

Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics

Prof. Rae Langton

Lecture 2. *Groundwork* Section I contd. Duty

1. *Reminder*. 'Common rational cognition' allows that the only thing good in itself, without limitation, is a *good will*. We explicate this concept of a will 'good in itself' in terms of the notion of a *duty*, which in turn must be understood as 'necessity of an action from respect for *law*'. So we ultimately reach the 'philosophic moral cognition' that the principle of the good will is that 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law'.

4: 397. *From the good will to duty*. The concept of a will good in itself is to be understood in terms of a *duty*, which 'contains' that of a good will, under certain 'subjective hindrances' or competing inclinations. What are the actions done 'from duty'? Not (a) actions that are *contrary* to duty; nor (b) actions that conform with duty, but which the agent performs from some *indirect* inclination: e.g. the honest shop-keeper whose honesty is a matter of enlightened self-interest; nor (c) actions that conform with duty, but that are done from a *direct* inclination, e.g. preserving one's own life. Examples of actions not only 'in conformity with duty' but also done *from* duty: the grief-stricken man with no taste for life, who preserves his life nonetheless; the cold and unsympathetic philanthropist.

2. Schiller's severe reading of the 'motive of duty'

Scruples of Conscience

I like to serve my friends, but unfortunately I do it by inclination
And so often I am bothered by the thought that I am not virtuous.

Decision

There is no other way but this! You must seek to despise them
And do with repugnance what duty bids you.

(Schiller, *Xenien*, 'The Philosophers', quoted in Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 344).

Schiller complains that the moral worth of our actions depends on our being inclined *not* to perform them. How fair is Schiller's complaint? 3.

Some recent severe readings

Example 1: The hospital visit (Stocker, 'The Schizophrenia of Moral Ethical Theories')

Example 2: Saving his wife (Williams, 'Persons, Character, Morality'). 'It is my wife, and in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife rather than other person'. The husband has 'one thought too many' (Williams), fails to act 'plainly and simply for [her] sake' (Susan Wolf).

4. The 'motive of duty': some saner readings

Epistemological reading. Evidentiary dependence of moral worth on facts about actual inclination. Those cases where opposing inclination is present (or: assisting inclination is absent) make it more *evident* that the action is being performed out of duty. But actions can be done from duty, and have moral worth, no matter what inclinations are absent or present.

'Battle citation' reading. Constitutive dependence of moral worth on actual facts about inclination: an action only has moral worth when opposing inclination is actually present (or: assisting inclination is actually absent); but 'moral worth' means less than you think. It doesn't mean moral value as such, but just something especially commendable, like a battle citation (cf. Henson), won against great odds; or like an 'A for effort'. (Richard Henson, "What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action", *The Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), 39-54)

Counterfactual independence from inclination. Constitutive dependence of moral worth on counterfactual facts about inclination. *What if* an opposing inclination were present, or the assisting inclination absent? If you *would* perform this action even in the presence of opposing inclinations (or: absence of assisting inclinations) then you *are* doing it from the motive of duty, and your action has moral worth. Duty-motive as a sort of *back-up generator*. Cf. Henson on the 'fitness report' model. (Would you visit the friend, save the wife, even if you didn't want to?)

Counterfactual dependence on duty. Constitutive dependence of moral worth on counterfactual facts about what duty would require. *What if* this action were countermanded by duty: i.e. what if permission were absent? If you would perform this action even if it were countermanded by duty, then you are not actually doing it from duty. Duty-motive as a sort of *filter*. (Would you visit the friend, save the wife, even if it were wrong?) Cf. Kant's point that motives of prudence are, on their own, unreliable (as Herman comments).

Marcia Baron: not just counterfactual dependence, but a *commitment* of the will. Barbara Herman: mixed motives are fine, provided e.g. it is the rightness, not the sympathy, that is the 'reason'.

4: 400. 'Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law'. The moral worth of an action doesn't lie in its effects; it doesn't lie in aimed-for effects either (4: 401), but in conformity to law alone. What could such a law be? 4: 402. Only the idea of universal law *as such*. Hence the imperative: I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. Illustration: the lying promise. The distinction between truth-telling from prudence, and from duty. I cannot at the same time will the lie, and a universal law where all lie. (4:404. The advantage of practical reason over theoretical, and how in the moral realm, anyone is as good as a philosopher.)

5. *The Formula of Universal Law*

I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*...Take this question, for example. May I not, when I am hard pressed, make a promise with the intention of not keeping it? Here I readily distinguish the two senses which the question can have—is it prudent, or is it right, to make a false promise? The first no doubt can often be the case. I do indeed see that it is not enough for me to extricate myself from the present embarrassment by this subterfuge: I have to consider whether from this lie there may not subsequently accrue to me much greater inconvenience than that from which I now escape....To tell the truth for the sake of duty is something entirely different from doing so out of concern for inconvenient results...Suppose I seek, however, to learn in the quickest way and yet unerringly how to solve the problem 'Does a lying promise accord with duty?' I have then to ask myself 'Should I really be content that my maxim (the maxim of getting out of difficulty by a false promise) should hold as universal law (one valid both for myself and others)? And could I really say to myself that every one may make a false promise if he finds himself in a difficulty from which he can extricate himself in no other way?' I then become aware at once that I can indeed will to lie, but I can by no means will a universal law of lying; for by such a law there could properly be no promises at all, since it would be futile to profess a will for future action to others who could not believe my profession or who, if they did so over-hastily, would pay me back in like coin; and consequently my maxim, as soon as it was made a universal law, would be bound to annul itself. (4: 402)