Kant: Critique of Practical Reason

There are few if any good summaries of this neglected work on the internet, or even in publication generally.

The one given here is more extensive than most, and points out the wisdom and erudition of Kants thinking about freedom of the will. It also paves the way for another article already on this website on Kant’s view of the world in general. (See https://www.academia.edu/10765809/Kants\_View\_of\_the\_World)

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A Summary

Preface

The first critique, the Critique of Pure Reason was concerned with judgements of fact in the phenomenal (or physical) world. Within that, Kant distinguishes theoretical reason, which is concerned with determining the conception of objects. Practical reason, the subject of the present Critique, is concerned with reality, and being under obligation; in short, with the determination of the will.

Some working definitions of Kant’s terminology are:

• Transcendental reason: The quest for a priori concepts of reason i.e. concepts which cannot reasonably be denied or negated (e.g. space, number, causality)

• Theoretical reason: determination of objects and their conception;

• Pure Reason: a system of a priori concepts of perception;

• Practical reason: determination of the will;

• Pure practical reason: a priori concepts for the determination of the will;

• Speculative reason: solving of problems on the way to developing transcendental reason.

Kant says that he is going to show that pure, practical reason exists. On the way he will be criticising desire based systems which are common in philosophy and which are in general referred to as practical reason. He also proposes to show that there are concepts within pure practical reason not available to pure reason alone; specifically, freedom, God, and immortality. Freedom will be shown to be a condition of the moral law; God and immortality follow as corollaries.

The existence of God and immortality will be shown not to be provable by practical reason any more than they were by pure reason. But Kant regards them as mental concepts made possible by practical reason largely because he sees them as necessary for the completion of a complete moral system. [In the later Critique of Judgement, he also sees them as necessary for the completion of an aesthetic system.] Kant realises that this stance is at odds with the one he took in Critique of Pure Reason where he showed that these concepts could not be proved in the phenomenal world. We do not see, through the interpretation of our senses or through reason based upon them (i.e. through science) any reason to assume God or immortality. But, Kant insists, they are practically useful concepts i.e. they help to determine the will.

He will show that man has two universes – the being in himself, or noumenal world, where freedom of the will and consciousness exist, and the physical phenomenal world outside with its concepts of space, number, time and causality. He defends this stance [effectively against accusations of Cartesian dualism] by saying that we live for the most part in the phenomenal world and we get only glimpses of the noumenal world – it can never be fully understood.

Kant’s strategy in this book will be to start from his previous Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. He admits that he will write at a level of high abstraction, and attempts to head off some of his critics, who have apparently accused him of lack of originality.

He ends the section by defending his method, a system of reason which he calls transcendental and based on a quest for a priori concepts and not what one can learn from custom, restricted experience or popular assent.

He criticises Hume, who treated the concept of causality as one of custom – this is too empirical for Kant. Hume, he notes, did not extend his empiricism to mathematics.

Introduction

This is a short sketch of the layout of the book. It is modelled on the Critique of Pure Reason:

Analytic: analysis of the problem;

Dialectic: discussion of the contradictions arising;

Doctrine of Method: a discussion of the question of moral education.

Book 1 Analytic

Of the Principles of Pure Practical Reason

Kant considers propositions relating to practical reason i.e. the determination of the will. They may be subjective maxims which are one’s own speculations about one’s own will, or objective laws, also called imperatives which are valid for every rational being. An imperative in practical reason differs from a physical law in pure reason in that nature always follows the latter. Man does not always follow imperatives of the will, including moral imperatives. So a moral imperative is an ‘ought’ statement; a physical law is a ‘shall’ statement.

He proceeds by way of four Theorems with discussions attached:

Theorem I

“All practical principles which presuppose an object of desire are empirical and can furnish no practical laws.”

Desire, according to Kant, is not an adequate basis for practical reason as one can never be sure that the outcome of desires will be fulfilled.

Theorem II

“All material practical principles are of self-love or private happiness.”

Principles for practical behaviour based on our own desires are motivated by what we ourselves want. He writes at some length about the shortcomings of the ‘promoting happiness’ principle – it is personal, short term, outcomes are unpredictable, what you want may not be what others want. Epicurus said that virtue determines the will only be means of the pleasure it promises. Kant admits that Epicurus was speaking about intellectual and not coarse pleasures, but his criticisms still apply. Kant is looking for something more a priori (i.e. so basic to everyone’s reasoning that to contradict the principle would be nonsense). He repeats this argument in different words several times.

Theorem III

“A rational being cannot regard his maxim (i.e. subjective view) as a universal law unless he conceives it not in its matter but in its form only.”

