

Robert Johnson

Morality

1. Meaning and location in Kant's works

Kant's uses of the terms 'moral' and 'morality' are too numerous to detail. However, one can draw some general conclusions the meaning of the term. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, morality is, first of all, a set of strict commands of *duty*. As such, morality, as opposed to rational requirements of skill or prudence, is a categorical imperative commanding conduct immediately without being based on some purpose or consequence that will be attained by so acting. Kant thus does not think of morality as the Ancients did, as primarily a matter of possessing certain traits or virtues, nor of producing desirable results in our actions, but of conforming one's will to this categorical principle of rationality. Kant also uses the term 'morality' to distinguish law from morals. Legality is the conformity of our actions with the law of duty, their morality is the conformity of their maxims to the law of duty. The former can be constrained by others, while the latter can only be self-constraint.

Wichtige Stellen: 4:400-8, 4:416, 4:443, 5:41, 5:119, 6:225

2. Related keywords in Kant's work

Categorical imperative, Doctrine of Virtue, duty, duties of justice, duties of virtue, ethics, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Metaphysics of Morals*, ought, realm of ends, virtues

3. Philosophical function in Kant's philosophy

For human rational agents, morality is not what it is good to do, but what one *must* do. Human beings have subjective limitations, in the form of desires and inclinations, that

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are not necessarily aligned with morality. Moreover, our moral duties are grounded in a single demand that each person's own reason makes of her, the "Categorical Imperative".

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Morality is entirely grounded on a single principle, one that cannot be discovered by observing the actual practices of any group of persons or existing culture, since it requires something, not of "actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see". 4:408 Morality requires that we act on these 'inner principles' or 'maxims' only if they can at the same time be willed to be valid for every other rational agent. 4:421 Thus, Kant repeatedly insists that the foundation of morality not only can but must be discovered and justified *a priori*. Although each minimally rational person in some sense knows what morality requires of him, morality is not to be confused with what the masses might at this or that time say or believe that it demands of them. 4: 403, 410

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Morality, based as it is on a rational imperative, is neither a command of God nor does it apply to God. The "subjective limitations and hindrances" that make morality an imperative for us, are absent in a holy will. 4: 397, 442 In recognizing that we *ought* to act in some way rather than another, we are recognizing in ourselves that we *might not*.

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Unlike many philosophers, Kant presents morality as concerned, not merely with the principles that guide our interactions with others, but also on those that guide our treatment of ourselves. 4:423, 4:430, 6:385-87, 6:391-93, 6:417-47 Thus, morality consists of duties, not only toward others, but also toward oneself. Morality is therefore not essentially or even primarily social for Kant; we would have at least some moral duties to ourselves even if the rest of humanity were to vanish, and morality itself is impossible without duties to oneself. 6:417

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Morality contains both "perfect" and "imperfect" obligations, or both obligations requiring that we always behave in some manner without exception and obligations requiring

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us to adopt and pursue certain ends. 4:421n For instance, the fact that I skip a workout is no evidence that I have not adopted exercising regularly as my end. By contrast, if I decide that I will never work on Sunday, I cannot 'skip' a Sunday and still be said to have conformed to my rule. Our duty to help others has the form of the former resolution; we must sometimes and to some extent help others, and we do not fail in our duty if we fail to spend all of our time helping. By contrast, the duty not to lie is a perfect duty resembling the latter rule. We must never lie; our duty is not just sometimes and to some extent avoid lying. Likewise, our duty to perfect ourselves is imperfect, admitting, as Kant puts it, "exception[s] in favor of inclination". 4:421n

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Kant thus follows other writers such as Baumgarten in representing morality as composed of four kinds of obligations: those toward ourselves, those toward others, those that are perfect and those that are imperfect. Since his main claim is that *all* of morality is based on the Categorical Imperative, his examples of how each kind of moral duty is derived from that imperative appears to form part of his argument for that claim. 4: 421-24, 429-31 His examples of what morality requires of us consist of a prohibition against suicide "from self-love" (a perfect duty to oneself); a prohibition against making a lying promise to another (a perfect duty to others); a requirement to develop one's talents and abilities (an imperfect duty to oneself); and a requirement to help others in need (an imperfect duty to others).

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It cannot be overemphasized that for Kant, morality does not make mere suggestions or offer rules of thumb about how one is to behave. It issues commands with absolute necessity. 4: 413 That is, it does not tell us that it would be a good idea to tell the truth, or that it would be undesirable for us to lie. It tells us that we *must* tell the truth and that we *must not* lie. This characteristic of morality is particularly important to Kant, since, if it is genuine, it implies that human beings, insofar as they are subject to moral demands,

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have *autonomous wills*. 4: 440; 446-67 If we morally ought to do something, then we have to do it even if we have no desire to do it. And if we ought to do something, then we can do it. So if we have to do something even if we have no desire to do it, then we can do something even if we have no desire to do it. Morality, because its demands make certain actions *necessary*, thus reveals the autonomy of the human will.

