

Kant and Cultural Relativism

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Abstract

We live an age of cultural relativism that asks how universal moral obligation can be justified. Immanuel Kant took up this challenge. His arguments can be reconstructed in a way that makes sense today.

1 Introduction

We live in an age of cultural mixing. Easy travel has shrunk the world, communications networks have enmeshed it, and global business has united it. Millions are exposed on a daily basis to a culture radically different from the one in which they grew up, and they must come to terms with the values of that culture.

There is nothing new about cultural confrontation. In fact world history is to a large extent a tale of one culture sweeping over another. But something has changed. Traditionally the dominant powers generally assumed their cultural superiority. Through its long colonial period, for example, the West brought the “three M’s” to the rest of the world: the Military to subdue it, Markets to profit from it, and Missionaries to convert it to Western religious and cultural values. In recent years, however, there has been a growing willingness to acknowledge the validity of other ways of life. Among the reasons for this one might mention the popularization of anthropology in the early part of this century, which provides a sympathetic or at least a neutral reading of alien cultures. Whatever the explanation, there is a growing acceptance of cultural relativism.

This means, for example, that if a Western business person is expected to pay bribes to officials for licensing and permits, he may hesitate to impose his own cultural norms. He might observe the government pays its officials obviously inadequate salaries in anticipation that they will make up the difference by other means. This is arguably a form of licensing fee that happens to be paid directly to officials rather than through the government. It may favor the wealthy and well positioned, but this is accepted in the local culture.

If a business finds an absence of anti-pollution laws in a country in which it wishes to build a factory, it may note that Western aesthetic ideals of clean water and clean air simply do not exist in that country. Pollution is detrimental to health, but Western culture is willing to accept the health hazards of automobile travel, a fat-laden diet, and a sedentary and stressful lifestyle in exchange for what it sees as their benefits. Another country may place higher value on the benefits of allowing industries to pollute.

If a firm operates a business abroad in which employees work in a dangerous environment for subsistence wages, but local executives enjoy an affluent lifestyle, it may feel tempted to acquiesce. It may understand that the local culture resigns itself to a natural order in which the few are fortunate and the many are fated to live a life of

penury. The notions of equality and human rights, after all, are eighteenth century European concoctions that may have no meaning or rationale in another worldview.

Cultural relativism is understood in several senses. Its core meaning seems to be the view that people's values are radically conditioned by the culture in which they grow up. This is a factual claim that can in principle be settled by cultural anthropology. But this fact, if it is a fact, seems to have implications so immediate that they are often folded into the meaning of 'cultural relativism.' One possible implication is that one's obligations are not only regarded differently from culture to culture, but they really do differ, because economic and social conditions differ. For example, pollution may be permissible in a poor country that desperately needs economic development but wrong in a rich country that can afford to clean up its mess. Or more radically, bribery may be permissible in one culture because a stable social order relies on it, while it is wrong in another culture that would be undermined by it. In other words, the very fact that a practice is considered permissible may make it so. This type of relativism is compatible with and in fact assumes universal moral principles.

A stronger inference is often drawn from cultural relativism, however, and it is the focus here. This is the view that there is no possibility of universal moral law. One cannot categorically assert any principle, however basic it may be. One can only say that a principle is accepted in a certain culture. There may be certain principles that happen to operate in all or nearly all cultures, such as the prohibition of incest, but this is due to some constant feature of how humans organize themselves in societies, not to an underlying moral precept. This view is sometimes called moral relativism, ethical relativism, or metaethical relativism.

This variety of relativism may be difficult to swallow when defined so starkly, but it can be seen creeping into the thought patterns of Westerners. Part of its appeal derives from the fact that there is no obvious way to defend the universality of a moral precept. The moral authority of religion is increasingly difficult to acknowledge in a pluralistic society. In fact the only intellectual authority that has broad acceptance in the West, namely science, either has nothing to say about the issue, or else encourages relativistic attitudes when it finds the sources of our mores in the contingencies of childhood experience and cultural history.

