

Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

Handout 8

Kant I

WHAT IS GOOD WILL? Kant begins with a statement that the only thing that is good ‘unconditionally’—that is, ‘necessarily’, ‘in every circumstance’—is good will. He is shy on telling us what the good will *is*. This is because he believes we are already in possession of its concept (see below). Nevertheless we might still ask: is it (1) a particular intention, on the given occasion, or is it (2) a trait of character?

There is evidence that Kant identifies good will with character: (393/1) and (398/11). But what is character and its traits? On one hand, we may think of character traits as natural dispositions (‘joyous character’). But is a ‘gift of fortune’, an accident that simply happened to a person. Good will cannot be such accident. Another option is to say that character is a ‘way of thinking’, a form of commitment to practical principles. Of course, there can be commitment to wrong principles. So the best answer at this stage is that good will is identified with commitment to right practical (ethical, moral) principles.

GOOD WILL AND VIRTUES. At all events, Kant does give a nice little argument to the effect that traditional Greek virtues, such as courage, knowledge, moderation, as well as external goods, such as wealth, health, honour—all these are good only conditionally. For example, a tyrant who is moderate and calculating should be considered worse than a tyrant who is emotionally unstable and rash (so a Stalin is worse than a Gaddafi). These virtues or other goods become genuinely good only in the presence of good will. A moderate person with a good will should generally be better than a rash person with a good will. But a moderate person with a bad will may often be worse than a rash person with a bad will.

It is tempting to interpret this idea in the way that separates good will from reason. Good will, we can say, is the only morally significant factor. The Greek virtues, however, are ultimately based on reason. But reason is morally neutral. It can serve bad and good people alike. It is at most merely a tool to facilitate the application of good will. This interpretation *ought to* be inaccurate. First, the Greeks did not see reason a mere instrument in decision making. But secondly, also Kant eventually bases the whole of morality on reason.

In any case, a straightforward Greek retort would be that ‘a bad moderate person’ is a contradiction in terms. You may have a tyrant (Stalin) who is moderate in some regard (in sexual lust, say), but he has to be entirely immoderate in many other regards (e.g. lust for power). A moderate tyrant is, so to speak, an optical illusion.

Example 1. Consider Stalin and Stalin*. They are indistinguishable in their moral character except that Stalin is grimly faithful to his one wife, while a sexually promiscuous Stalin* is not. A Greek moralist must say that Stalin is morally superior to Stalin*. This might not sound terribly convincing: one might find more humanity in Stalin* than in Stalin who, through moderation, is single-mindedly committed to his murderous job. But actually, the case is under-described. Stalin* has more humanity not by virtue of his sexual adventures, but because we assume that they distract him from doing his tyrannical job properly.

All in all, the following seem to me to hold good. (a) *Some* traditional Greek virtues (courage) are merely instrumental. Kant deserves credit for bringing this out. But (b) other virtues (generosity, moderation?) are not. However, they are essentially good precisely because they are conceptually linked to good will: you cannot exercise these virtues unless you act in good will. (c) External goods are merely instrumental (the Greeks would agree with that).

GOOD WILL AND UTILITY. Kant rushes to contrast the value of good will with the value of results it may produce. Certainly good will is expected to produce good results. Sometimes though it may fail in doing that. Still, even then it will ‘shine like a jewel’. It is important to note the contrast Kant draws between good will and good ‘wish’.

Question 2. Does Kant's idea here stand in contradiction with Mill's views?

DUTY. The concept of good will, it turns out, need not be defined, since we already have it in our understanding. But we need to examine the concept of duty that contains that of good will. To achieve this, we have to contrast actions done from the motive of duty (or for the sake of duty) from actions done only in conformity to duty. Some examples follow. (1) A typical honest shopkeeper does his job in accordance with duty, but not out of duty (but rather out of *prudence*). (2) We routinely preserve our lives, and such preservation is a duty. Normally we don't do it out of duty, but rather out of inclination. Sometimes it's different: you may be disappointed in your life, and still go on. Then you do it out of duty. (3) Helping others is a duty. But you act out of duty once no other inclination is dominant in your action. (4) Somewhat surprisingly, Kant announces that pursuing your happiness is also your duty. But people pursue happiness out of inclination. So again, in most cases they do not act out of duty.

Remark 3. As for the helping example, Kant may be interpreted as saying that you have to positively extinguish all your friendly feelings in order to be able to act out of duty. Schiller understood him in this way:

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with inclination
And thus I am frequently nagged by my lack of conscience.
There is no other advice: you must seek to despise them,
And do with disgust what your duty commands.

But this is inaccurate. Kant says that if you have no such inclinations, then it's easy to see that you in fact act out of duty. And he also says that friendly feelings count not at all towards the moral value of your action. Yet having no such feelings is not a condition for committing a morally right action.

Kant wraps up by commenting on the 'Love thy neighbour' command. He says that it is impossible to command to love (i.e. to have a feeling of love). The Scripture commands you to act kindly and to mean to act kindly even when you have no inclination to do so (say, towards your enemy). Well, this gloss is left unsupported. On one hand, you can be commanded to develop certain feelings towards other people, including enemies. You can be required at least to suppress feelings of hatred. Certainly you cannot be commanded to *fall in love*; but this is irrelevant. On the other hand, recall Mill's gloss on the same fragment. You may be commanded only to bring about benefits to your neighbour (however remote he is), without any particular constraint on the psychological background of your action.

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