

**Ayer & Kant: Some Additional Notes**

Moral realism (objectivism), as we've seen, holds that moral facts can be established that exist independently of the individual. If they don't actually exist in the fabric of the universe, the realist argues, then they can be found through reasoning (Kant). Moral irrealism (subjectivism), by contrast, argues that the realist position is absurd; it suggests, instead, that (through our emotions) we project ideas of right and wrong onto the world as a result of our emotions. These notes will outline the respective positions of Ayer (subjectivity) and Kant (objectivity).

**Ayer**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher A.J. Ayer was a strong advocate of the irrealist (subjectivist) position. Ayer's view was a product of his overall view of philosophy; he was a **logical positivist**. The **Logical Positivists** were a group of philosophers in the early 20th century who believed that meaning was ultimately bound up with how (and whether) one could verify or falsify a statement. Any statement that cannot, in principle, be verified (seen to be true) or falsified (seen to be false) should be considered as nonsense. For example, the statement, "the only true light is in the darkness" is obviously nonsense. How would one go about finding whether it was true or false either by an examination of definitions or through experience? Put another way: this means that a statement can only be true if its meaning can be demonstrated to be true - either by definition (such as, "all bachelors are unmarried men") or by experience ("the sun is shining today"). Of course, statements can be falsified in the same way: "all bachelors are married men" is false by definition and "the sun is shining today" can be falsified through experience if it is cloudy and raining. Ayer believed that this could not be done with moral statements.

It is important to note here, that when **Logical Positivists** speak about verifying a statement through experience they are talking about a scientific form of verification. That means they treat every statement as an hypothesis to be tested; through those tests, they can discover whether the statement is true or false.

Moral statements such as "killing is wrong", Ayer thought, could not be understood as true or false either by definition or experience. He therefore concluded that they could not be objective and must, therefore, be mere expressions of attitude or emotion (hence emotivism). The issue is however, more complicated than that. You might want to argue here that a) "murder is wrong" is true by definition or b) "that killing inflicts human suffering and is, therefore, wrong" is true by experience. There are two points to consider here. The first is that the statement "murder is wrong" is true by definition *only* if the wrongness of murder can be verified in the same way. In other words, although "murder is wrong" is true by definition it can only be true by definition if we take premeditated killing as verifiably wrong either by definition or experience. If we can't do that, then we can't accept that "murder is wrong" is true (or, for that matter, false). The second point is that, while no one

likes human suffering, how does one verify (independently of emotions) that it is wrong? How can we scientifically test for wrongness?

None of this is to suggest however, that there is no factual content involved. We can describe an incident perfectly well. If someone has committed a murder, we can (as Ayer points out) say a good deal about it that is factual. We can give the identity of the person who was killed, we can say what time the killing occurred, we can even specify the killer's motives; we can say where the victim was killed and so on. All these are facts. Ayer's point is that we can say nothing of this kind about the ethical dimensions of the killing. Yes, we can say that the killing was wrong, but what have we added to the facts? Nothing. An objection that Ayer anticipates is that someone may say that "the killing was wrong" is a statement that describes the ethical features. But, Ayer replies, "...*how are they [the ethical features] related to the other features of the situation, to what we might provisionally call its "natural" features?*" He goes on to point out that two people may completely agree on the facts of the matter – the "where" "when" and "how" – but completely disagree in terms of their ethical evaluation of them. Ayer calls such facts "natural features". On such a basis he argues that one cannot demonstrate the rightness or wrongness of an action; one cannot test for rightness or wrongness against the facts. There are no moral facts (or so Ayer believed).

Ayer, therefore, believes that moral reasons are just expression of our attitudes. He thinks that when one person tries to convince another that an action is morally right or wrong, all he is doing is drawing attention to the "natural" features a situation that he believes to be emotionally persuasive. Although there are no moral facts on this account, there can still be a good deal of moral agreement, as our emotional responses to situations are often similar. For example, we all dislike suffering, and will generally express moral resentment towards people who have caused it and in a way that is proportional to the amount of suffering.

