

Kantian Morality: A Dialectic

Ray: Why, hi, John! Going to the game tonight? We're going to crush East State!

John: You know I wouldn't miss it! I just need to finish reading a chapter for Ethics 102, but I ought to have that done before supper.

Ray: Great! I don't have much homework either. Let's go together.

John: Sounds good to me. I plan to eat as soon as the cafeteria opens at 5. How about we meet at the Union Hall at 6?

Ray: Perfect, see you there!

John: Oh, don't forget to bundle up, they are calling for snow tonight!

Ray: Gotcha!

<later>

Ray: How's ethics going? Last semester you said you learned several alternative moral systems you wanted to share with me, and I think you have one left?

John: Yes, and I'm learning some new ones this year too! If I remember right, we discussed evolution after biology at the beginning of the year, and since then we talked about utilitarianism and contractarianism.

Ray: I remember, those were some good talks we had.

John: Ha. I don't know if I would call them "good," but you certainly got me thinking about things. This time, I think I might have it! A man named Immanuel Kant was a deeply spiritual guy, but he had little use for organized religion. As a result, he tried to come up with a system that could match the morality of Christianity, which he respected as a good thing, with a moral system that was devoid of needing God as its foundation.

Ray: That's quite a challenge, I think. I believe there are some things necessary for morality that need God to make it work.

John: Well, perhaps you didn't know this, but Father Wojtyla, better known as Pope John Paul II, was tremendously influenced by Kant. He allegedly would burst out saying "Kant! Kant! My God, Kant!" in his lectures!

Ray: Well, just because someone doesn't profess the existence of God does not mean they must always be wrong, or are incapable of having deep, meaningful thoughts.

John: Ha! Did I finally get to you Ray?

Ray: No, what did you learn about him?

John: Well, Kant claimed that any rational being is what he called "an end-in-itself."

Ray: Rational being? That caused quite a problem for us before. Remember what we talked about last time? Are we in agreement that a rational being ought to be based on one's potential to be rational?

John: Yes, yes! You convinced me that it is irrational to claim unborn children are not rational beings. But that was just a detail, not an actual problem.

Ray: It's a problem for some, but that's all I wanted to clarify for now. Please, go on.

John: Okay, well, this end-in-itself concept is critical, because we all have desires and goals we want to achieve. In order to meet these desires and goals, we need to manipulate things to make them happen. The things and methods we use to get what we want are called "means to an end." This, of course, needs to include people and animals, as many things are unattainable otherwise.

Ray: I think I understand. I want a college education, and the only way I can make that happen is to have a professor be part of this process. So, he becomes a means to an end I want to happen.

John: Exactly! But the professors are rational beings, therefore they are also ends in themselves. Being ends in themselves, it is immoral to treat them as if they were *merely* a means to an end. There is nothing wrong with a professor helping you get a college education as long as the professor is doing it of his own free will. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with the college charging students tuition, as long as the students do it of their own free will, nor with the professor getting paid by the college as long as everyone freely agrees to the terms.

Ray: To listen to you talk! So, welfare, race based hiring quotas, and school boards not listening to the demands of parents are all immoral by Kant's standards!

John: Hmmm. Now that you mention it, you are right. But do you want to hear more about Kant, or do you really want to discuss politics?

Ray: No, tell me about Kant. No sane person ever associated politics with morality anyway!

John: True dat! Do you see how Kantianism is so attuned to Christianity, and why Wojtyla liked him so much?

Ray: Well, it sounds a lot like the Christian idea of "human dignity," and the virtue of justice that demands our respect of it. As for Father Wojtyla, you got my interest up. I'll do some research on it later. What else did he say? Obviously human dignity is a great place to start, but what does that mean in application?

John: You are right, it is a bit complex, but not too bad I don't think. First of all, he called the way one ought to act an "imperative." He had two types of imperatives, the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative. Hypothetical imperatives are things that you, as a singular rational human being, value. If you value a college education, then you ought to get one as long as it doesn't violate a categorical imperative. But just because you want an education doesn't mean someone else does. What's right for you may not be right for another. But if you do decide to get an education, you ought to act in ways that lead to the education, such as studying, earning money, applying for scholarships,

etc. The categorical imperatives are based on the value of other rational beings. These imperatives bind us regardless of our desires.

Ray: So, if I want, or value, a new car and a college education, I ought to work to get both of them, but I am still limited in respecting other people as well as to how I get them?

John: Yes! Exactly!

Ray: But what if I can get one but not both?

John: Well, "value" is, by definition, a subjective word. Which of the two do you want more? Obviously, *you* value the college education more than a new car.

Ray: So far, so good. But how do you know what a categorical imperative is?

John: Well, that is a three step process. We already discussed the second one, which is to never use a rational being merely as a means to an end. The first one is, as a rational being, to create a set of universal laws. I think the best way to describe that is by saying you should come up with a series of "laws" that everywhere and always must be true of how you want to be treated. The third one really ties the first two together. In this step, you must come up with laws that any other rational being could agree would be beneficial to every other rational being.

Ray: Sounds a lot like the "Golden Rule" of Christianity.