This is a more subtle point. Since we are denied empirical evidence in the practical laws which determine the will, we need a law which manifests itself in form only; otherwise we impose our own desires on it. Put another way, if we see a moral act as one which, say, promotes happiness or some other objective end-point, it all depends on how we go about it and what we judge as happiness or other suitable endpoint for ourselves or the other rational beings concerned. This judgement is likely to depend on, and be made inaccurate by, our own views and desires, which are in turn based on our experiences, beliefs, personality and so on. (Think of people’s differing political views on what is good for other people). Kant wants a law which avoids these personal inputs by the actor. The morality of individual acts must therefore be defined by an imperative or non-physical law which avoids that dilemma. It must not be personal (conceived not in its matter) but impersonal (conceived only in its form).

It is here that Kant first signals in the Critique of Practical Reason the form of the law of morality he has in mind. He refers to the question ‘what if everybody did that?’ which one might put to an actor. He asks whether an action would be practicable and in particular if it would lead to other rational individuals being able to operate on a basis of free will. Since a moral law can only exist in form, it is not empirical but theoretical, and can only dependent on mental reasoning. Freedom of the will leads to choice by the actor and thence to sociable practical action. The latter is devoid of self –love but is dependent on reason. He goes on to give an example of a man’s feeling of guilt if ordered to bear false witness against an honourable man by a superior. The feeling of guilt is such that he may be willing to undergo punishment rather than act immorally against the man. If, on the other hand, the same individual were prevented on pain of punishment from fulfilling his lustful desires, he might well desist, albeit unwillingly. Kant seems to be saying here that our sense of breakdown of order if we do a wrong thing is, or can be, acute, and stronger than our desire for happiness.

Kant eventually comes out with his previous proposal for a law of morality that is theCategorical Imperative that he has already discussed at length in the Groundwork:

“Act so that the maxim of thy will can always hold good as a principle of universal legislation.”

He goes on to show that the Categorical Imperative is synthetic. The Categorical Imperative is uniquely fitted by definition to confer universal advantage so that to negate it would be nonsense. It also applies to various acts A which predicate outcomes B, while A is not necessarily implied by B, so it is synthetic. So, he says, like concepts of space, number and causality in the phenomenal world its veracity cannot be denied. It is not based on any proposition other than logic, so it fulfils the condition that it is entirely theoretical.

Finally on the subject of Theorem III, Kant considers how difficult it is to stick to the Categorical Imperative in practice. Whereas in the phenomenal world objects obey the synthetic a priori laws of physics, in the moral world, where we are in an ‘ought’ situation, mere mortals (who are not rational beings all the time) need something else to help them obey the law. This is duty.

So, as we have seen, if freedom of the will is to lead to choice by the actor and thence to sociable practical action, and then this choice is assisted by duty. So, sociable practical (i.e. moral) action is an equilibrium (or balance) between exerting free will on the one side, and doing ones duty on the other.

Theorem IV

“The autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of all duties which conform to them; on the other hand heteronomy of the elective will cannot be the basis of any obligation.”

Autonomy, acting on the basis of a Categorical Imperative, is uniquely fitted for moral judgements. Heteronomy, which in the Groundwork he also calls acting on the basis of a hypothetical imperative either of skill or prudence, is insufficient as a moral law – though presumably it may provide guidance as to what will work and what would be propitious. The moral law must be Categorical, and not empirical. Only that way will it apply to all situations. (He has already covered much of this ground in his discussion of Theorem III.) Doing what you like, says Kant, is negative freedom; doing something from duty is positive freedom. Duty is self-legislation.

He repeats several times the argument that there are insurmountable difficulties in aiming at happiness as a goal of morality. He is particularly scathing about those philosophers (mainly Epicureans) who take personal happiness (“self love”) as their goal. But even if universal happiness were made the object, this is not enough. The “variety of judgement” he says, “must be endless…the maxim of self-love (prudence) only advises; the law of morality commands”. To lose at play would make a person unhappy; to win but cheat at play would make the same person, if he had a good will, not only unhappy but also guilty as he would not have done his duty.

Briefly, Kant considers the role of punishment, mostly in relation to happiness as a goal. Punishment leads to unhappiness and it could be said that the person has drawn the unhappiness on himself rather than the happiness he sought, and that therein lays his punishment. Kant pours scorn on such reasoning, which he seems to see as the logical consequence of taking happiness as a goal. Seeing the pain of punishment as part of some equation to reduce the final happiness sought by an action is nonsense. A person must have sufficient good will that he knows what his duty is, from which follows a conscience which can tell the person from reason what his duty is. The role of punishment must be to remind him of that not merely to reduce his net happiness.

Finally on Theorem IV, he looks at proposals on morality by other philosophical moralists. None of their analyses stand up to the rigorous transcendental reasoning of Kant. He sets out a table summarising their work divided into subjective and objective definitions of morality (The subjective comprises Montaigne, who favoured a Civil approach using education; Epicurus who looked to physical and moral feeling as a guide; and Hutcheson and Mandeville who looked to the constitution. The objective comprises Wolf and the Stoics who looked to the achievement of perfection and Crusius and theological moralists who looked to the will of God).