This kind of subjectivist argument seems very plausible. We can't prove the existence of moral truths, so they must relate to individual attitude; there is a general agreement – at least when it comes to acts like murder – because we react emotionally in similar ways. Ayer would say that the reasons why people react favourably to certain facts and unfavourably to others, are a matter for sociologists (those people who study society). However, this kind of emotivist account of morality means that we cannot have definite moral standards. It also means that we cannot develop a system of moral values. (Think about the consequences of this outcome for particular cultures – we'll talk about this in lessons.)

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that there exists bitter moral disagreement. Think about the debates surrounding issues such as torture and euthanasia. So, how could we go about

solving such disputes if all we have to go on is our emotional reaction?

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### Kant

Kant's main work on moral philosophy possesses the grand title: *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals On a supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns*. Henceforth, I shall refer to it as the *Groundwork*. The idea of these notes is to put some flesh on the bones (and fill in the gaps) of the basics that we covered last week.

Kant, as we discussed in last week's class, was a moral realist (or moral objectivist). Unlike A.J.Ayer, he believed that there are genuine moral truths that can be accessed through the exercise of reason.

I shall start by outlining some Kantian terminology. Kant talks a great deal about the **Good Will**. The Good Will is not what we might think it is. Rather than being a term used in relation to wishes, desires and so on, it is a form of practical reason. That means, in essence, that the good will is a form of reason that we use when determining moral laws (or duties) and what (practically) to do. However, Kant does not believe that the will is always good; sometimes we use practical reason for our own ends – when, for example, we act in accordance with duty and not for the sake of it. Put another way: we often use practical reason for our own purposes, rather than purely on grounds of duty. Reason is required to determine a moral law which is why the good will is a form of practical reason. “*Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason*” (Kant. *Groundwork*. 412)

Nevertheless, as I've said, there are times when we use reason for our own ends (think of the shopkeeper who doesn't overcharge his customers because he wants to keep them). Practical reason can be used here as well: the shopkeeper reasons that he will keep his customers if he doesn't overcharge them; he acts in a practical way to keep them. An example of the good will would be if the shopkeeper reasons that it is his duty not to overcharge his customers (he would reason that, among other things, the concept of value in relation to peoples' needs would collapse and, as such, understand it as wrong).

Kant believes that, on the many occasions in which we do not act for the sake of duty, we are falling prey to some inclination (an inclination can be broadly construed as emotion). Given that we are prone to use practical reason for our own ends, because we have fallen prey to inclinations, Kant believes that we – as human beings – are not in complete conformity with reason; we are susceptible to incentives that conflict with reason. This is a complex thought and I shall try to explain it more clearly. Basically, it is only if we use practical reason in accordance with the demands of pure reason that we will be able to act morally (i.e. for the sake of duty and nothing else). We can, of course, use practical reason when we have fallen prey to other incentives but reason doesn't run all the way through

our motives, so to speak. It is only used insofar as it allows us to get what we want. This is why Kant dismisses the role of emotion (inclination) in coming to understand our moral obligations.

You should now be able to see why Kant believes that the moral law holds for all rational beings (not just human beings). Rational beings understand that there are moral demands and obligations because they are able to determine (through reason) what would happen to concepts such as 'promise' if no one kept them. Animals are not answerable to the moral law because they are unable to reason (or, at least, reason to the point where they could be understood as rational). As such, they are unable to entertain concepts such as 'promise', let alone why it is our moral duty to keep them. Rationality allows human beings, not only to understand the concept of a promise, but also to know why we ought to keep our promises. As such, a rational being could not (logically) live in a way that was devoid of such concepts; that is why rational beings are necessarily moral beings answerable to a moral law derived from reason.

Indeed, Kant considers that beings could exist in whom the will wholly conforms to the demands of reason. In such a case, we could say that such beings had an unqualified **Good Will** because the will would not be distracted or corrupted by inclinations (emotions, desires etc.). Human beings are, sadly, not beings whose wills are in complete conformity with reason, as is exemplified by how they act in ways that fulfil their personal desires, but contradict what pure reason would dictate. – Again, think about the shopkeeper, or that you have promised a friend something but end up not doing it because there is something else that you would like to do. Put another way, a wholly rational being would understand that all their actions (duties) were not only objectively necessary but also subjectively necessary. There would be no conflict between what I ought to do (my duty) and what I want to do (subjectively).

