

Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

6. The Ethics of Kant

Sunday, June 19, 2005

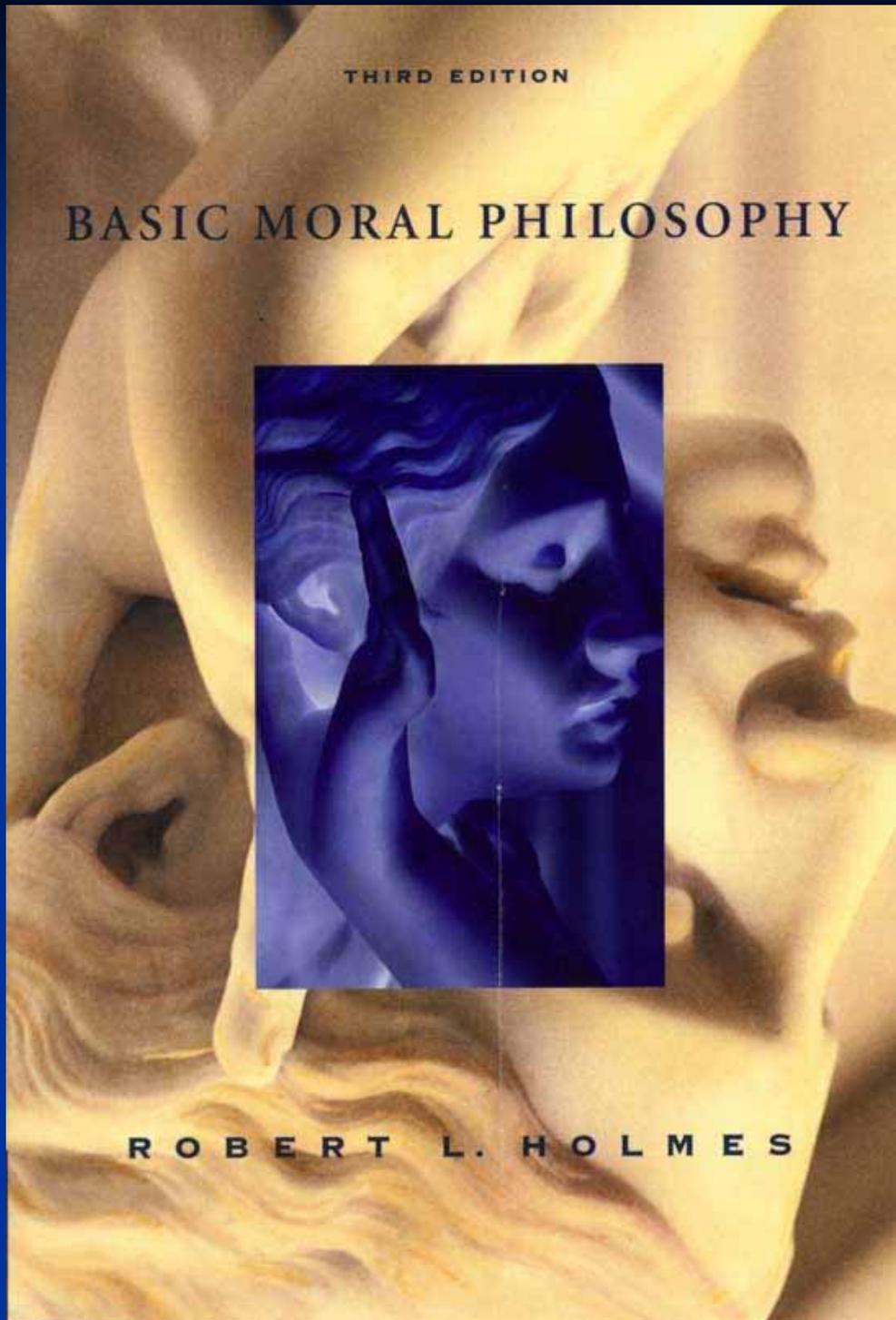
9 to 9:50 am, in the Parlor.

Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

**Almighty Lord and everlasting God,
we beseech you to direct, sanctify and govern
both our hearts and bodies
in the ways of your laws and the works of your
commandments;
that through your most mighty protection, both
here and ever,
we may be preserved in body and soul;
through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.**

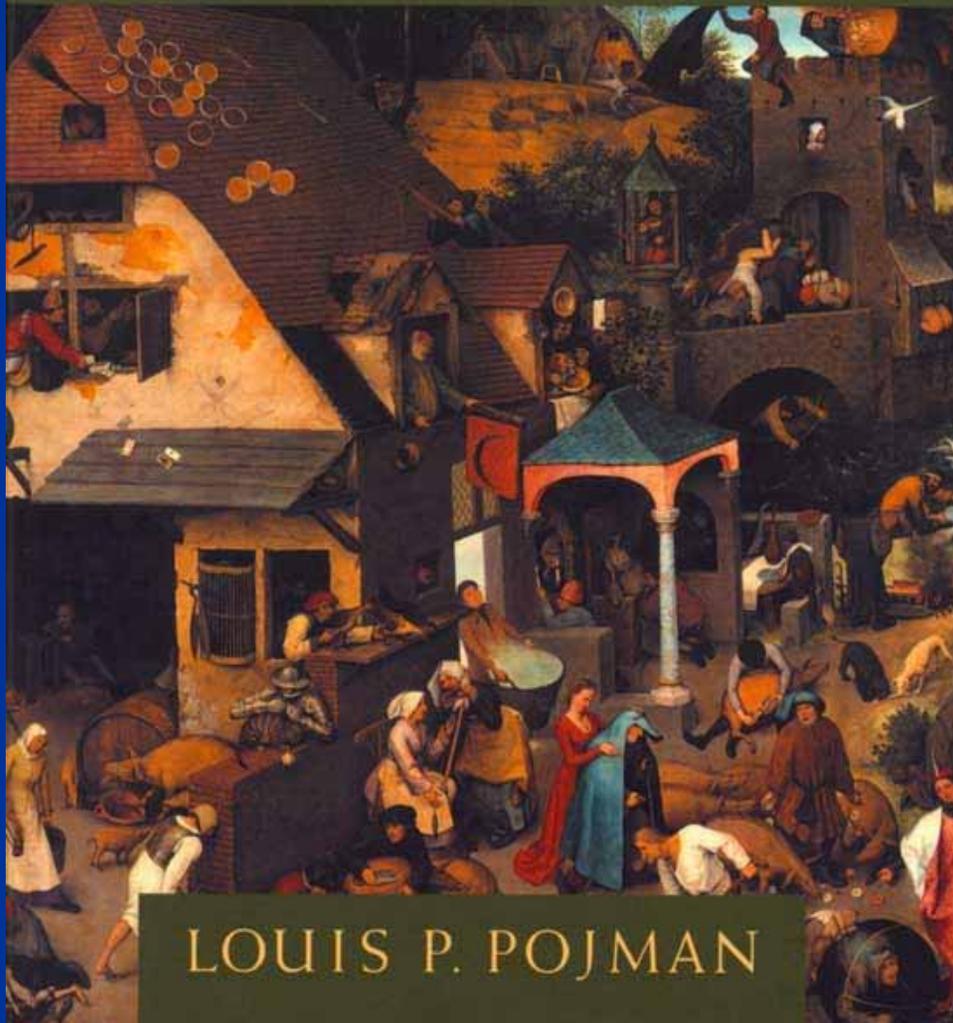
- Common Prayer, p. 412



- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2 (Chapter 8: “Kantianism”)
- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

AN INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS



LOUIS P. POJMAN

- **How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics**, Louis P. Pojman, Wadsworth Publishing, 2005. ISBN: 0-534-55657-4. (Chapter 7 “Deontological Ethics: Intuitionism and Kantian Ethics”)
- Dr. Pojman is professor of philosophy at the United States Military Academy



Philosophy and Religion in the West

(32 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 625

Taught by **Phillip Cary**
Eastern University
Ph.D., Yale University

- **Philosophy and Religion in the West**, Phillip Cary, The Teaching Company (www.teach12.com), 1998. (Lecture 21 “Kant: Morality as the Basis for Religion”)
- Dr. Cary is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Eastern University

