

Kant, the Virtue Ethicist

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The one debate that reigns king amongst moral philosophers is the question of the moral rightness and superiority of deontological versus utilitarian thinking. Some brave moral theorists have seen it apt introduce virtue ethics into this debate, much to the dismay of seemingly anyone who does not consider themselves a virtue ethicist. While I understand the frustration with what can easily be read as an unnecessary detour in the debate about the most effective and consistent moral theory, I contend that rather than virtue ethics being an opponent to deontologists, an approach rooted in virtue can address many of the traditional pitfalls associated with deontological thought. Furthermore, through consideration of Immanuel Kant's *The Doctrine of Virtue*, it seems to be the case that Kant himself, the patron saint of deontological thought, was similarly interested in addressing and rooting much of his ethical theory in virtue, meaning it would not be a laughable claim that he himself could be considered what we now call a virtue ethicist. Rather, it could be argued, many of the problems associated with deontology today are a result of the lost memory of the influence of virtue. After establishing this argument, I will consider objections that this approach is both potentially ahistorical to Kant's theories and their influence as well as unfaithful to them, much in the spirit of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as well as Marcia Baron. Concluding, it seems more ahistorical to ignore the influence of virtue on Enlightenment era philosopher, regardless of if it was an identifiable school of thought at the time. It is my position that to deny the role of virtue in Kantian morality, in favor of the descriptor of deontology, is to narrowly define and constrain his ethics potentially leaving them uninteresting or un compelling to modern readers not exclusively motivated by an interest in the figure of Kant himself and rather, it can be argued that in his ethics, Kant develops a unique system of virtue ethics.

Before we dive head first into Kantian ethics, I feel it is necessary to define and understand what I am referring to as virtue ethics throughout this paper. Much of my personal education about virtue ethics is tied to Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" and similarly, I think it appropriate for that work to serve as a touchstone for what I am referring to when I refer to virtue ethics. Now, while I view this work as a touchstone, I am not arguing that Aristotle provides a comprehensive view of what virtue ethics are, especially considering that if it weren't for the work of feminist philosophers in the early twentieth century, we may not even refer to Aristotle as a "virtue ethicist." Rather, I think he provides historical grounding for the moral principle that one's primary motivation ought to be becoming a virtuous person, which I will define as the most basic tenant of a theory of virtue ethics or as Robert Louden explains "For virtue theorists, the primary object of moral evaluation is not the intentional act or its consequences, but the agent." (Louden 1968) and furthermore, "In virtue ethics the preferred motivation factor is not duty or utility but the virtues themselves." This prioritization of virtue over duty as an essential element of virtue ethics will jump out to any Kant scholar as an immediate indication that he is not a virtue ethicist, and we will return to this concern, but first we must establish another element of Aristotelian virtue ethics. In my opinion, one of the most strikingly similar elements of Kant's and Aristotle's ethics is the notion of "happiness as the supreme good" to be achieved as "an activity of the soul in accordance with complete or perfect virtue." (Aristotle and Welldon 1902) Though Kant and Aristotle are in disagreement about the way one goes about acting in accordance with perfect virtue (Kant viewing it as the subordination of certain human predispositions to the moral law through reason and Aristotle viewing it as the result of habituation of virtue), they are like minded in their picture of a virtuous person. Moreover, where Kant describes a moral agent as being apathetic to any other option outside of the moral law,

Aristotle similarly views a moral agent as being so thoroughly habituated to acting morally, that the unvirtuous option isn't even taken into consideration.

Now that we've begun meddling Aristotelean and Kantian thought, I think it is about time for us to turn more precisely to what Kant's account of virtue was. As Kant's writing is notoriously dense and easy to misinterpret, I will be grounding my summary of the *Doctrine of Virtue* in Mark Timmons's "Kant's Doctrine of Virtue." Timmons establishes Kant's motivation in writing this doctrine as being "that branch of moral philosophy whose primary aim is to derive a system of principles of duty from the supreme principle of morality, the categorical imperative." (Timmons 83) Kant is establishing that in order to act within accordance with reason and morality they must establish a clear picture of virtue and vice. He then contends "Duties of virtue... are not subject to coercion from others. Rather, the only motive or incentive possible for ethics is the "pure" (non-empirical) motive of duty, compliance with which requires self-constraint ("inner freedom") and excludes external constraint via coercion from others." (Timmons 85) Meaning virtue is a self-contained duty not motivated by external influences and reflective of one's own sense of morality. Additionally, he moves on the question of the distinction between a duty and an end, arguing "in ethics the concept of duty will have to lead to ends and ground maxims with regard to ends we ought to set for ourselves, according to moral principles" (DV 6:382)" and working to "show "that and why a duty of this kind goes by the name of a duty of virtue" (DV 6:383). (Timmons 89) This wrinkle in Kant's own understanding of what duty means begins to reveal to us that these distinctions between virtue, duty and ends may not be as rigid as many moral philosophers like to treat them. Kant was undeniably tied to reason and duty as being tools and motivators but is in no way divorced from virtue as also a motivator and end in itself. Ultimately it seems a rational person would be motivated by the

“highest good” and use rationality to achieve said good, with the predictable end of fulfilling the duty of virtue.

