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“Doing duty for its own sake”: The Empty Formalism Objection

Kant’s moral philosophy as articulated in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* revolves around the idea of the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is a self-established rule that must be adhered to and carried out in all circumstances. It should be consistent, uncontradictory, and *universalizable*. Such a maxim could be brought into existence by one’s *will*, which is moved by the idea of duty. The autonomy of the will results in human freedom. Kant believes that the categorical imperative must be carried out for the reason of duty alone, rather than for any other reason. Hegel takes issue with the categorical imperative in the *Philosophy of Right*, arguing that merely fulfilling duty for its own sake isn’t enough in providing us with a framework for moral action, and letting us gauge moral permissibility. The “merely moral position” becomes an empty formalism as a result, providing us with a much too abstract notion of moral action.

Hegel agrees with Kant in the determination that rationality is necessary in the cultivation of an adequate moral grounding. Despite his disagreement with the idea that the categorical imperative is enough in fulfilling the demands of pure practical reason, he concedes that Kant’s notion of autonomy and its mediation by reason is important. Hegel acknowledges that it is essential “to give prominence to the pure unconditioned self-determination of the will as the root of duty” and that “knowledge of the will, thanks to Kant’s philosophy, has won its firm foundation and starting-point for the first time through the thought of its infinite autonomy”

[*Philosophy of Right*, ¶135]. Hegel is saying that the realization of the will — specifically, the “good will” — will result in the formation of autonomy. The “good will”, according to Kant, “is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination” (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:394). Moreover, inclination is necessarily put aside in the fulfillment of moral duty. Hegel pays homage to Kant for his ideas regarding autonomy and liberation from the ills of inclination and conscience in the pursuit of moral understanding, though he does not fully divorce inclination from autonomy in the way Kant does. Both thinkers hold that autonomy is the supreme manner by which individuals attain freedom, but they disagree about the manner in which it is attained. Hegel also agrees with Kant that the determination of the will is duty’s impetus. Autonomy can be traced back in part, according to Hegel in his understanding of Kant, to the will and its movement. In addition, both thinkers regard duty as that which imbues the individual with moral knowledge. Hegel accepts Kant’s notion of duty and prizes it just as much, despite his critique of the empty formalism of “doing duty for duty’s sake”. Although Hegel believes in the actualization of duty in reality through the practice of ethical life, Hegel and Kant share views about the importance of duty itself whilst recognizing pure practical reason as a mode of arriving at dutiful understanding.

Hegel believes that the “merely moral position” is at risk of becoming an empty formalism because Kant champions a far-too abstract notion of “duty”. He does not outline what our duty should be, or the means by which we should execute it. Hegel posits that Kant “is preaching duty for duty’s sake” without properly articulating the content that is necessary in helping one to fulfill their moral duty. Because of Kant’s position as a non-consequentialist, reliance on this “empty formalism” from a Hegelian point of view breeds an inability to determine actions that can or cannot be carried out, because of the principle of noncontradiction.

Kant in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals has not said enough to enable us to live properly, live well, and carry out moral duty, according to Hegel: “Since every action for itself requires a particular content and a definite end, while duty as an abstraction entails nothing of the kind, the question arises: what is my duty?” [PR, ¶134]. In Kant’s view, one should act in accordance with a maxim such that it is universalizable. For example, if one wills truth-telling and establishes a maxim to never tell a lie, this principle must be considered a universal law. But, because maxims are never specified within Kant’s philosophy, and leave the burden of determination to the individual, maxims are neither created nor ruled out. The principle of noncontradiction that is implicit in the creation of a categorical imperative does not help one to subjectively determine maxims which aid the overall good. For example, a person might will that murder is permissible. From this arises the creation of a categorical imperative — murder is okay across the board, which is something we would want to intuitively rule out. Because Kant does not provide us with a clear way of determining morality — (it is assumed that the rational individual is able to distinguish right from wrong a priori) our actions are left for the individual to make sense of, which can be problematic:

“[I]f the definition of duty is taken to be the absence of contradiction, formal correspondence with itself [...] then no transition is possible to the specification of formal duties nor, if some such particular content for acting comes under consideration, is there any criterion in that principle for deciding whether it is or it is not a duty. On the contrary, by this means any wrong or immoral mode of conduct may be justified” [PR, ¶135].