John: Yes, like I said he tried to come up with a rational way to arrive at the same destination the Jews and Christians came to. And it seems to me that all the objections you had in the past are met. I don't remember all of them off hand, but I can give to the poor of the world because if I was starving, I would want someone to feed me. You ought not abandon a spouse in hard times because you will want her to be there for you in your hard times. We have an objective way to judge which laws are moral and which ones are not.

Ray: Yes, I can see all that.

John: Yep. And remember, Kant agreed with Christian morality, he just didn't want all the "baggage" that came from an organized religion. Voila! He came up with a system where God is not needed anymore.

Ray: Hold on there, I think you are getting ahead of yourself! Just because he was able to reverse engineer a single aspect of Christian thought does not mean the original engineer is no longer needed. But we can discuss that later. Right now, I have some questions.

John: You have no questions when the Church tells you to do what Kant is telling you to do. What's the problem?

Ray: Well, as a Catholic, I have seventy-three books to help guide me through the grey areas, as well as those that appear to create a conflict between each other. My protestant brethren have sixty-six books. But for starters, everything about Kantianism is so rational.

John: Yes, extremely rational. Kant grew up in a Pietist Lutheran family, where emotion was very

important, along with strict discipline. He rebelled, and placed very little value in emotion. He made it a point to say that morality should be based on reason, not emotion.

Ray: So, if I see a girl drowning, and I'm temporarily overwhelmed with emotion from shock and horror, am I to stand still and do nothing until I get my emotions under control before I try to save her?

John: I don't know, but I would assume that we could decide in calmer times what is right and not right. When the time came to act, emotion would be a non-issue because the matter was already decided.

Ray: Fair enough. But there is more. Kantianism is clearly a moral system you create for yourself, even though the need to look at everyone else's point of view undoubtedly means yours has a great deal of conformity with others. But when I work as a cashier at the store on weekends, there are things I would like to have but I can't afford them. Is it moral to discount the price for me if I do it for all the customers as well?

John: Ha! I think I may finally have you stumped! I told you that this is too much like Christian morality. No, it is not alright. You forgot the owner of the store. All the inventory actually belongs to him. He has the right to set prices, you are taking that right away from him. You are treating him as an end to a means instead of an end in himself. Kantianism requires it to be universal, and it can't be universal with exceptions.

Ray: No exceptions? Okay, how about this. Do you like to be lied to?

John: No, of course not.

Ray: I assume you would agree that no rational person wants to be lied to?

John: That's a fair assumption.

Ray: So, not lying meets two of the three criteria for a categorical imperative?

John: Yes. Why do I feel like you are up to something?

Ray: Who, me? Sir, you cut me to the quick!

John: Uh huh, cry me a river! I know you better than that.

Ray: Just trying to make sure I fully understand what you are saying.

John: <chuckle> How can I argue with that?

Ray: And can we agree that hurting other people is wrong for the same reasons?

John: Sure.

Ray: Does this extend to letting others get hurt when you could have done something about it?

John: Now I know you are up to something, but I can't see why you are wrong.

Ray: Okay, so lying and letting people get hurt meet two of the criteria, all that is left to make them categorical imperatives is to make them universal.

John: Why are you assuming they are not universal already?

Ray: Because I can't see how you can possibly have more than one categorical imperative if you want to make them universal. At some point, there will be a conflict between the two and you will have to choose one or the other. And once you do that, then they are no longer universal.

John: How so?

Ray: Didn't you tell me that your cousin Jenny is living with your parents to hide from her dangerous ex-boyfriend?

John: Yes, what's that got to do with anything?

Ray: He knows you. Suppose he asks you if she is at your parents' house? Telling the truth will almost certainly get her hurt, a hurt you could have prevented by lying. And you are potentially putting your parents in danger as well.

John: Why can't I simply say, "I'm not telling you"? No problem.

Ray: Well, I have to concede that you thought quickly on that one. But do you honestly think you can be that clever *every* time two or more categorical imperatives come into conflict with each other?

John: No, you are right. Life is too complex for there to be more than one categorical imperative. And he's devious enough to recognize that if she really wasn't there, then I would have simply said "no" instead of being evasive like that. So even my clever response still put her and my parents in danger.

Ray: I really admire your integrity here! I wish everyone was so honest with themselves.

John: Oh no you don't! Don't pull that line on me. I see you talking to Kathy, Fredric, Trina and Thomas all the time. You have plenty of people to talk with about this stuff.

Ray: Yes, I have been blessed this year. But you don't see all those who don't want to talk. But anyway, what I was going to say was, I wonder why you, as an atheist, would care to act morally in this case.

John: Huh?

Ray: If God does not exist, then what difference does it make if Kant is right or not on this matter? Are you willing to let your cousin and possibly your parents get hurt simply because you want to be a moral exemplar? If you arrived at this same conclusion and had this outcome because you thought God would redress the evil in the end, then such a risk and sacrifice might make sense. But if God does not exist, all you have left are feelings of helplessness and guilt.

John: As always, you have given me a lot to think about here. Let's just get our tickets now and enjoy the game, shall we?

Ray: Sure. Once in, I'll get the popcorn and something for us to drink, and you save me a good seat!

John: Awesome! Oh, make it hot chocolate for me, I need to thaw out. This is going to be an epic night!

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Original Publication Date: 2 January 2025