One of my own primary motivations in arguing that Kant can be read as both a virtue ethicist and deontologist, is that I view deontology itself as a school of moral thought in real danger of falling out of popular favor as it seems on a day-to-day basis most Americans generally seem to be either harsh utilitarians or in some part of the process of developing a deep sense of cynicism or nihilism. This may not have been on Kant’s mind while he was alive, but we know he is no stranger to decrying philosophical emergencies and I think Kantian philosophers should be more concerned with addressing why his moral philosophies grate on so many students as intuitively unsatisfactory. In his essay “The problem we all have with deontology”, Michael Slote articulates why I think so many people find deontological moral reasoning unappealing. For one he contends that often maxims of the categorical imperative often “end up justifying too much or too little” (Slote 2011) consider common scenarios presented as challenges to the CI such as a murderer asks you where someone is hiding. Most would agree that telling the murderer where said person was hiding would be a case of the CI either justifying too much (telling the truth) or too little (a disinterest in the life of that person). From this Slote contends that there seems to be little stopping a Kantian deontologist from willing any morally dubious action as a universal maxim for someone put into a similar situation and moves on to problematize the Formula for Humanity and the “idea of inviolability” as an avenue of avoiding these concerns. He maintains his original position that “deontology involves saying that it can sometimes be morally right or obligatory not to act for the best” and “that there are certain kinds of acts one (morally) ought to avoid performing just because of the kind acts they are” (Slote 2011) but does not seem to provide a clear explanation of why.

And it is this question of why that brings me to my suggestion of considering Kant as not only a deontologist, but also a virtue ethicist. One of the most cursory pieces of my argument would be that Kant himself directly looked to the influence of Greek theorists, like Aristotle, in his writing as on page one of the “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” he begins with an assessment of the divisions of ancient Greek philosophy. This may seem minute, but considering that virtue ethics is a relatively new way of discussing what was a predominant Greek moral theory, it is worth noting that Kant was influenced by these thinkers as well and it may be worth reevaluating how his ethics related to those ideas. For one, as I’ve already denoted, there is a clear similarity in Kant’s conception of the highest good and Aristotle’s idea of the supreme good. They also both view the moral agent as being unconsciously loyal to the moral good and being motivated by external factors. Now there are also some significant divides in these two systems of ethics, however from here I will argue that regardless of these differences, Kant meets the most fundamental standard of being considered a virtue ethicist, which is primarily being concerned with answering the question, what does a virtuous person look like? As Robert Louden explores in his article “Kant’s Virtue Ethics”, “The virtuous agent is one who consistently ‘follows the rules’ out of respect for the idea of rationally legislated law. But ‘the rules’, while they do serve as action-guides, are intended most fundamentally as life-guides.” (Louden 1968), a perspective that importantly presents the notion that reason could be treated as a virtue in this system and a moral person would practice this value in developing ‘life-guides’ or duties. This feels compatible with traditional notions of virtue ethics that treat things such as intelligence and cleverness as virtue. Though not identical to these virtues, I would contend Kant has simply developed a unique and influential account of reason that many have adopted into their understanding of virtue. This assessment is similarly echoed by Louden as well as he

explains “The duty which Kant asserts all agents have to promote their own perfection includes as its most important component the obligation to cultivate one's will 'to the purest attitude of virtue” and even more paramount “the duty to develop one's moral character is the linchpin of Kant's entire system of duties.” (Louden 1968) It seems that by developing an understanding of the duty of virtue as a necessary end in achieving the highest good as being the root of Kantian ethics, we can begin moving away from prescriptions of specific maxims as a necessary feature of Kantian agents, but rather an attempt as reasonably developing an understanding of further duties. This shift from considering Kant’s ethics as being duty oriented, to agent oriented allows for a significantly more nuance in this picture of a Kantian agent. This resolves some qualms with deontological thought, as focusing on the status of the agent as virtuous rather than on certain duties or maxims. Furthermore, this added dimension of understanding, leaves room for more ambiguity and awareness that every individual person’s theory of ethics will be as unique and expansive as the number of virtues and the ways about which to achieve those virtues that philosophers could ever list off.

