, such as the patient's wishes, the family's wishes etc. it still is not clear that we can come up with a valid universal law applicable to similar cases.