

## Lecture Notes 1 : Duty and Moral Worth

### **Groundwork: Preface**

Laws of nature (laws 'according to which everything does happen') vs. laws of freedom (laws 'according to what ought to happen').

Both subject matters, natural science and ethics, have a non-empirical, *a priori* component.

What would the *a priori* amount to in a metaphysics of morals?

for a law, if it is to hold morally... the ground of obligation must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* simply in concepts of pure reason... (*Groundwork* 4: 389)

Already recalls Kant's (1764) claim in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* on the universal claim-making of the dignity and beauty of human nature.

### **Section 1**

#### **The good will**

The will: a faculty enabling action on subjective principles (maxims). The good will: the faculty that actually acts on *good* maxims, or objective laws.

Kant claims:

- (1) The good will is a necessary condition for the 'sole and complete good'.

#### **Duty**

- (2) The concept of a duty 'contains' the concept of a good will. (*Groundwork*, 4: 397)

Natural to think *acting from duty* does not exhaust the good will.

#### **Acting from duty**

Kant illustrates four cases:

- (i) where an action is contrary to duty, in which case it cannot be done from duty (as actions done from duty are always in conformity with duty),
- (ii) where an action is done in order to satisfy a further inclination,
- (iii) where an action is done from an immediate inclination towards that action,
- (iv) where an action is done from duty irrespective of inclination

Kant claims that distinguishing (iii) and (iv) is 'difficult': important about the nature of acting from duty.

Action from duty is a form of self-constraint in recognition of practical necessity.

### Moral Worth

To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations... Suppose, then, that the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which -extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, and that while he still had the means to benefit others in distress their troubles did not move him because he had enough to do with his own; and suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty; then the action first has its genuine moral worth. (*Groundwork* 4: 398)

Two types of *reductio*: (i) seems to imply no moral praise for right actions, (ii) seems to encourage—perhaps even require—misanthropy.

Both (i) and (ii) are false.

### From duty to law

Kant distinguishes between:

- (3) Authentic moral worth comes from, and only from, acting from duty.

and:

- (4) Moral worth derives not from the 'purpose' of an action, but from the maxim on which it is performed.

A 'consequence' of (3) and (4), according to Kant, is that:

- (5) Duty is the necessity of an action out of respect for law.

General strategy: good will to duty, duty to moral worth, moral worth to maxims, maxims to law. What is the content of this law? More on this next week.

### Study questions

According to Kant, is it possible for me to do the right thing for the wrong reason? 'Kant thinks acting on duty cannot rely on feeling.' Discuss.

### Suggested Reading

*Groundwork*, sections 1 and 2.

Dietrichson, P. (1962) 'What does Kant mean by "acting from duty"?' , *Kant-Studien* 1-4, 277-288.

Wood (1999), chapter 1.