

HANDOUT 9

DUTIES AND VIRTUES: KANT

PRELIMINARIES. What we find in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS) has little to do with metaphysics and a lot with morals (also with law). As we normally understand it, metaphysics was covered in the *Groundwork* and in KpV. In MS, on the other hand, Kant is chiefly concerned with real life applications of the metaphysical theory of ethics embodied in the categorical imperative. That is: supposing that the test of morality is given by the categorical imperative, what kinds of maxims are in fact moral and what kind of behaviour, as a result, should be adopted? In the course of his discussion he also offers some important clarifications of the views outlined in the *Groundwork*.

SOME QUESTIONS ON MS. The text is not difficult to follow (i.e. to understand the simple meaning, even if reasoning is occasionally elusive), especially for those who have mastered the *Groundwork* and KpV. Thus a lot of material will be left as exercise.

Question 1. Explain the distinction between wide duties and narrow duties. Provide examples.

Question 2. Why cannot there be a duty of perfecting other people? What would such perfection consist in?

Question 3. Why cannot there be a duty of making oneself happy? What is the concept of happiness that Kant uses in this discussion?

Question 4. What is a distinctive characteristic of humanity? What implications does this have for testing moral maxims with the aid of FH? Illustrate with examples.

Question 5. What is the content of the duty of achieving moral perfection?

LYING. Kant provides an important clarification of the prohibition of lying. In the *Groundwork* lying was one of the main examples of a moral violation. Lying (intentional failure to keep promises, to be exact) failed the test of FLN, since its universalisation amounts to the disappearance of the practice of promising. Perhaps more persuasively, lying fails the test of FH, since a liar takes advantage of the victim (the person he is lying to), thus fails to respect him as a person.

So the violation of lying was previously conceived as a violation toward another person. It is clear that any harm resulting from lying is not a matter of moral evaluation, and so should be addressed in the *Doctrine of right*. Still, lying to others, in Kant's present terms, is just one form of lying—'external lying'. There is, however, also 'internal lying', a violation of duty to yourself. A liar destroys his own dignity (*Menschenwürde*). This is because, as a person, he must communicate his thoughts to other humans. In going against the basic purpose of communication, itself presumably an essential capacity of humans, the liar goes against his own human nature. Indeed, he is inferior even to an inanimate object, which, after all, can be put to some use. By destroying his dignity a liar makes himself contemptible in the eyes of others (external lying) or in his own eyes (internal lying).

Kant's increasingly hysterical language aside, one might argue that dishonest communication, i.e. *manipulation*, is in fact very much an essential capacity of human beings, indeed, of every living creature. One might then explore the conditions under which honesty and dishonesty in communication might arise—without rushing to the conclusion that lying is a betrayal of human dignity.

Question 6. Should Kant argue that animal dishonesty is a betrayal of their animal nature?

Kant then turns to the case of internal lying, that is, self-deception. He sees that there is some difficulty in showing how it can be real. His explanation, I think, is as follows (the text is difficult, our English translation here is a paraphrase of Kant's German). We distinguish between 'professing to believe' that *p* and genuinely believing that *p*. If I were to always follow reason, and if my reason were always consistent, no gap would be possible between the two. However, suppose I do not. Typically, I have some incentives competing with reason. So it may be that my theoretical reason tells me there is no God, but prudentially I convince myself it would be useful to believe in God. Or I may flatter myself about how pious I am, whilst really having no belief in God.

CASUISTICAL QUESTIONS. Kant considers three scenarios. One is 'mere politeness', as when I begin a letter with 'Dear John'. This is not a problem, since no one is deceived by this lie. Second, the case where I lie out of concern for the other person's feelings. I ask you how well I sang karaoke,

and you say, 'Excellent!', though you couldn't bear it. Well, is this permissible? Kant is uncertain, so it seems.

He is much more certain in the third case, where the lie concerns 'serious matters', though it is still uttered with no malice. The liar is responsible for whatever harm is incurred as a result of his lie.

It is not, however, clear to me why Kant considers any of these cases especially hard. In the first case there is no lie to begin with. In the second case, there is obviously dishonest communication. So why is it not just as obviously not a case of self-disrespect? The same in the third case.

SERVILITY AND SELF-RESPECT. In these passages Kant makes some of the clearest statements about the nature of human dignity. As a natural object, a man is insignificant, just one of the animals inhabiting one of the planets. But when the man is regarded as a person (*als Person betrachtet*), as a subject of moral and practical reason, then he is beyond price. As such, he cannot be used as a means for other people's goals (a familiar FH). He, moreover, exacts (demands) respect from other people. And he *should* demand that respect. To fail this demand is to forfeit the duty of self-respect and to disrespect humanity in yourself.

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RESPECT FOR OTHERS. A parallel reasoning should apparently be deployed for the case of treating others. But there are, I think, some interesting complications. When Kant turns to the issue of respecting others, he imperceptibly slides from the notion of respect (*Achtung*) to the notion of respectability (*Ehrbarkeit*). There is no obvious connection between them. What's more, the German words are completely different, and so their English gloss in our text is misleading. Respect for people was so far understood as paying attention to, respecting their ends. This is in tune with the German terminology: *achten*, *beachten*, *beobachten* all have the connotation of considering, observing, paying attention to something or someone. But *Ehrbarkeit* comes from *Ehr*, honour. It is not obvious why respect has anything to do specifically with honour. Indeed, Kant is explicit about the lack of duty of honouring people (as kings or millionaires), as opposed to the duty of respecting them (merely as people). Then it is not clear why scandalising people, damaging their reputation, ridiculing them must be singled out as a central instance of disrespect for others.

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