It is at this point that the unreadable German philosopher Immanuel Kant enters the scene. Kant undertook to find a bedrock moral principle that not only binds everyone, regardless of culture, but can be demonstrated to do so. In fact the Kantian ethical tradition is the only one that takes seriously the task of proving the existence of universal moral law. Its success may be less than complete, but its efforts give rise to a deep and satisfying moral philosophy that has had enormous influence and, in our age of cultural relativism, is more urgently needed than ever. 1

Unfortunately Kant's reputation as hard to understand is deserved. He not only wrote in the convoluted academic prose of his day, whose sentences might easily run on for half a page, but he grappled with revolutionary ideas that were unclear even to himself. He made several attempts to articulate his vision that have become slogans, none of which really explain what he was about. You may associate with Kant his categorical imperative, which states that one should adopt only those maxims that one can simultaneously will to become universal law. But without a carefully inculcated background in Kantian action theory, this formulation is unintelligible. You may have also heard slogans to the effect that the only unconditional good is a good will, or that

one should never treat other persons as means only, but as ends in themselves. These sound intriguing, but they convey no hint as to why one should believe them.

1 Kant presents his ethical theory in *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, or *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* [6], and elaborates it in *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft*, or *Critique of Practical Reason* [7]. An excellent commentary on the former is [9], and the classic commentary on the latter is [1].

Kant's arguments can, however, be reconstructed so as to make sense to modern ears. They begin with a theory of freedom that teaches interesting lessons in its own right. For example, it says something about whether we have obligations to robots, and they to us. From this theory he deduces a necessary condition for the possibility of action. He says that unless one acts according to a certain principle (namely, the categorical imperative just mentioned), he does not act at all. Kant therefore makes the astounding claim that morally correct action is the only possible kind of action. You read it right: one acts freely only to the extent that one acts morally. All action is bound by the same moral law, because that law is a necessary condition for acting in the first place. I warned you that his view is revolutionary! But don't dismiss it until you hear it out.

2 Action and Freedom

A puzzle that dates back at least to the time of Epicurus asks how human beings can act freely when their behavior is determined by nature and nurture. This is far more than a philosopher's conundrum, because it speaks to a pressing social issue. To what extent can a person be held responsible for her actions, when she is the product of her environment and genetic makeup? Should persons who had abusive parents, for example, be held accountable for violent behavior? Is a schizophrenic person competent to stand trial for a crime? How about a person addicted to drugs since childhood? The implication in these questions is that when a direct cause for a person's behavior can be identified, it is hard to say that the person freely chose that behavior. One can of course carry this reasoning to its logical extreme and insist that because a person's every act is determined by the chemistry of her neurons, she is never free to choose her actions and therefore responsible for none of them.

The common-sense response to this puzzle is to say that certain types of causes usurp freedom, and others enable it. A profoundly schizophrenic person, or someone in the grip of debilitating drug addiction since childhood, should not be held to the same standard of responsibility as most people. But a person whose actions are determined by neural chemistry can be entirely free, and in fact it is precisely by means of such neural processes that persons act freely.

Even if this response relieves the seeming conflict between freedom and determinism, it provides no principle for deciding what kind of causes abrogate freedom. The computer age gives the question a new twist. Can a robot become so smart that we are obliged to regard it as an agent that freely chooses its actions and therefore has rights and responsibilities? The robot's behavior may be determined by its programming and circuitry, but these may be analogous to human neural circuitry.

Here again Professor Kant again steps in. He grants that every action may be determined by some prior cause; if so, nobody has negative freedom. But what is relevant to moral concerns is positive freedom, which is a wholly different concept. Perhaps the best way to explain this idea today is that an entity has positive freedom when its behavior can be reasonably explained as the outcome of deliberation. This, the behavior

submits to a practical explanation. Behavior that can only be explained causally is mere behavior; behavior that can be explained practically is action.

Whereas a causal explanation might involve neurochemistry or repressed libido, depending on which theory one prefers, a practical explanation re-constructs how an agent arrived at the decision to perform an act. A causal explanation might have the form: hormone A stimulated the production of neurotransmitter B, which resulted in synapse C, which led to electrochemical reaction D, which contracted muscles so that a finger pushed the power button on a radio. A practical explanation might have the form: Joe Smith wanted to listen to the weather report before leaving for work, he knew that the report was available at that time on the radio, and he therefore switched on the radio.

This makes agency to some degree a matter of how behavior is interpreted rather than what it actually is, but the interpretation is not arbitrary; it must be reasonable and appropriate. If a mosquito flies through the window and buzzes around my ears, it is implausible to suppose that the insect said to itself, “to get my daily protein, I will investigate that human’s habitat for a subcutaneous source.” Biological explanations in terms of attraction to light or odors are more convincing. In the case of human beings, however, practical explanations are normally much more efficient. They not only make human behavior intelligible but can be valuable in predicting it, whereas neurochemical explanations have made relatively little progress in either direction.