Introduction

Introduction

Ethics of Doing vs. Being

- There are two ways of approaching the question of what it means to be **moral** or **ethical** (= *right / good* rather than *wrong / evil*):
 - 1. **Ethics of Doing = Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct.** Asks the question: *What should I do?*
 - 2. **Ethics of Being = Virtue-based Ethics = Aretaic Ethics.** Asks the question: *What should I become?*

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- There are two major divisions in **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct**):
 - 1. **Relativism**: *all* moral principles are **relative**, and will vary from culture to culture (= Conventional Ethical Relativism or Conventionalism) or even from person to person (= Subjective Ethical Relativism or Subjectivism)
 - 2. **Objectivism, Absolutism**: there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place, or time that they live.
 - **Absolutism**: the **universal moral principles** do not conflict with each other. It should (at least theoretically) be possible to find one correct answer to every moral problem.
 - **Objectivism**: some of the **universal moral principles** may override others in some situations.

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- All Christian ethical theories of doing agree there are **universal moral principles** that apply to all people, regardless of the culture, place or time that they live.
- A Christian system of ethics may be:
 - An **Absolutist** system.
 - An **Objectivist** system.

Introduction

Ethics of Doing

- What makes an act *right* or *good*?
- There are two general answers to this question that create the two main divisions in the **Ethics of Doing** (= **Action-based Ethics** = **Ethics of Conduct**):
 - 1. **Teleological Ethics** = **Consequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based on the *outcome* or *consequence* of the act.
 - 2. **Deontological Ethics** = **Nonconsequentialist Ethics**. The morality of an act is based in the *act itself*.
- Most Christian ethics of doing are *primarily* deontological or nonconsequentialist.

Introduction

The Ethics of Kant

- Ethics of Immanuel Kant (today's topic) is:
 - An **Absolutist ethics**. Kant did not believe there was room for conflict between the universal moral principles of his ethics.
 - **Deontological**. The morality (rightness / wrongness) of an act is based in the act itself, and is unrelated to the consequences.

Kant

Immanuel Kant

Biography

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was the greatest philosopher of the German Enlightenment, and perhaps the most important philosopher in history since Plato.
- **April 22, 1724:** born to lower middle-class parents in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)
- Parents were devout pietists (German Lutheran movement that emphasized heartfelt devotion and ethical purity rather than dogma)
- **Age 8:** entered Collegium Fridiricianum (a pietistic Latin School)

Immanuel Kant

Biography

- **1740 (age 16):** entered University of Königsberg. Studied theology, natural science, philosophy.
- **1746 (age 23):** father died and Kant had to interrupt his studies. He worked for 9 years as a private tutor.
- **1755 (age 31):** returned to University of Königsberg (where he was to remain the rest of his career).
- **1756 (age 32):** got his doctoral degree from the University and became a lecturer at the University of Königsberg.

Immanuel Kant

Biography

- **1770 (age 46):** appointed Professor of Logic and Metaphysics.
- Before he retired in **1796 (age 72)**, he had been Dean of the Faculties six times, and Rector of the University twice.
- **1804:** died in Konigsberg age 80.

Immanuel Kant

Major Works

- Published numerous works. Between **1781** and **1797** he completed the series of now classic works that secured his reputation in philosophy.
- Most famous work *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, age 57)
- Important works in ethics and morals:
 - *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785 age 61)
 - *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787 age 63)

The Moral Law

The Moral Law

Natural Law and Moral Law

- *Built into the structure of reality, there are:*
 - **Natural laws** (the laws of physics, chemistry...) that specify what *must* occur.
 - **Moral laws** that specify what *ought* to occur.

The Moral Law

Rational Creatures

- Rational creatures (ourselves, angels and intelligent extraterrestrials, if they exist) may differ in their **inclinations** (what they desire, want, need for happiness), but all have in common:
 - Their rationality, their ability *through reason alone* to discover the **moral law**.
 - The *free will* to choose or not to choose to try to obey the **moral law**.