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If we are to be able to do what morality makes necessary, no matter what we desire to do, then morality must itself *interest* us. 4: 461) However, it seems clear from common observation that what in fact interests human beings is only accidentally related to what morality requires. Indeed, there is no empirically discernible *interest* human beings have that will always line up with morality's demands. 4:406-7 Kant in fact thought that it was impossible to explain why the bare universality of a maxim as law – the demand made by the Categorical Imperative – interests us. 4: 460

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Although Kant held that all of morality is based on a single principle of rationality, he reformulated that principle several times, suggesting that he thought that this principle contained subtleties requiring illumination. The first formulation is the so-called "*universal law of nature*" formulation, or "act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a **universal law of nature**" 4:421 Morality under this guise requires us to act in such a way that we are by our choices legislating for all rational agents. This principle is then reformulated as the "*principle of humanity*, and in general of every rational nature, as an end in itself". 4:430-1 Presented in this way, morality requires that you "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." 4:429 Morality thus requires one to treat all persons, including oneself, as having inherent dignity or respect, in virtue of their possessing "humanity". Both discussions of these two formulations of the Categorical Imperative try to

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show that each kind of requirement (perfect, imperfect, etc.) that composes morality can be derived from these formulations. However, Kant goes on to reformulate the principle again as "the principle of every human will as *a will giving universal law through all its maxims*" or the "principle of **autonomy** of the will", and then further as the principle that a person must "always regard himself as lawgiving in a **kingdom of ends** possible through freedom of the will". The latter suggests that even if Kant held morality required that we treat ourselves in certain ways, his conception of morality was also deeply social, one in which moral rules are rules for the regulation of interactions between rational agents.

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One apparent departure from the above representation of morality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, concerns the argument in the *Groundwork* that morality's fundamental principle, the Categorical Imperative, is justified because our wills are free in the sense of being autonomous. 4: 446-7 In the second *Critique*, Kant reverses himself and claims that we are simply 'conscious' of morality's authority over us. This consciousness is simply a "fact of reason" and that it is how we become aware of the autonomy of our own wills. 5: 29-32

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In addition to adding the idea that consciousness of morality's authority over us is, as he puts it, the *ratio cognoscendi* of our freedom, the second *Critique* expands in various other ways on his conception of morality. A particularly important development is his 'deontological' (as it is nowadays called) representation of morality. Chapter II of "The Analytic of Practical Reason" is dubbed "On the Concept of an object of Pure Practical Reason". 5: 57-67 The aim of is to explain the relationship between "the concept of the good" and principles of rational action, including the principles of morality. Insofar as we are rational, we choose what is good and are averse to what is bad. 5: 58 Thus, 'good' whatever is an **object** of a rational will. However, unlike any previous philosopher, Kant denied that it is the goodness of the object of our choices that makes those choices morally correct.

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Instead, what makes what we choose good is the conformity of our choosing to the moral law. 5:62, 65 Thus, morality does not have authority for us because its requirements aim at something good. Rather, it is because its requirements have authority for us that what those requirements aim our choices at is good.

Perhaps the most dramatic enrichment of Kant's view on morality revealed in the second *Critique* is his view that the complete aim of practical reason is not merely perfect conformity of one's will with moral law, but also happiness in proportion to that conformity.

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5: 110 There is a "natural connection between the consciousness of morality and the expectation of a happiness proportionate to it". 5:119 Complete moral virtue together with proportionate happiness is, he states, the highest good, and the highest good is that at which every rational will must aim, at least every rational will that additionally possesses a nature such as human beings have (one that of natural necessity must aim at its own happiness). Thus, even though Kant is adamant that the authority of morality does not come from the promise of happiness for the agent or anyone else, he nevertheless thought that it is completely contrary to morality that the wicked might prosper while the virtuous languish. "To need happiness, to be also worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power." 5:110 Kant thus stated that the existence of morality presupposes three postulates: the freedom of our wills, our immortality, and the existence of Providence.

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In essence, Kant's reasoning here is not surprising. We have already seen why morality as it is requires freedom of the will. Add to this the idea that morality requires the complete conformity of our wills to its demands, and that this is impossible for imperfect, finite being such as ourselves. Complete conformity will thus require "never-ending progress" which we will never complete in a finite amount of time. 5: 122 But, again, if we ought to do

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something, then we can do it. And we can do it only if we have an infinite amount of time to do it. But we have an infinite amount of time to do it only if our souls are immortal. Moreover, even if we were to attain perfection, and comply completely with all of morality's demands, that would not *of itself* make us happy. Indeed, it is compatible with our being fairly unhappy. However, *it ought to be the case* that each person's happiness is proportional to her virtue. Since that will not happen in the course of nature, we must postulate the existence of Providence to provide it. 5:124-32

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Although morality is not fundamentally, for Kant, concerned with character traits such as courage, morality as it applies to human beings is indeed concerned with such traits. The discovery and justification of morality's fundamental principle is supposed to proceed without appeal to human nature—without appeal to what human beings are like as a species, our typical desires, interests, feelings. However, once having established this fundamental principle, we must ask, What does morality ask of human beings, that is, beings who are not merely rational agents but beings who are *human* rational agents? Thus, in fact, there are two conceptions of morality in Kant's works, there is morality insofar as it concerns rational (but imperfect) agents, and morality insofar as it concerns a particular kind of rational but imperfect agent, namely human rational agents. Much of what Kant thought about human nature is contained in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

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Kant represents morality in the *Metaphysics of Morals* as divided into the *legal* and the *ethical*. The former are "duties that can be given by external laws" or can be *coerced*, and the latter are those duties that cannot be. Both are types of constraint, but in the former case, the constraint can be external, while ethical constraint is entirely *self-constraint*. Morality conceived of as "the ethical" concerns, not actions, but the *maxims* or *principles* behind our actions. 6:389 In particular, what the ethical requires of us is that we adopt maxims of

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pursuing certain *ends*, our own **perfection** (both moral and natural) and the happiness of others. Because morality, as what is *ethical*, requires self-constraint in adopting and pursuing certain ends, it requires **virtue** or “the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty”. 6:405 By contrast, **vice** is adopting and acting on policies that flout the pursuit of these required ends. 6:390 Although Kant emphasizes the happiness of others and self-perfection as central to what is ethical, he still holds that **respect**, in the form of negative duties of avoiding contempt, arrogance, defamation and ridicule, are a part of our ethical duties as well. 6:462-468

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