By far the most widely read of Kant’s works in moral philosophy is *Groundwork*. In writing the *Groundwork*, Kant expected to publish a second work shortly afterwards. This planned work was *Metaphysics of Morals*. In fact, it was to be years before this second work emerged. In contrast, Kant did not expect to write *Critique of Practical Reason*, a work which he published only a few years after *Groundwork* and almost a decade before *Metaphysics of Morals* (figure 1).

1 **Metaphysics of Morals**

Structure: see figure 2.

Discussion

- *In a group, discuss questions 1 and 2 (theses and terminology).*

2 **The Categorical Imperative**

In *Groundwork*, Kant argues that if we have any moral obligations at all, the Moral Law must take a certain form. This is **the Categorical Imperative**. To say that it is an imperative is to say that it is a command. To say that it is categorical is to say that it applies to you regardless of the desires and goals you happen to have. As a rational being, you can’t ‘opt out’ of morality. You can ignore what morality demands, of course, but you cannot avoid the legitimacy of such demands. You can’t make it the case that morality doesn’t apply to you.

Kant offers various (allegedly equivalent) formulation of the Categorical Imperative. For our purposes, the second of these is probably the most pertinent. This is the Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself (FHEI).

**Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself** states that one should always act so as to treat rational beings as ends in themselves, and never as mere means.

People are worthy of respect because they are rational — because they are able to reason and, in particular, to recognise moral demands.

As a person, you are worthy of this respect. This means not only that other people should respect you. This is the basis of the duties they have to you. It also means that you should respect yourself. This is the basis of the duties you have to yourself.

3 **Do you have duties to yourself?**

Kant considers the following problem.

First:

- It doesn’t seem to make sense to say one has duties to oneself.

Second:

- Nonetheless, one **does** have duties to oneself.

Why?

- Suppose not.
  - If not, one would have no duties at all.
  - It is only the recognition of myself as a moral being which grounds my recognition of others as moral beings.
  - And this status is the basis of duty in both cases.
  - If one has duties at all, one has duties to oneself.
Figure 1: Immanuel Kant: major ethical works

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**Metaphysics of Morals**

- **Doctrine of right** (judicial duties)
  - **ACT** so that...
    - enforceable in a just legal system
    - actions in accordance with duty
    - form of the Moral Law determines content

- **Doctrine of virtue** (ethical duties)
  - **WILL** so that...
    - less enforceable
    - duty as motivation
    - ends which are also duties etc.

- **Doctrine of the elements of ethics**
  - duties to oneself
  - duties to others

- **Doctrine of the methods of ethics**

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Figure 2: *Metaphysics of Morals*
How is this possible? Kant tries to resolve this puzzle by arguing that one can consider oneself in two ways:

1. as ‘sensible being’
   or
2. as ‘moral being’.

Discussion

• In a group, please discuss question 3. Why does Kant reject Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the mean’?

• Clarify the conclusion i.e. what exactly is Kant trying to persuade you of?

• What are the premises of this argument? Premises are claims which an argument relies on i.e. the points it starts from.

• Is the argument valid? An argument is valid if, and only if, the conclusion follows logically from the premises so that the premises could not possibly be true without the conclusion being true as well.

4 Duties

Kant distinguishes different kinds of moral duties.

• **Perfect** duties are absolute, exceptionless.
  e.g. ‘Never commit suicide for reasons of self-love.’

• **Imperfect** duties are equally binding, but they are not always or never.
  e.g. ‘Recognise the value of other people’s ends and projects, and help them to achieve those ends.’

You don’t have to continuously go about helping other people, but it is not OK to never help anybody at anytime.

• **Narrow** duties are duties to refrain from acting in particular ways.
  e.g. The duty not to steal other people’s property.

• **Wide** duties are duties to adopt certain ends i.e. to value certain things, to be motivated in particular ways, to recognise certain kinds of reasons as reasons for action.

  e.g. The duty to strive for one’s own moral perfection. The duty to promote others’ happiness.

5 Perfect duties to oneself

The two ways of seeing oneself mentioned above (as a ‘sensible being’ and as a ‘moral being’) are also the basis of distinct duties to oneself.

1. As ‘animal’, ‘sensible’, ‘natural’ being:
   (a) self-preservation
   • suicide & self-mutilation as vices;
   (b) species-preservation
   • masturbation etc. as vices;
   (c) temperance/moderation
   • drunkenness & gluttony as vices.

2. As ‘moral being’:
   (a) truthfulness
   • outer & inner lies as vices;
   (b) meeting one’s true needs
   • avarice, greed, self-indulgence, miserliness etc. as vices;
   (c) self-respect
   • servility etc. as vices.

Discussion

• If possible, find somebody who picked the same topic for question 4 as you and compare notes. If not, try working with somebody who picked a claim about a duty to yourself of the same general kind (‘sensible’ or ‘moral’).

• Now find somebody who picked a different topic, preferably a thesis concerning duty to yourself of the other kind.
References


