

KANT'S EMPIRICAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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1. Kant's "empirical moral philosophy"

Kant's "empirical moral philosophy" is an often-forgotten aspect of his thought, primarily because it does not fit well into the mould of Kantian 'formalist' ethics as fabricated by Kant's critics but also because Kant's view of empirical moral philosophy have been changing and are somewhat puzzling. In short: empirical moral philosophy or anthropology is not empirical social science, but instead Kant's 'applied', or better, in Moses Mendelssohn's words, *Ausübende* (practical, or ethics practiced in real situations), an ethic not unlike what would be called now virtue ethics. It is a description of the ways in which moral sentiments and the faculty of moral judgement may develop in the individual as well as in mankind as a whole. It is, surprisingly, the only 'practical' part of ethics, since the pure normative ethics cannot be applied in individual cases.

This empirical side of ethics is named "doctrine of prudence", "moral anthropology", "practical anthropology", or "pragmatic anthropology". Let me remind that in his early lecture courses, Kant made room, besides "physical geography", for a "moral geography", the former being "knowledge of the world" complementary to the sciences being based not on casual explanation but instead on "observations"; the latter was meant to illustrate "customs and characters of human beings at different places" and was followed by a political, a mercantile, and a theological geography (Kant, 1802: 164). Anthropology in a following phase incorporated moral geography together with psychology (another discipline whose status created serious troubles). Thus anthropology is a side of rational ethics, but also a part of "cosmological knowledge" together with "physical geography" and it discloses us the sources of "all the sciences, morals, technology, social customs, the method for educating and governing human beings, and accordingly of the practical sphere as a whole" (Kant, 1773: 175; cf. Manganaro 1984, ch. 1).

The reader may argue that there is room also for empirical/theoretical social sciences not based on "observations" but instead on causal explanation, and such sciences explain social phenomena as if the were natural phenomena, governed by necessary laws. In fact, "human actions", as far as we see them as phenomena of the freedom of our will, or as empirical facts, are no less subservient to universal laws of nature than any other natural event (Kant, 1784).

Kant's would-be empirical social sciences are neither value-free sciences nor immediately subordinated to ethics, since the twofold teleology of ends (subjective ends and ends pursued by nature through unintended results) allows for a system of "pragmatic" ends, aiming at the subjective end of happiness as individuals are able to represent it to themselves, and to the

objective end of the full development of the mankind's potentialities, which is in turn connected with a moral end, the development of mankind's full moral powers (Kant, 1784, thesis 4). There are law-like connections among those ends, that may be made the subject of study in themselves, like Kepler discovered the thread of natural phenomena, and Newton the hidden cause governing that thread, even if we are still waiting for a Newton of societal laws is still to be waited. Thus, the social sciences are not at once value-loaded sciences, and yet they have an inherent link to the higher moral ends through two parallel kinds of teleology (see Manganaro, 1984, ch. 1).

2. Deception and unintended results

But it is a desirable thing that truths about human being's "final destination" may be apprehended just as "postulates", that is, as something coming after morality, not as something coming before. In fact, had we access to some immediate awareness of the existence of an after-life, our actions would have as free as those of "puppets" and we should be grateful to God's wisdom for "what was left hidden to our eyes as much as for what was revealed" (Kant, 1788, I.II.2). Thus, limits to knowledge and deception are not only tools by which self-love in drag manipulates human beings, but instead a fundamental condition of human action, civilisation, and finally a pre-condition of the process of moralisation. Kant had learned from the sceptics and the Jansenists that transparency of consciousness is a delusion, that behind actions conforming to duty we may detect disguised self-love ore "the dear I" (Kant, 1785, 27), for "the depth of man's heart is inscrutable" (Kant, 1787: 447). We cannot judge the actions we have done; we can just establish maxims for our prospective action. Virtue has to fight, not so much against our inclinations, as the Stoics used to believe, but instead against an invisible enemy, the perversity of human heart that "through principles corrupting the soul, in a concealed way undermines its very intention" (Kant, 1799: 68). Deception plays a basic role in the history of mankind, in so far as it allows for a hidden twofold teleology of human action; in fact, men, while following the dictates of self-love, pursue such delusory ends as welfare, wealth and power, in a word happiness, and employ and improve reason, in its theoretical and technical aspects as a means for attaining those ends. But they are systematically mistaken about the results they actually contribute in bringing about, first because happiness is a self-contradictory goal, secondly because individual human life is too short for men to enjoy the results of their efforts, thirdly because the unintended result of each individual's anti-social drives is a system of rights and regulations. The result is a growth of enlightenment, learning, education, and freedom, and this prepares the condition for full development of the moral abilities men are endowed with. Deception is also an unavoidable requirement for the growth of virtue: civilization carries politeness, and this is the custom of feigning feelings of benevolence and respect for each other that have no true sincere intention behind them. This does not amount to deceiving each other, since everybody knows that sincerity is never at home in the life of the