Because no inherent contradiction arises within the established maxim, Hegel argues that, in principle, we are unable to dismiss its validity — even if it permits the execution of immoral deeds, or promotes questionable ideas, such as the negation of private property under a maxim that permits its nonexistence:

“The absence of property contains in itself just as little contradiction as the non-existence of this or that people, family, etc., or the death of the whole human race. But if it is already established on other grounds and presupposed that property and human life are to exist and be respected, then indeed it is a contradiction to commit theft or murder; a contradiction must be a contradiction of something, i.e. of some content presupposed from the start as a fixed principle” [PR, ¶135].

Hegel is saying that, in our decision to carry out duty merely for its own sake, (under no true discretion of Kant’s as to what this duty may be) the principle of noncontradiction in Kant’s philosophy may lead us astray in carrying out said duty. Moreover, if it is evident that, for example, stealing in a society that upholds the notion of private property is wrong, then there arises a contradiction within the act of stealing and the creation of a categorical imperative that endorses the act of stealing. But, because Kant does not provide us with a framework of how to gauge morality itself — be it through the articulation of specific morals that should be adhered to, or a way of judging morals and behaviors that concern them — the pitfalls of Kant’s ethical philosophy render it vague and detract from its utility.

Hegel refrains from falling into the trap of moral relativism and subjectivity — rather, he points out the possibility that abstracting morality to such an extent is not helpful in guiding one’s determination in conducting oneself (how one “ought” to live). He warns against reliance on the individual conscience in taking issue with the empty formalism of the categorical imperative. The highly particular nature of the categorical imperative lends itself well to the individual conscience despite its generality (and, perhaps, because of it). Hegel argues that “To have a conscience [...] is simply to be on the verge of slipping into evil” [PR, ¶139]. The subjective will is fickle, not particularly grounded in the notion of the objective good and in turn must be reconciled. Conviction is the sole thing measuring “right and duty” despite its capriciousness —

“At one moment conviction is made the basis of ethics and of the supreme value of humanity, and is thus pronounced supreme and sacrosanct; at another, all we have to do with is error, and my conviction is something trivial and contingent, in fact something strictly external, which may turn out this way or that” [PR, ¶140].

Hegel’s goal is to articulate the necessity for *integration* of the good and conscience in the creation of a well-founded moral system of conduct. Rather than making normative any specific way of life, Hegel invokes the concrete in place of the abstract. His theory of ethical life — *Sittlichkeit* — paves way for the merging of the objective good and the subjective will. Hegel takes great care in illustrating ethical life, arguing that individuals gain moral understanding by virtue of participation in society itself through the cultivation of families, participation in stately affairs, accepting the authority of ethical substance, and inculcation into civil society. In Hegel’s view, individuals cannot exist in isolation from one another, and ethical understanding does not exist in a vacuum — one’s understanding is constantly mediated (though not necessarily caused by) the societal processes at work. Most importantly, individuality is not renounced in the collective — ethical life is the highest expression of subjectivity, in its realization of the individual. Whereas Kant’s categorical imperative presupposes an inevitable low-tier subjectivity, (because the individual ought to operate under maxims they see fit for universalization with consistency since content is absent in this determination) Hegel believes that the mere act of doing for duty’s sake does not take into account the world at large.

The authority that ethical life has on the individual is one that imbues the individual with realization of both selfhood and community. Individuals identify with the ethical order, and, in turn, realize its rationality. Unless we consider the grander scheme of human interdependence and existence, we will not have an understanding of ethical life. Hegel is a proponent of human virtue and goodness — he enumerates our obligations as such: (a) to do right, and (b) to promote welfare, one’s own welfare, and welfare in universal terms, the welfare of others. [PR, ¶134].

Kant assumes that the individual is a rational agent, intuitively distinguishing right from wrong, ideally abandoning impulse in favor of reason. Hegel does not make these suppositions, and lists the aforementioned moral suggestions for the purpose of filling the gaps in Kant's own moral theory, since we cannot assume that we must be "good" only from subscribing to Kant's notion of duty (to fulfill it for its own sake). Ethical life is the embodiment of freedom, in Hegelian terms. It is meant to be liberating — "...[first], from dependence on mere natural impulse [...]; secondly, liberation from the indeterminate subjectivity which...remains in itself and devoid of actuality" [PR, ¶149]. In essence, Hegel is saying that in the consultation of both the individual, subjective will and the context-dependent objective good, one will be able to glean concrete moral meaning. This stands in opposition to Kant's divorcing of reason and impulse — if one is expected to consult reason alone, after all, reason becomes meaningless, and subjectivity takes precedence. Autonomy and actuality are grounded in both modes. Going beyond the "I" of the individual will and reconciling it as a "We" should be of principal importance to any individual participating in and comprising a larger network of collective interests. Thus, Hegel believes that it is our ethical duty to marry, start a family, and belong to civil society and a state in the pursuit of both self consciousness and social orientation. It is in these areas that moral duty — and, more importantly, *autonomy* — are realized most clearly and materially, rather than through mere truisms and moral abstractions.

