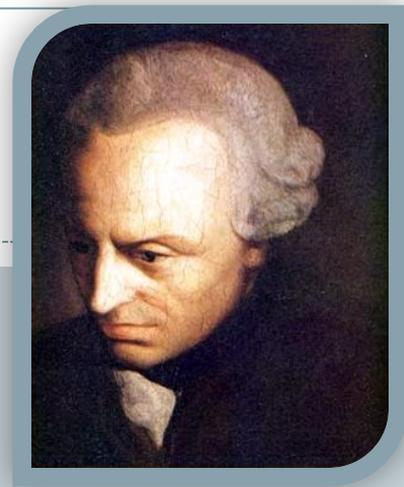


Kant on Moral Autonomy and Respect



ETHICS: AUTONOMY AND HEALTH (SPRING 2014)
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Immanuel Kant



- 1724-1804, East Prussia
- **Human reason** as source of knowledge, concepts, duty
- Wants to ground ethical duties in necessity
 - should not be grounded in contingencies of time, place, culture, experience, inclinations (desire, feeling)
- Focuses on motivation, rather than the quality of actions or consequences
 - Principles to guide the will
 - Some principles will be *absolute*

Duty and Respect for the Moral Law



- An action must be done from duty in order to have any moral worth.
 - **Duty**: “necessity of an action done out of respect for the law” (Ak 4:400)
 - If I **respect** the law, then it must motivate me *regardless* of inclination, self-interest, or consequences
 - Practical “love resides **in the will** and **not in the propensities of feeling, in principles** of action and **not in tender sympathy**” (Ak 4:399, emphasis added)
 - ✦ Reason can command we have **practical love**, not affection or feeling

Duty and Respect for the Moral Law



motivation: inclination
(e.g., sympathy,
happiness)



motivation: self-interest



motivation: because duty
compels me

**Action of moral
worth
(intended if not
achieved)**

Respect-Worthiness



- Fundamental moral equality of rational creatures in virtue of shared **reason** and **autonomy**
 - Unconditionally and incomparably valuable, priceless
 - Autonomy grounds dignity and intrinsic worth
 - Equal participants in the kingdom of ends
- “rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as **ends in themselves**, i.e., as something which is not to be used merely as a means” (Ak 4:428, emphasis added)
- Cannot make an exception for myself
 - To do so undermines respect for others as equal members of the moral community

Autonomy



- Can consult our reason and derive the moral law
 - Same for all rational beings
- Since we ourselves derive the moral law, it is self-legislated → thus **autonomous**
 - Both subject and legislator of the law
- As opposed to **heteronomy**: being ruled by forces outside of the best part of ourselves (reason)
 - Someone who is completely ruled by inclination or self-interest is neither autonomous nor free
- Once discovered, the moral law compels the best part of us
 - Inclination and self-love can taint our motives and drown out reason

What Is the Moral Law?



- **Categorical imperative:** commands us to will certain things in virtue of our reason—regardless of what other ends, desires, or plans we have
 - **Universal law formulation:** “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Ak 4:402)
 - **Humanity formulation:** “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (Ak 4:429)
 - **Autonomy formulation:** “all maxims are rejected which are not consistent with the will’s own legislation of universal law” (Ak 4:431)

Duties (examples)



	to others	to self
perfect	not to lie	not to commit suicide
imperfect	beneficence	to cultivate one's talents and skills

Some Critiques of Kant from G. Dworkin



- Empirically false, neglects intrinsically social aspects of moral principles
 - this view denies our *history*. We are born in a given environment [...] We mature more slowly [...] It makes no more sense to suppose we invent the moral law for ourselves than to suppose that we invent the language we speak for ourselves” (Dworkin, *Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, p. 36)
- Can be autonomous while relying on others for moral facts/testimony/advice
 - Conclusion: Kant is fundamentally wrong about what it means to be autonomous
- *How do you think Kant would respond to these objections? Are they compelling?*

Discussion Questions



- **Kant contrasts the following:**
 - A callous recluse who acts out of duty
 - A philanthropist who acts out of sympathy (but not compelled by duty)
 - He argues that the callous recluse morally surpasses the philanthropist.
 - ✦ What might be problematic about this?
 - ✦ What role do you think emotions and fellow-feeling should have in moral decision-making?
- **Does Kant or Mill make a more compelling case for the why we should value autonomy?**

Discussion Questions



- If we were to adopt Kant's conception of autonomy, what would be some implications for bioethics?
 - E.g.: If a patient claimed to be acting autonomously but was also acting immorally, how would Kant respond? Is this the right response?
- Is it always ethically impermissible to undermine someone's autonomy (Kant's formulation of it)?
- Do you agree that we have a perfect duty not to lie?
 - Is this obligation only negative in real-world contexts?
 - What about the murderer at the door looking for a would-be victim in your basement?

Questions?



COMMENTS?