There are cases of human behavior in which practical explanation breaks down. It is hard to explain the behavior of a person suffering a seizure as the result of that person’s conscious deliberation; in prescientific times people resorted to ideas of demonic possession to make sense of it. The person is therefore not acting freely. Mental illness presents a complex and fascinating test of this principle, but arguably one mark of illness is that we have difficulty “getting into the person’s mind” to reconstruct the thought process that gave rise to the behavior, or if we do so, the reasoning is somehow twisted or implausible. Computers and robots may soon develop behavior rich and subtle enough so that it becomes much easier to understand and predict it by regarding them as deliberating over their next action rather than following a million-line Lisp code. As Daniel Dennett puts it in [2], we might find it useful to take an “intentional stance” toward computers. Once we begin to do this, we begin to regard them as agents that freely choose their actions.

The key aspect of this theory for Kant’s purposes is that an agent has reasons for its action. To give a practical explanation for behavior is to say that because the agent wanted X, and because it knew that Y was the means to X, the agent chose to do Y; this type of reasoning is sometimes called a practical syllogism. Reason, however, is universal, and this is the Archimedean point Kant uses to move ethics in the direction of universality.

3 The Heart of the Argument

When Joe Smith decides to turn on the radio, his decision is based on reasons, and those reasons are grounded in the situation, not in who the reasoner is. If a desire to hear the weather report, and the fact the report is available on the radio, are sufficient reason for Joe to turn on the radio, then they are sufficient reason, period. In particular they are sufficient reason for any other person to do so.

This may seem implausible because, for instance, many persons do not speak the language one would hear on the radio. But the fact that the radio speaks his language is clearly part of Joe’s reasoning; the statement that “the report is available on the radio”

clearly means that it is available in a form that Joe can understand. The claim here is that when the reasons for Joe's action are fully spelled out, they are equally valid reasons for anyone. This is part of what it means to be a reason: a reason is grounded in the characteristics of the situation, not in the identity of the person who does the reasoning.

This means that a person who acts freely, which is to say a person whose choice of action is based on reasons, chooses for anyone when he chooses for himself. If his reasons are sufficient for him, he must regard them as sufficient for anyone.

This is the meaning of Kant's categorical imperative, namely that one should act only according to a maxim that he can simultaneously will to become universal law. Note first that one acts according to a maxim. A maxim is an imperative of the form, "in situations with characteristics X, do Y." All actions take this form. One can never decide, on the basis of reasons, to act in a certain way only at this particular point in time. If certain features of the present situation justify turning on the radio now, then they justify turning on the radio at any time they occur. A decision to act is therefore always a decision always to act when the situation has certain characteristics. In other words, to act is always to adopt a maxim. Furthermore, the reasons that are good for one agent are good for another. So to adopt a maxim for oneself is always to adopt a maxim for anyone. It is to will that the maxim become "universal law."

This gives rise to a generalization principle in ethics. Suppose I decide not to vote in the next election, because it is inconvenient. Then I decide that no one vote when it is inconvenient. Because voting is inconvenient for almost everyone, I decide that practically no one vote. But I protest that this is not what I am deciding; I want to enjoy the benefits of democratic government. It is therefore impossible to give a practical explanation for my action. Attempts to do so fail, because the only plausible reason for my nonparticipation seems to be inconvenience, and yet I am unwilling to let inconvenience be a reason not to vote.

What we loosely call immoral action, then, is really behavior that is not action at all, because it can be given no consistent practical explanation. Immorality is therefore experienced as a kind of inconsistency, and in some of his formulations Kant highlighted this aspect. For example, he says that one who breaks a promise merely because it is convenient to do so has an inconsistent will, because if everyone broke promises when convenient, it would be impossible even to make a promise; the institution of promising would break down. One can go on at some length analyzing the types of inconsistency that may be involved here, but it is best not to do so, because inconsistency is not the whole story.