Though I feel this approach makes Kantian ethics more nuanced and adaptable to doubts of the appropriateness of certain duties, there are some who feel this approach instead leaves Kantian and virtue ethics meaningless and distorted. One vocal proponent of this perspective is Marcia Baron, who has returned to the question multiple times and seems to only grow stronger in her conviction that they are not compatible as she does so. Some of the more introductory objections she raises are the vagueness of virtue ethics and how seemingly unnecessary this project would be. I feel I have thoroughly defined a concept of virtue ethics as well as a clear reason for undertaking this project, so those objections will not be the focus of my consideration. Instead, I turn to her concerns that for one “it seems clear that it is indeed possible to have a

Kantian conception of the moral point of view without a conception of relevant virtues” two, attempting to shape Kantian ethics into a virtue ethics “is an unnecessarily combative reaction, one that would quite justifiably arouse suspicions that we are simply being territorial” and finally, the claim she makes that “I am not eager to argue that Kant’s ethics can count as a species of virtue ethics reflects a view about the history of ethics.” (Baron 2011) These final two concerns seem to have a similar undertone of concern about meta conversations within philosophy and generally tie together. The concern, as I understand it, is that Kant was a leader in the Enlightenment due to the emphasis he placed on reason. This is consistent within his ethics and to ignore that and call him a virtue ethicist would contradict much of his extended philosophies and work beyond the “Doctrine of Virtue” and furthermore be potentially ahistorical in the context of Kant’s influence and treatment as a deontologist (al a “The Dialectic of Enlightenment”). I mention “The Dialectic of the Enlightenment” here to reinforce Baron’s argument and develop the context that historical influence of a philosopher is not only significant for history’s sake but also in understanding the way these ideas have interacted with and influenced the world and what that could potentially tell us about those ideas and the world.

So, as I see it, we have two main objections to the question of treating Kant as a “species of virtue ethics.” One, it is ahistorical and insulting to virtue ethicists and two, that is possible to develop a picture of Kant’s ethics without developing this approach related to virtue ethics. In regards to the first objection, though Adorno, Baron and Horkheimer as well as anyone concerned with the material conditions of human beings, make compelling arguments about the important context of the historical and societal impact of philosophy, if we zoom out even further, it seems to even more so be the case that at their core every thinker is part of a constant eb and flow created by the same gravitational pull to answer extraordinarily familiar questions

about morality, like ‘what does it mean to live a good life?’ or ‘be a good person?.’ Taking into account the trajectory humans have taken to answer these questions will of course always be important for us to remember and take into account, but it does not mean that we should limit our thinking to be consistent with the ideas of the past.

Moving on to the second objection about this coming across as territorial and hostile to unnecessarily distort Kantian ethics into virtue ethics. I would first contend that this is an extraordinarily ‘inside of baseball’ perspective that does not serve the general populous outside of professional Kantian and virtue scholars. Secondly, though Baron may view it as unnecessary, I content it is urgently required if Kant wants to remain in favor as a moral theorist. Furthermore, it does seem that his work is inclined to the this. As Loudon explains

Kant's notion of action aus Pflicht means in the most fundamental sense not that one performs a specific act for the sake of a specific rule which prescribes it (and likewise for other specific acts one performs) but rather that one strives for a way of life in which all of one's acts are a manifestation of a character which is in harmony with moral law.

Action aus Pflicht is action motivated by virtue, albeit virtue in Kant's sternly rationalist sense (Louden 1968)

Rather, than continuing to draw the battlelines between deontologists and virtue ethicists deeper and deeper, I maintain it is more fruitful an endeavor to explore their intersections and what that tells us about virtue and as the above quote from Loudon supports, it seems Kantian ethics are prime for the effort.

Ultimately, the I remain unsure if this picture of Kantian ethics is enough to sway me into considering myself a Kantian agent with the intensity of Maria von Herbert, but I do think this

picture begins to illuminate a view of Kantian ethics not so rigidly tied to reason, duty, apathy and unmovable maxims. While I concede that this view may be inconsistent with historical attitudes and reading of Kant, I am of the opinion that it may be necessary for the survival of Kantian ethics as more than a relict of historical thought. As is the case with any great work that moves with humans through centuries, in order to remain of service to new generations that will find itself being reimagined and reinterpreted in ways wildly beyond what the original author may have even considered. However, I do not think it is accurate to say Kant didn't so much as consider virtue as a key tenant of his ethics. Instead, I think it may be wise for modern thinkers to place virtue into a more prominent position in his work. It is important to remember as Kant himself wrote "among the moral attributes true virtue alone is sublime." (Louden 1968)

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