Hopefully you now understand what Kant meant by the **Good Will** and how it relates to rational beings and their duties.

Let us now turn to what Kant calls **Maxims**. A maxim is, essentially, a principle upon which an action is based. Not all maxims are moral maxims, however. Here is an example of a maxim: “*When I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know this will never happen.*” (Kant. I. *Groundwork*. 422). Another maxim: “Never break a promise.” In both cases, we can see how such maxims underwrite action; it should also be clear that the former is not a moral action. The latter could, contentiously, be described as a moral one provided it is done for the sake of duty and not just in accordance with it. Kant considers maxims as being subjective principles of acting. In other words, maxims are specifically applicable to the agent who forms them, because they are thought of by the agent (subject). If they can be universalized as categorical imperatives, they become objective principles of

acting. Maxims, therefore, can give rise to both hypothetical and categorical imperatives.

It is now possible to make a link between the Good Will, Maxims and what Kant terms *Hypothetical* and *Categorical Imperatives*. “Now, all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former represents the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end.” (Kant. I. *Groundwork*. 414).

He continues: “Now, if an action would be good merely as a means to something else the imperative is hypothetical; if the action is represented as in itself good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, then it is categorical.” (ibid.)

In other words, Hypothetical Imperatives are those of means to ends; they are still connected with our ability to reason but they are not moral imperatives. This is for two reasons. The first is that they may not have a moral dimension at all (e.g. “In order to have Marmite on toast I should toast the bread and get the Marmite out of the cupboard.”). The second is that there may be moral issues at stake but, because they are means to ends principles, any act that they give rise to will not be done for the sake of duty; it will be done in order to achieve an end (or goal). For example: “Whenever queuing for a ticket would make me miss my train, I jump the queue.” Could this be universalised? If not, then it is not a moral maxim; it is (rather) a maxim that gives rise to a hypothetical imperative.

By contrast, a categorical imperative expresses a single (formal) idea: that of a rational being acting wholly in accordance with the demands of reason. In the case of human beings, who have less than completely rational wills, this means yielding wholly to the demands of reason. A wholly rational being would not need to bend their will in such a way; it would naturally be in accordance with reason.

This is Kant’s most famous formulation of the categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Kant. I. *Groundwork*. 421).<sup>1</sup>

Hopefully, it is now possible to see the links between Kant’s conception of the good will, maxims, hypothetical and categorical imperatives. We are rational beings and, as such capable of practical reason. Nonetheless, we are also vulnerable to our inclinations (emotions); this means that personal desires can provide the root of our motives rather than reason. In such cases, we only use practical reason insofar as it allows us to get what we want. When we allow this to happen we form maxims that are of a means to ends

variety (e.g. “Whenever queuing for a ticket would make me miss my train, I jump the queue.”). When we form categorical imperatives, we bend our will to the demands made by rationality. A wholly rational being would not have to bend his will to the demands of reason.

The avoidance of contradiction is important and, according to Kant, has two main dimensions. The first is *contradiction in concept* and the second is *contradiction in will*. We have seen *contradiction in concept* in the idea of willing the breaking of promises. – Through doing so we contradict (or undermine) the very idea of the concept of promise since, if everybody broke their promises, the concept would make no sense; it would become incoherent. The *contradiction in will* is a more tricky idea. Basically, it amounts to willing something that will simultaneously contradict itself. For example, suppose I willed that everyone should act out of self-interest. In this case, I would be willing a particular end (my interest) but not willing the necessary means to it – namely the voluntary help of others. So, my own ends are immediately undermined if such a maxim was to hold universally. Another example (this time from the *Groundwork*): suppose I will that I should not help another in need when I am able to (perhaps because I can’t be bothered). If this was willed as a universal law (i.e. if everyone abided by such a maxim) then it would follow that the means to achieve many of my ambitions in life would collapse. They would collapse because so much of what we do relies either directly or indirectly on the help of others. If a maxim fails either (or both) the *contradiction in concept* or the *contradiction in will* then these are maxims that it is our moral duty not to do; to carry them out would be morally wrong. This kind of negative approach nonetheless gives rise to some positive outcomes. It encourages us to mutually help each other, not only in the moral sphere but also with aspects of our lives that have no moral dimensions (or no direct links to morality anyway). I realise this is difficult but you should make the effort to understand it!