Suppose for example that I hereby adopt the maxim, "Let all persons who live at my address decline to vote when it is inconvenient." I am perfectly willing to let everyone act according this maxim, because it would have no measurable effect on democratic institutions. There is no inconsistency, and yet something is wrong. The problem is that there is simply no convincing practical explanation of my refusal to vote that would make reference to my address. I may say that I adopted the above maxim, but I did not. There may be situations in which my address really is a factor in my reasoning, if for example it lay outside the boundary of any democratic state. In such cases I might not be obligated to vote.

I may of course decide not to vote simply because I am me. That is, any plausible reconstruction of my motivation must eventually boil down to fact that I make an exception for myself. But in this case I am not acting, because no reasons cited for my action can depend on who the reasoner is. I therefore have no positive freedom. I merely

exhibit behavior motivated by selfish inclinations. A psychoanalyst might explain my behavior as rooted in insecurity, etc., but from the moral standpoint it is indistinguishable from that of the mosquito that flew in my window, because my choice of behavior cannot be explained through a rational reconstruction of my deliberations.

4 Kantian Justice

Kant's ethical theory provides the foundation for an interesting theory of justice, which has been elaborated most notably by John Rawls [8]. The issue of justice arises if a nineteenth century plantation owner, for example, decides to buy slaves. The reasons for his action are that slaves make economic sense for South Carolina plantations, and furthermore, the slaves he is buying belong to a race that he considers suited for slavery. These reasons seem at first glance to provide a convincing practical explanation of his behavior, as he is not only willing for others in his situation to behave similarly, but he notes that others are in fact doing so, and he is quite satisfied with the state of affairs. Does this mean that Kantian ethics condone slavery?

It does not. If the reasons for action must be equally valid when someone else is in the reasoner's position, then by the same token, they must be equally valid when the reasoner is someone else's position. In particular, the slave owner must hold his reasons to be equally valid if he had just arrived from Africa on a slave ship. He must be willing to say that if he were about to be sold into slavery, he would find the justification for the slave trade equally compelling. If he would not, then his purchase of slaves is not really based on reasons after all, and no convincing practical explanation can be given for his behavior.

In effect this means that the plantation owner must choose the appropriate action without knowing who he is. It is as though he is viewing history from above and does not yet know which role in it he will occupy, and he is asked to choose an appropriate action for a certain plantation owner. He may later learn that he is himself the plantation owner, or that he is standing on the auction block in Charleston, or that he is a clerk in a Norwegian travel agency. This extrahistorical vantage point is what Rawls calls the "original position" from which decisions of policy should be viewed. Rawls derives from this conception what might be called a lexicographic criterion for ranking social policies with respect to justice. It goes something like this. Divide society into strata in some reasonable way, based on wealth, privileges, etc. For each policy rank each stratum on a scale of A to Z with respect to amount of good it receives, and use the rankings for form a word that begins with the lowest stratum; e.g., FGSTI, if there are five strata. Then one policy is preferable to another if the ranking word for the former precedes that for the latter in alphabetical (i.e., lexicographical) order. One might question this particular elaboration of Kantian justice, but the idea of the original position is central.

A particularly sticky type of situation for generalization principles is that in which most people as a matter of fact will not act according to the maxim in question. A soldier on the battlefield might consider the maxim that instructs all troops to lay down their weapons. The soldier is more than willing for the maxim to be universally adopted. But he dare not follow through, because he knows that the enemy will not lay down their weapons, whether they ought to or not. This presents a serious problem for rule utilitarianism, which states that one ought to act according to general policies that result in the greatest good for the greatest number. At least on the face of it, a rule utilitarian would instruct the soldier to lay down his weapons, because world peace is likely to be much more beneficial than war.

Kantian ethics deals with this situation with more subtlety and more plausibility. Suppose that a young recruit finds himself on the battlefield because he answered the call to duty, embroiled in a conflict with murky political motivations, and his life threatened by the enemy. If he uses his weapon to defend himself, his maxim is clearly something like, “if you find your life threatened in a battle whose rationale you don’t really understand, then defend yourself, with your weapon if necessary.” Supposing he is on side A of the conflict, does he endorse this reasoning in the event he is on side B? Of course. If he were on side B, he would have no interest shooting down side A, because he uses the weapon only for self-defense, and so would have no problem with side A’s defending itself. Kantian ethics therefore does not censure his action. If, however, he takes aim at an enemy soldier who poses no threat to himself, the situation is not so clear. If he is willing for the soldier to do the same to him, that is, if he is willing to play in what is in some sense a fair competition, then his action may be reasonable and consistent. Whether it makes sense to endorse a deadly competition, and how competition itself should be analyzed, are interesting issues for Kantian ethics. If the soldier believes that the enemy is likely to kill and injure others in the future, or that the world will be miserable if his side does not win the war, and these are part of the reasons for his attack, then his policy may be just on that ground, because the soldier must be willing to endorse his action if he were in the position of any of these persons as well as in the position of the enemy. The answer is therefore not straightforward and depends on a careful analysis of the situation in all its complexity. But this is the mark of a good ethical theory, because we know that life is complicated, and the rightness of an action sometimes turns on the details.