The Moral Law

The Moral Law and Rational Creatures

- This ability to discover the **moral law**, and to freely choose to try to obey it, gives *dignity* and *infinite worth* to all rational creatures.
- The greatest “achievement” of the universe is to provide a setting for rational creatures to freely choose to try to obey the **moral law**.

The Moral Law

The Holiness of Obeying the Moral Law

- For a rational creature to try to obey the **moral law** is a event that has an intrinsic “holiness” within reality.
- Kant: it “**sparkle[s] like a jewel with its own light, as something that had full worth in itself.**”

Duty and The Good Will

Duty and The Good Will

Being Moral

- What is necessary for a rational creature to be moral?
 - 1. We must *try* to obey the moral law. Whether we *succeed* in performing a given act is often beyond our control. What is important is that we *try*.
 - 2. But not only must we try to do the right act, but we must try it for the *right reason or motive*.

Duty and The Good Will

The Right Reason

- *Example:* if you do not cheat on an exam because you are afraid you will get caught, you have not acted “morally.”
 - You did the right act (did not cheat)
 - But you did *not* act for the right reason or motive.

Duty and The Good Will

The Right Reason: Duty

- The only *morally right* reason or motive is to act “out of **duty**.”
 - To do what is right *because* it is right.
 - To obey the moral law *because* it is the universal moral law built into reality telling us what we *ought* to do, even if every inclination in our being is pulling us in a different direction.
- To act from the motive of **duty** is to have a **Good Will**.

Duty and The Good Will

The Right Reason: Duty

- *Example:* If you are in love, and perform acts of great kindness for your beloved because you are in love, your acts of kindness have *no moral value*.
 - Your acts are not morally bad; they are *morally* neither positive or negative.
 - For your acts to have *moral worth*, you must act with a **good will**, that is, from a motive of **duty**, doing what is right because it is right, because it is the moral law and what you *ought* to do.
 - to act because you are in love, or out of a want or desire, is to act out of your **inclinations**

Duty and The Good Will

The Value of Good Will

- The **Good Will** is unconditionally good in itself.
- Kant: “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except the **Good Will**. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other *talents* of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, as undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature also may become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore constitutes what is called *character* is not good . . .

Duty and The Good Will

The Value of Good Will

- . . . Even if it should happen that, owing to special disfavor of fortune, or the stingy provision of a step motherly nature, this **Good Will** should wholly lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the **Good Will** . . . then, like a jewel, it should still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitfulness can neither add to nor take away anything from this value.”

Duty and The Good Will

The Value of Good Will

- The only unqualified good in reality is a **Good Will**.
- If two soldiers set out on a risky mission with **Good Will** to save some comrades, and one is cut down and dies immediately, and the other succeeds and gets a Medal of Honor, what counts is the **Good Will** of the two soldiers, and both acts shine as jewels in the unseen fabric of reality.

The Categorical Imperative

The Categorical Imperative

How Ought We Act?

- Duties or obligations use a language of commands (The Ten “Commandments”) or imperatives.
- Kant distinguished between two types of commands or imperatives:
 - 1. **Hypothetical Imperatives** or Mean-Ends imperatives.
 - Have the form “If you want A, then do B.”
 - 2. **Categorical Imperatives** or Unconditional / Unqualified Imperatives
 - Have the form “Do B!” No “ifs, ands or buts” about it.
 - Are the form of imperatives for the **moral law**: they are intuitive, immediate, absolute commands that all rational creatures can understand through their reason. This is what you do whether you like it or not.

The Categorical Imperative

How Ought We Act?

- All morality can be rationally derived from a single categorical / unconditional / unqualified command:
“The Categorical Imperative”
 - Actually Kant gave *three* different formulations of this Categorical Imperative, but argued that the three formulations were related and would lead to the same moral judgments on a given action.
- The **Categorical Imperative** encapsulates the way a *fully rational* creature would act.
 - As imperfectly rational creatures, the Categorical Imperative tells us how we *ought* to act.

The Categorical Imperative

1. The Golden Rule Formulation

The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative: (the Golden Rule Formulation or Principle of Universalization):

**Always act according to principles
that you would be willing to
become universal laws**

The Categorical Imperative

1. The Golden Rule Formulation

- Not to act in this way is irrational and inconsistent.

