

Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

Handout 15

Kant VIII

KANT AND THE FIRST SCEPTIC. Earlier we suggested that chapter III is profitably read as a response to the moral sceptic as conceived by Plato and Hobbes. But what does the response consist in? And is Kant in a position to offer any plausible response?


As I see it, the response is in the Identity thesis itself. It is just this: So far as you are free, you obey the moral law. So far as you are not free, you disobey the moral law.

Most certainly Kant does *not* claim that, in order to secure your self-interest (\approx your happiness), you should obey the moral law. Perhaps if the sceptic recognises his happiness as the only possible reason for action, then Kant's response is ineffective. Nevertheless if we suppose, as we should, that the sceptic is more open-minded, the Identity thesis can provide a genuine response. Who would fail to see freedom as valuable? Who would, *willingly*, consent to be an instrument for alien causes? And is happiness *at all possible* without freedom?

Moral behaviour, in this way, becomes privilege of the few. That of course does not mean that it is always pleasant: if it were, morality would have become an instrument for one's own happiness (as Plato and Hobbes attempted to argue). But Kant's answer at least encourages the sceptic to give morality a second thought.

OBJECTION. One might ask whether, in giving such an answer, Kant would thereby reduce morality to a system of hypothetical imperatives. So, for example, he would be offering this maxim to the sceptic: 'If you want to be free, do not lie.' Evidently this maxim commands hypothetically, rather than categorically.

REPLY. Consider the negation of the maxim's condition: 'I do not want to be free.' It is equivalent (let us agree) to 'I want to be non-free.' Is this possible? As we have seen, Kant claims in chapter III that no one can think of himself as not free. So what do I say when I say that *I* want to be non-free? I contradict myself. It is not unlike saying, 'I want to be Brad Pitt'. It is logically impossible for *me* to be Brad Pitt. So, even though I may legitimately want to have some qualities of Brad Pitt, the object of my desire is empty when I declare my desire to literally become Brad Pitt. And thus, not only it is impossible for me to become Brad Pitt, it is also impossible for me to want to become Brad Pitt.

Remark 1. Caution should be exercised here on the issue of theoretical and practical standpoints: we cannot prove the reality of freedom in the same way we can prove the impossibility of someone other than Brad Pitt becoming Brad Pitt. 

Similarly, it is impossible for me to want to be non-free. And so it is a necessary truth that I want to be free. If so, then the maxim offered to the sceptic commands categorically, despite its grammatical form (which is the case with many moral maxims anyway; also recall that ' $P \rightarrow Q$ ' is equivalent to Q if P is a necessary truth).

Perhaps one could still insist that morality *is* an instrument for freedom—but this is not very different from saying that morality is an instrument for morality. At any rate, morality cannot be thought as a causal factor of freedom. We do not act morally in order to be free: that is impossible, so far as morality commands categorically. Rather, we become free *through* acting morally.

RESPONSE TO THE SECOND SCEPTIC. The Identity thesis can also offer a response to the sceptic (described by Hume) who doubts the reality of moral distinctions. Their reality, it now turns out, hinges upon the possibility of freedom. So far as free action is possible, it is governed by the categorical imperative. An action that is not free is necessarily not governed by the categorical imperative.

OVERVIEW. Let us close our lengthy exploration of Kant's ethics by giving its critical overview. And let us do this by considering some objections raised against it (some of them cropped up in our earlier discussions). All the objections we are going to mention now were in fact made immediately upon the publication of the *Groundwork* by Herman Andreas Pistorius, the pastor of a small town in northern Germany.

FORMALISM OBJECTION. The formulae FUL and FLN are inadequate as expressions of the categorical imperative. For someone may adopt a manifestly evil maxim and follow it through out of respect for the *immoral* law. Therefore, these formulae must at least be supplemented with the material condition ruling out any maxims that are not moral (or at least those that are manifestly immoral).

REPLY. I think we have to concede the force of this objection. Yet, the formula FH provides the non-formal test on maxims which generally seems to work better in many instances. However, this would undermine Kant's insistence that all of the formulae of the categorical imperative are equivalent. [Kant – Pistorius: 0-1]

INDIFFERENCE OBJECTION. In acting morally the agent is supposed to act on reason, rather than on inclinations (desires). But is this possible? A man devoid of desires will stay indifferent to action. He will not act at all. For the action to be possible, there must be a desire 'inclining' the man to act.

REPLY. The objection expresses classical empiricist thinking. First of all, Kant can flatly deny that reason cannot incline us to action. But secondly, he can argue, as in fact he did, that the morally informed reason can generate a unique feeling of reverence for law which will provide the required incentive. [1-0]

COMPLEXITY OBJECTION. The tests offered by the categorical imperative (in any of its formulations) are too complex to be grasped by anyone except philosophers. So morality would be beyond the reach of the majority of people and, therefore, cease to be practical.

REPLY. Kant insists on a number of occasions that the tests offered by the categorical imperative are supposed to tell us 'at once' how to act or not to act. Of course we do not need to examine the maxims in real time—we can prepare them in advance. As far as FUL and FLN, this is rather doubtful. FH is more transparent, but even this formula is difficult in that it requires us to know the exact conditions of 'treating a person as an end'. For example, should we be allowed to torture a terrorist, to interrogate him, or merely to ask him politely? Kant also believes that utilitarians are on a back foot here, since they require the agent to engage in lengthy (even infinite) calculations. This latter claim is dubious: we have seen how Mill allows the utilitarian agent to use various rules. In any event, I think these concerns may well be misguided. As long as there is a resolution in principle, why should we worry about the majority? The intellectual elite can decide what is right or wrong, and the rest will consult their opinion. Why should morality be any simpler than medicine or civil engineering? [1-0]

METAPHYSICAL OBJECTION. The theory of freedom as presented in chapter III requires some illicit metaphysical assumptions. First, the man is said to be equipped with free will which is not subject to causality. But all we ever encounter are objects in causal relations. How do we know that such free agent exists? And secondly, the free will has the *power* to initiate causal sequences (in actions) while itself not being subject to causation. But the concept of power is causal, while the concept of beginning is temporal. According to Kant's theoretical philosophy, we cannot think of events in time except through the concept of causality. Therefore, free will, if it can be understood at all, is just another causal power fully subject to normal causation.

REPLY. Although the full discussion is far beyond the scope of our course, very briefly we can say that the knowledge of freedom is practical. That is, it is not gained in the way our knowledge of the external world is: we cannot establish the reality of freedom by examining our observations. Nor is it like a piece of logical or mathematical knowledge. In other words, the claim 'Freedom is real' is of a different category than the claim ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' or ' $F = ma$ '. Rather, we become aware of freedom in the process of our practical deliberation (it is interesting to notice the etymology of the word 'de-liberation'). We see that for our deliberation to be possible, freedom ought to be real. (Another response I do not favour is: By becoming aware of the moral law we become aware of freedom.) [1-1]

Question 2. Is it fair to say that Kant's theory imposes certain moral tyranny over the individual?

Question 3. We saw earlier Williams' claim to the effect that utilitarian ethics threatens the agent's integrity. Is this critique relevant against Kant's theory as well?

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