A serious lacuna in Kantian justice, however, relates to what R. M. Hare [4] calls the problem of the fanatic. The problem is raised, for instance, by a Nazi sympathizer who is so doctrinaire that he would be willing to consign himself to a concentration camp if he learned that he had Jewish ancestry. Alan Gewirth [3] argues that although fanaticism can sometimes be a consistent position, it is not consistent where the most basic conditions of agency are concerned. The Nazi cannot consistently sentence himself to death or to treatment that essentially destroys his humanity, because regardless of his ethnic background the mere fact that he is an agent commits him to willing that he have the minimal requirements of agency. It therefore makes no sense for him to say that he would willingly give them up. This is a subtle point that is discussed further in [5], but whatever its correct resolution, it teaches an important lesson: Kantian ethics imposes only the barest minimum of duty. It rules out only actions whose practical explanation is so incoherent that they cannot even convincingly be interpreted as actions. It may permit serious crimes if the agent is sufficiently fanatical. After all, nothing in the development of Kant’s theory even sup- poses that agents are human beings; it applies equally well to creatures from another planet, or computers that are smart enough to be agents. One should therefore expect only a skeletal theory. As a practical matter, how- ever, people who seek ethical guidance are rarely fanatics, and for them the Kantian point of view can help order their thinking. In an age of relativism and ethical nihilism, even this is welcome relief.

5 Conclusion

It is now possible to understand the alternative formulations of Kant's principle, none of which tell the whole story.

One formulation that Kant did not accept is the famous Golden Rule, which states that one should treat others as he himself would be treated. In several cultures it is a given a negative formulation: don't treat others as you wouldn't want to be treated. Kant viewed this as a crude, inadequate and misleading summary of obligation. He gave the example of a judge who, if she followed the Golden Rule, would never pass sentence on a criminal. The judge's policy should instead be formulated from the point of the view of the original position. What policy is the judge willing to adopt, given the she might be the judge, might be the criminal, might be one of the criminal's future victims, or might live in a society whose quality of life depends in part on the integrity of judges? Whatever the weakness of the Golden Rule, however, it does seem to reflect the inherent inconsistency of immoral behavior, a fact that may help explain its articulation in widely disparate cultures.

Kant said that the only unconditional good is a good will. This follows from the fact that Kantian ethics evaluates behavior from the standpoint of the agent, and in particular whether it can be given a convincing practical explanation. Happiness may or may not be a good thing, depending on circumstances, but if an agent wills happiness or unhappiness, it must be willed according to a maxim the agent is willing to endorse for all agents. One always comes back to the agent's will in order to make ethical judgments.

Kant also says that other agents should be treated as ends in themselves, never as means only. This follows from the idea of the original position. From this vantage point, an agent will never treat another as a mere pawn to carry out his purposes, because he himself may be that pawn. It may be permissible or necessary to "use" others to some extent, but never completely, because the agent must always consider that there but for the grace of God goes he.

Kant's most fundamental formulation, the categorical imperative, is itself imperfect. It commands one to act only according to a maxim that he can simultaneously will to become universal law. Strictly speaking it makes no sense to command one to act in this way when, by Kant's own theory, this the only way one can act; this is what is meant by action. In its highest expression Kant's ethical philosophy views the struggle to act morally as a struggle to act at all. It is a struggle for positive freedom.

A person may refuse to vote simply because he makes an exception for himself. A soldier may say that, sure, if he were on the other side, we would think differently, but that's life. These persons are not struggling to make decisions, as opposed to merely indulging in behavior. As human beings they have the ability to deliberate about their actions, and ground them in reasons, and therefore to be free. They are not doing it. Agency can be difficult. It is not easy to formulate a policy of action that you are willing to adopt, no matter who you might be. But it is the cost of freedom.

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