Kant's categorical imperative is an empty formalism because of its level of moral abstraction. For many of the same reasons that Hegel expressed the empty formalism critique, I believe that the vagueness of the merely moral position renders it mostly unsuitable. Due to the nature of human community and inculcation, I do not know whether it is possible to glean narrow, specific moral understanding in contexts that require our better judgment prior to

experience altogether. However, this is not to say that we cannot intuit right from wrong, or that we're born with a sort of blank moral template that must be written over by socially-imposed moral codes. Blindly adhering to the principle of doing duty for duty's sake may breed a reliance on individual conscience and a neglect of the overall good in our individual determinations of duty, as expressed by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*. Because of this inherent disconnect between interpersonality and mercurial, erroneous subjectivity, the categorical imperative is not only empty, but troublesome. One might find it difficult to reconcile the two, (if at all) resulting in the building of frustrations over its impracticality. According to Hegel, the domains of family, civil society, and the state are outgrowths of human reason. This idea is in line with Kant's position as a staunch rationalist, and through his development of his moral theory and subsequent exclusion of external, empirical affairs. By articulating the notion of doing duty for duty's sake, "Kant is depriving himself of the full richness that reason gives rise to over the course of its historical and institutional development" (Blecher, lecture). Human beings create structures and states based upon notions of what is right, laying down values as foundations for the growth of institutions. In essence, these institutions are direct manifestations of higher-order subjectivities. Moreover, because Kant's moral theory only takes into account the individual and places undue faith into his or her rationality, his theory is then lacking considerations of universal existence and moral guidance.

One might ask, "what does it mean to carry out duty for its own sake?" and they would be posing a valid question. Is there such a thing as doing duty for its own sake to begin with, without the underlying presence of an ulterior motive? Kant warns against the fulfillment of duty for the derivation of benefit and enjoyment. How might an individual begin to distinguish between the nebulous feeling of doing something for its own sake, and doing it for a deep-seated

reason that they haven't yet begun to deconstruct? Shrouded in mystery, the moral position becomes empty and harder to attribute to dutiful purity more so than, say, feelings of satisfaction.

Still, Kant's moral theory may prove useful in the realm of the abstract rather than the practical. Moreover, the "empty formalism" about which Hegel speaks may be more relevant in the application of Kant's theory in daily events and interactions. Because the abstract and the concrete do not seem to mesh well, it may be worth reserving the abstractness of the categorical imperative for moral principles that one ought to follow generally. Perhaps the categorical imperative is not completely an empty formalism because it isn't meant to be applied in every single morally-charged interaction with others, but rather, only in specific circumstances where its application is necessary (for example, the idea that one mustn't steal from others) and as an overarching, generalized moral code.

In addition, Kant's notion of perfect and imperfect duties provides a more nuanced view of moral actions, wherein acts against the former "are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature" (G, 4:424). The universal law of nature presupposes the furtherance of life, and Kant argues that a maxim contradicting this principle cannot be willed, such as in the case of suicide — "It is then seen at once that a nature whose law it would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feeling whose determination it is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contradict itself" (G, 4:422). This narrows the parameters by which the categorical imperative is to be extended significantly. By this definition, a person cannot even will into existence a categorical imperative that allows for suicide, laziness, lying promises, and universal indifference — because there is something inherently contradictory in willing about each of these things, therefore they cannot be universalized. For instance, one cannot "will" to commit suicide, because suicide cannot be universalized (or else everyone

would be dead). Kant's categorical imperative, then, keeps itself in check — because we cannot will just about anything and attempt the process of universalization, certain limits are placed on it. These limits are stricter than Hegel gives credit for, and one may even infer that the merely moral position is not entirely devoid of meaning and usefulness altogether. Despite its overall vagueness, perhaps we are able to glean moral understanding in some logical and uncontradictory capacity — especially in the realm of pure “abstract” reason.

Works Cited

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