I now want to move on to discuss why Kant believes that we have personal autonomy and, as rational beings, exist in a “kingdom of ends”.

Where does Kant get the idea that each of us is fundamentally autonomous – i.e. has personal autonomy? Well, firstly, we are rational beings who should never treat each other as means but always as ends in themselves. Why should we never treat people as means to ends? – If we willed the idea that one can treat others as means to ends then one falls foul of the *contradiction in will*; if I willed such a thing I would also be allowing myself to be used as a means to an end rather than being acknowledged as the equal of others – I would be submitting myself to the inclinations (desires/emotions) of others. Thus, as rational beings, we must necessarily be ends in ourselves rather than means to ends; already one can see the beginnings of personal autonomy emerging from the argument that we should all be treated as ends rather than as means to ends. Nevertheless, Kant adds more weight to the idea that every rational being has personal autonomy. Not only should we

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<sup>1</sup> Remember that “will” equates to practical reason.

be treated as ends in ourselves on pain of *contradiction in will*, but willing (as such) is an individual activity. That is to say: we are subject to the moral law because *we* make it through our willing. Any rational being able to self-legislate is able to follow the demands of reason; because it can do that, it follows (Kant thinks) that all rational beings are autonomous. It is (therefore) a moral duty that such autonomy be acknowledged. Were one to create a maxim to say human beings were not autonomous we would, again, be falling foul of *contradiction of the will*. In other words, we would be denying our own power to self-legislate.

Finally, I want to say a little about what Kant means by a “kingdom of ends”. We have seen (on numerous occasions) that rational beings should be treated as ends in themselves; that they are all subject to the demands of reason and the Categorical Imperative. We should also understand that not all rational beings (and I’m thinking humans here!) are only subject to the good will. Sometimes we let our inclinations interfere with duty but act on a motivating factor that is not in accordance with reason and so on. Nevertheless, an understanding that we are all autonomous rational creatures leads Kant to stress that, as a community of rational creatures, we therefore participate in a *kingdom of ends*. Such a kingdom of ends is “*a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws.*” (Kant. I. Groundwork.). Put another way: because a moral maxim (or categorical imperative) holds for all rational beings, it follows that all rational beings are subject to its demands. – Rational beings (of whatever kind) therefore participate in a life of common moral laws that never treat those who are bound to it as means to ends, but only ever as ends in themselves.

There are many objections to Kant, I’ll mention just a couple here.

The multifarious cultures in the world have such differing moral systems that it is hard to conceive of them ever agreeing. Is that enough to say either that Kant is wrong to conceive of morality as he does, or that human beings are so enslaved by their emotions (inclinations) that there is no possibility of them ever ascertaining their duties from reason?

There is a further related objection (assume Kant is correct for this one). Suppose that a host of completely rational alien creatures arrives on earth. They are never enslaved by their inclinations; indeed, you could say that what they found to be objectively necessary was subjectively necessary for them also. Given that different cultures on earth have such a diverse range of moral beliefs it follows that, at best, only one of them has the correct system of beliefs. Assuming there to be this one culture that has the correct system of moral beliefs, it follows that all the others are likely, in one way or another, to disagree with the alien visitors. Perhaps they will even disagree to the point of violence. Remember that Kant thinks that the moral law only holds for all rational beings and that, as such, animals have less moral significance and worth the further down the

scale of rationality they get. In this respect, would the alien creatures therefore have less in the way of moral reservations over killing humans than they would their own kind or the one human culture that has got it right? Are we of less moral value because we are sometimes imprisoned by our inclinations?

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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