Example:

- You need money, and choose to act under the principle: “I will borrow money and say I will repay it without any intention of doing so.”
- But you would not want this to become a universal way people acted, for then no one would lend money, and your need for money could never be satisfied through a loan.
- The way a fully rational creature would act, and therefore what we as imperfectly rational creatures *ought* to do, is to keep promises, not lie and be deceitful to others.

The Categorical Imperative

1. The Golden Rule Formulation

- To act morally is to recognize the same rules must apply to you as apply to everyone else.
- Implies an underlying respect for others, who as rational creatures:
 - Are autonomous beings, capable of “legislating universal laws” by following this Golden Rule formation of the Categorical Imperative.
 - Are capable of acting out of duty, with a Good Will, and who hence have dignity and infinite worth.

The Categorical Imperative

2. Principle of Humanity

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative (the Principle of Humanity or the Formulation of Respect):

Always act so to treat people, whether yourself or others, as an end, and never as a means only

The Categorical Imperative

2. Principle of Humanity

- Rational creatures have infinite worth, and must be treated as priceless ends in themselves.
- It is immoral to use people or treat them as tools only.
 - They must never be treated as mere instruments to serve the ends of ourselves or others

The Categorical Imperative

2. Principle of Humanity

■ *Example:*

- You need money, and choose to act under the principle: “I will borrow money and say I will repay it without any intention of doing so.”
- To do so, would be for us to:
 - treat the person loaning us money as a *mere means* for our need, by making our deceitful promise to them
 - fail to respect that the person loaning us money is a rational being, by depriving them of the information they need to make a rational decision to loan us money.

The Categorical Imperative

3. “Kingdom of Ends” Formulation

The third formulation of the Categorical Imperative (The “Kingdom of Ends” formulation):

Always act so to promote a “kingdom of ends,” in which every rational being respects each other as ends in themselves

The Categorical Imperative

3. “Kingdom of Ends” Formulation

- This is a “social” formulation of the categorical imperative.
- It is also “idealistic:” our duty is to act so as to move the world towards a “kingdom of ends,” even though we realistically know such a kingdom can never be achieved in this life.

**Is It Possible to
Have a Good Will?**

Is It Possible to Have a Good Will?

- Is it humanly possible to live by the **Categorical Imperative**, to obey the moral law, motivated by duty, by the desire to do right for the sake of doing right?
- Is it, in other words, humanly possible to have a **Good Will**?

Is It Possible to Have a Good Will?

- Kant: it is impossible to recognize or prove.
- For any action, it will always be possible to find an explanation involving our inclinations (our desires, wants, needs...).
 - The soldiers who risk a mission to save their comrades may be motivated by anger, or fear of a commanding officer, rather than duty.
 - We may not even know ourselves well enough to be sure of our own motivations.

Is It Possible to Have a Good Will?

- Nonetheless, as rational beings with free will, we *can* act out of duty (= have a **Good Will**) even when all our inclinations are crying out to do otherwise.
 - Free will gives us the freedom to act despite our inclinations.
- This ability is what gives rational creatures dignity and infinite worth in the creation.

Problems

Problems

Kant's Ethics

- Kant's ethics defines a very narrow scope for moral action.
 - An action is moral only when we act from a motivation of duty, of doing the right thing only for the sake of the doing the right thing.
 - To act out of our inclinations is amoral – even to act out of love is amoral.
- Yet it would seem morality *should* deal with actions motivated by our “inclinations.”
 - For example, the many selfless acts that arise from love surely deserve a place in any theory of morality or ethics.

Problems

Kant's Ethics

- Kant's ethics is the paradigm of moral legalism. The rules that follow from the Categorical Imperative are absolute duties.
- If you hide an escaped Jew "Mr. A" in your house in Nazi Germany, and the police come to your door and ask the straightforward question: "Is Mr. A in your house?" your duty is to answer truthfully.
 - Your duty is to obey the moral law, not to try to predict consequences.
 - To act with a Good Will, duty for duty's sake, is intrinsically holy, a jewel shining in the unseen fabric of reality. To lie would be unholy, would darken the unseen fabric of reality.