world, and politeness and civility provide at least a coat for instincts, a coat that may protect a room where the growth of true virtue may take place (Kant 1798: 151).

3. From civilisation to moralisation

The well-known Kantian passage on “misology” in the *Groundwork* (Kant, 1785: sect. I) where he states that reason is useless as a tool for obtaining happiness, and accordingly Nature should have endowed man with reason for some other purpose, starts making fuller sense when located within the framework of Kant writings on philosophy of history, where he contrasts civilization with moralization as two different phases in the growth of humankind. In this context, the growth of commerce and manufactures plays a distinctive role, namely that of means of fostering civilization, even if all human efforts in this direction are prompted by the image of a deceptive goal, namely happiness.

Because of opacity of consciousness, Kant believes that “judgment” (a nearly Aristotelian category which he believes to have the last word on the quality of individual human actions, all the mythology about the abstractness of Kantian ethics notwithstanding) is almost impossible about actions, both by ourselves and others, since real intentions never can be established. Reflective judgment, of the kind he depicts in the *Critique of Judgment*, is quite practicable, instead, as regards the process of moral development. We may look at the history of mankind as *if* it were a process of moral development not unlike the development of an individual, and the good reason we have for believing that the agenda of human history is *in fact* a path to moralization is a moral necessity of believing in the possibility that morality may come fully into reality.

Nature prompts men to undertake every kind of effort to have more comfort, wealth, safety, in a word happiness. Most of the time, the individual will not enjoy the results of his efforts but will leave them to his offspring. Self-love and unsociability brings people into mutual interaction, through war and conquest, and gradually through less offensive means, such as commerce. Commerce brings different peoples into mutual relationship and thus paves the way to a cosmopolitan society. The growth of the arts and sciences supplies preconditions for the growth of learned institutions, a free press, and a public opinion that are the basis on which reason may start being used in its critical abilities. This, that is Enlightenment, is a preliminary step to moralization, that is the jump of individuals from a state of minority to a state where they are masters of themselves (See Kant, 1784).

4. The role of Judgment, perfect duties, and the conflict among duties

Thus, what “empirical” moral philosophy may afford is teaching us the ways of moral education. This is not very much and is not, first, normative ethics; but this is all that philosophy is able to

afford. "Pure" moral philosophy is ladder we should throw away after climbing up the wall. And Kant's wall is made of mistaken and corrupting moral doctrines that hinder our sight from seeing obvious moral truths.

Thus the last word is for judgment, a faculty that does not need theory to be carried out in practice, but that needs theory only as a forerunner, and theory is useless in practical cases, since the gap between principles and cases would never be filled by intermediate principles, unless we are to proceed up to infinity (See Kant 1773: 275). Every plain man knows that lying may not be acceptable on any ground (Kant 1777). But every plain man already knows, in a non-inferential way, that is through judgement, that, say, informing an Italian policeman in 1943 of the whereabouts of a Jew had little to do with "telling the truth", since the salient moral quality at the given time and place, was defending an innocent against criminals.

To sum up: Kant took from Moses Mendelssohn, without paying due acknowledgment, one of his basic ideas, namely a distinction between geometry of morals and a practical ethic. He paid a somewhat heavy price for that, since, by a kind of nemesis, he was drastically misunderstood by his followers precisely on this point; he had learned the lesson of the sceptics and Jansenists, that men are prompted to act by deceptive ends, and he was aware that human actions are also empirical phenomena, where laws like the laws of Nature may be detected. His practical ethics made room for judgment as a holistic procedure for assessing the saliency of relevant moral qualities of one situation; this procedure yields the same results as the geometry of morals does for abstract cases, but does so immediately and without balancing conflicting duties with each other, since what makes for the salient quality of a situation is perceived from the very beginning. Kantian ethics on principle has an answer to the classical objections raised by consequentialists against so-called deontological ethics.

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