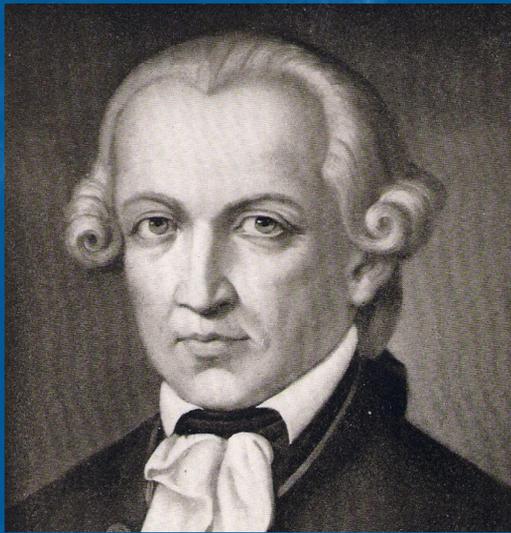


Are you Enlightened?: A Kantian Ethic Making Explicit What is Implicit

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Introduction

Kant's moral philosophy is articulated in a variety of books and essays, most notably, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, and "What is Enlightenment?". Kant's moral philosophy is apposite to the present day because Kant not only presents the application of his moral system to be readily available to each individual, but provides a palpable understanding for how the individual can engage in moral action even in seemingly paradoxical situations such as the political arena. Despite the perpetuation of post-modernism and deconstructionism that seeks to eliminate Kant's moral philosophy, Kant's argument emanates from human reasoning and moral absolutes that still carry precedence today. Such examples can be found in a universal acknowledgment that murder and rape is immoral and evil. These moral absolutes that are recognized by human reasoning are typically taken for granted and so an evaluation of Kant's moral philosophy will not only illuminate what many people find to be innate and implicit, but also introduces a new-found awareness that generates a consciousness towards responsibility. Kant synthesizes a moral philosophy by positing how an individual is to engage in moral action and live in accordance with morality. From this understanding of morality, Kant goes on to explore the stipulations and structure that not only undergirds morality, but what makes morality even possible. This ultimately results in Kant postulating the application of morality to both the individual and the nation.



Knowledge of Moral Absolutes emanates from Reason

Kant begins by asserting that there are absolute a priori moral laws that are known by pure reason. Kant writes:

Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e. as the ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity...hence that the ground of the obligation here 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 solely in concepts of pure reason, and that any other prescription that is founded on principles of mere existence—and even a prescription that is in some certain respect universal, in so far as it relies in the least part on empirical grounds, perhaps just for a motivating ground—can indeed be called a practical rule, but never a moral law (Kant 5).

Kant is asserting that, in order for a moral law to be a law, it must contain an absolute necessity. In order for a moral law to demand obedience and require obligation, its character must be of absolute necessity. From the character of absolute necessity, Kant recognizes that these moral laws do not emanate from empiricism or the nature and experiences of the human being in the world, but rather that they are a priori concepts that can only be known through pure reason. Kant goes on to acknowledge that there is the possibility to observe certain principles or rules in the world from experience, but at most they can only be understood as a practical rule and not a moral law.

The Categorical Imperative is the Practical Form of Applying Moral Law

The categorical imperative, similar to moral law, demands obligation for its own sake without any attention to the outcome. Kant goes on to explicitly state the connection of the categorical imperative to morality by writing,

This imperative is categorical. It concerns not the matter of the action or what is to result from it, but the form and the principle from which it does itself follow; and the essential good in it consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may. This imperative may be called that of morality (Kant 30).

Kant describes the categorical imperative as being that which does not heed the results or consequences of the action, but rather prioritizes the form, principle, or itself as what is most exigent. Because the categorical imperative is able to act for the sake of itself, Kant posits the categorical imperative as the practical application of moral law. After having posited the categorical imperative, Kant details how the categorical imperative should be carried out in particular situations. Kant writes,

There is therefore only a single categorical imperative and it is this: act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law (Kant 34).

Kant is determining that the categorical imperative can be simply reduced to the act of deducing whether or not a particular maxim or action can be willed as a universal law without contradiction or conflict. If it is possible that such a particular maxim could be made a universal law then one must follow through with that command as if it were a moral law.

Enlightenment of the Individual

In advocating for enlightenment, Kant articulates two possibilities for the use of reason in the forms of public and private. Kant writes,

The public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings; the private use of one's reason may, however, often be very narrowly restricted without this particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. But by the public use of one's own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers. What I call the private use of reason is that which one may make of it in a certain civil post or office with which he is entrusted (Kant 18).

It is through the public use of one's reason where enlightenment can flourish and progress because it is where one has the freedom to publish and present various ideas and theories that can be judged and evaluated by other people. Kant recognizes that the private arena tends to be much more insular as an individual has a responsibility to carry out a particular job or duty in which one does not have the right to demur and impugn certain methods within that job or post. In situations where reason finds the private situation to be impossible or immoral, Kant writes,

For if he believed...he could not in conscience hold his office; he would have to resign from it" (Kant 19).

Kant is asserting that reason is to have priority in one's interaction with the public and private spheres in that if an individual's reason finds it unreasonable to continue in accordance with the private sphere, that individual must listen to reason and remove himself. In relation to Kant's moral system, an individual can only come to the stage of resigning from a post if that individual used his reason and determined that the responsibilities of that post could not be made a categorical imperative and violated moral law. Kant's moral system is the foundation from which, when partnered with reason and enlightenment, one can even enter the public sphere as a scholar and dispute or evaluate errors in institutions, ideas, and theories.

A League of Nations

In regards to the application of moral law to nations, Kant argues that, despite the failure of the peace pact to prevent future wars and the hostile nature of the state, reason still calls for the moral law of peace between states. Kant concludes that the solution is through a league of nations where Kant believes all war will end forever. Kant elaborates on this league of nations by writing,

This league does not look to acquiring any power of a state but only to preserving and securing the freedom of a state itself and of other states in league with it, but without there being any need for them to subject themselves to public laws and coercion under them (as people in a state of nature must do). The practicability (objective reality) of this ideas of a federalism that should gradually extend over all states and so lead to perpetual peace can be shown (Kant 327).

Kant conceives of the league of nations as being one that does not attempt to coalesce other states into it, but rather consists of all states in agreement of maintaining their freedom as states. Kant understands that there will not be any public laws, but simply an understanding among all the states that each is to maintain its own autonomy. This league of nations would gradually consist of all the states and nations in the world in which perpetual peace then can be established.

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