

Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

Handout 13

Kant VI

WHAT IS AT STAKE. At the end of chapter 2 Kant announces that the formulae of the categorical imperative and the theory of duty presented in the first two chapters are incomplete in one key regard.

Kant interprets his procedure in these chapters as the development of a generally accepted (common) morality and claims that the autonomy of will is the outcome of that development. In other words, the only possible morality is the one given by the categorical imperative. But we have not shown that *any* morality is real, or as he puts it, that it is not a “phantom of the brain”. This will be the subject of chapter 3.

Already from these remarks it is evident that chapter 3 is not going to be easy. It is far from clear what the alleged ‘reality’ of morality, or lack thereof, should consist in. I think we can profitably interpret the task of chapter 3 as a response to two sceptics. One is a figure familiar from Plato and Hobbes. He does not quarrel with particular formulae of duties. But he doubts whether anyone has a good reason to fulfil those duties. ‘Your theory is neat,’ he says, ‘but what is there in it for me?’ Another kind of sceptic, familiar from Hume, again does not quarrel with the formulae of duties, but still doubts whether any human action could satisfy or violate these duties. Compare him to an ‘inquisitive atheist’ who is willing to debate this or that religious duty, but at the same time denies the existence of God.

Accordingly, chapter 3 can be split into two unequal parts. In the first half spanning the first three paragraphs Kant argues, roughly, that freedom is necessarily correlated with morality. In the second half spanning most of the remainder Kant argues that freedom can be ascribed to human beings.

FREEDOM AND ALIEN CAUSES. Right at the start the will is defined as a “kind of causality” possessed by rational beings. This definition seems at odds with the views of the first two chapters. How, for example, can we speak of ‘good causality’? Our own interpretation suggested in this course was to identify the will (good will, in particular) with a trait of character. Can a trait of character be a form of causality? More plausibly, the will is understood here as a special power that human beings (and possibly others) have.

The intended contrast is between the power of the will and the power of desire. A parallel contrast is between freedom as an effective cause and causality according to nature (natural necessity). Observe Kant’s usage here (as elsewhere in the book): desires are characterised as “alien causes”. One might ask why they are ‘alien’. Why are my desires any less mine than my will?

Question 1. Recall that Frankfurt would also characterise some desires as alien. What is the contrast, if there is any, between Frankfurt’s view and Kant’s?

THE NATURE OF FREEDOM. To say that to be free is to be not determined by natural causes tells us what freedom is not. But we want to know, positively, what freedom is. Kant interprets this question as the question of what laws govern free activities. This sounds like a contradiction: could there be laws of freedom? Kant claims there should be, since freedom is still a form of causality, and any causal behaviour should follow laws.

THE IDENTITY THESIS. Recall that, according to FA, to act morally is to act on the autonomous determination of your will. This implies that acting morally involves the ability to resist, with your will, the influence of desires. So it follows already from the FA that freedom would be necessary for morality. Now Kant wishes to argue that it is also sufficient. Therefore, a free will and a will acting under moral laws are identical. The argument is not difficult to make sense of, but rather more difficult to defend.

All in all, the argument of the first three paragraphs can be presented as follows:

1. A free will must be law obedient.
2. However, a free will cannot obey natural laws.
3. Therefore, it must obey the laws generated by itself (i.e. it must be autonomous).
4. Its autonomous laws are regulated by the principle of autonomy.
5. But the principle of autonomy is a moral principle (i.e. it is expressible in the FA equivalent to the FUL).
6. Therefore, a free will is governed by a moral principle.

The problem with this argument is evidently in the transition from the concepts of causality and determinism to the concepts of morality. In particular, self-determination can be understood in accordance with FA (putatively equivalent to FUL), or it can be understood as action under self-generated laws. There is no guarantee that those laws would coincide (let alone, necessarily coincide) with the laws prescribed by FA.

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