1. I. Of the Deduction of the Fundamental Principles of Pure Practical Reason

Kant summarises the fundamental principles of pure reason from his first Critique. He raises the concept of the noumenon, and hints that the moral law can give us a glimpse of the noumenal world. He splits the world into the part based on the senses, amenable to the pure theoretical reason of the first critique, and that of the moral, his present subject. He equates these with the phenomenal and noumenal worlds respectively. His reasons for doing this are not immediately clear, and at first suggest mission creep. However, he expands the theme as he goes along. [If we equate the sensible world with essentialist philosophy, and the noumenal world with the existential philosophy, we can start to see that Kant had a point here, although this may not be quite what he had in mind.]

He starts also, as in the Groundwork, to develop corollaries to the original statement of the Categorical Imperative For example, the Categorical Imperative can also mean that a universalised moral action can also become a law of nature. Kant had great respect for the laws of nature, as he had for their investigators such as Newton and Copernicus, and his aim is to provide moral law whose contravention is if not impossible at least unmistakeably wrong.

He continues to develop this theme:

• pure reason has objects, practical reason has ideas;

• pure reason has causality, practical reason has freedom;

• pure reason has senses, practical reason has desires of the will.

Laws of pure reason are laws of physics and happen naturally but laws of practical reason are formal and happen because we see them as duty. It follows that a law of practical reason can be disobeyed in practice, but with the result that the world would cease in some way to work properly, especially if it was universalised. In the phenomenal world we are concerned with sense perception, but in the noumenal world we are concerned with what we can have.

He admits that pure, practical reason (i.e. pure reason aimed at the workings of the will) has principles that are more difficult to establish than those for pure reason itself. He says that the moral law has no empirical or a posteriori proof. “ The moral law is in fact a law of the causality of free agents and therefore of the possibility of a super-sensible system of nature” i.e. a system of nature not dependent on physical laws. The moral law is a principle of the deduction of freedom. It is not limited to involvement with the sensible world only as are the laws of pure reason. So he considers that he has introduced a principle of causality of sorts into practical reason – freedom has to be directed at the moral law via reason and vice versa.

“But as to the notion which [reason] for its own causality as noumenon, need not determine [that notion] theoretically with a view to the cognition of its super-sensible existence, so as to give it significance in this way. For it acquires significance apart from this, though only for practical use, through the moral law.”

In short, Kant thinks that he has discovered things of at least practical moral significance without the introduction of concepts from the sensible world, and so he must have glimpsed, at least in outline, something of a super-sensible (though certainly not super-natural) world.

Of the Right that Pure Reason in its Practical Use has to an Extension which is not Possible in its Speculative Use

Kant makes the astounding proposal that practical reason is not limited to the phenomenal world. So what are its limits?

He considers Hume’s claim that for any connection between events A and B, experience is the only thing that enables us to know if such a connection exists, not that it necessarily exists. Such an a priori claim, according to Hume, depends ultimately on experience. So much for physics; Hume thought that maths was, however, analytical, and did not depend on experience.

Kant claims to have disproved Hume’s empirical scepticism but only at the expense of saying that all such events as A and B being causally connected are merely sensible phenomena obeying rules of physics the contravention of which would prevent the world as we know it from working. (N.B. Kant sets out his disagreement with and also his admiration for Hume’s work in this area in a very clear narrative is this section. There is a particularly interesting passage which eerily predicts the possibility of post-modernism if Hume’s extreme scepticism is taken too for: “Whether such a terrible overthrow of the chief branches of knowledge, common reason will escape better, and will not rather become irrecoverably in this destruction of all knowledge, so that from the principles a universal scepticism should follow (affecting, indeed, only the learned), this I will lead everyone to judge for himself.”)

But then what about practical reason? Kant says “the objective reality of the concept of causality remains, as it can be used, even of noumena, but without our being able in the least to define the concept theoretically”. In practical reason, we must consider desire or will, and the use of laws to reason practically. If I reason practically in order to fulfil my will, I use a form of causality since the concepts are linked (so I believe) logically (if this, then that etc.) in a free way in my imagination.

In spite of Hume’s scepticism of the reality of causality except as a product of experience even in physics, Kant says he will adopt causality cautiously to develop a theory of the determining of the will looking at practical necessities.

Of the Concept of an Objective of Pure Practical Reason

While one can in principle will all sorts of objectives, if the moral law is invoked all of them will be either good or evil; the former to be desired, the latter shunned.

How do we know if an objective is good? If it provides pleasure? If it is useful? But both of theses objectives have to be evaluated by the subject making their choice; they are personal. This is true even if we take a long view, and put up with harm or pain in the interests of later happiness. It is the action itself that is good or evil, not the outcome. We may adopt the maxim “Do no harm” [as have Google!]. But this is only what Kant calls a rational practical precept. We desire not good, but welfare.

The concept of good or evil must, according to Kant, be determined after the moral law, as a result of applying it, and not before it has been applied. So Kant does not start by trying to define good and evil, but from a law without any specific perceived object; a statement of principle. He proceeds again to rail against heteronomy and the empiricists who apply it.

He contrast the Categories he set out in the Critique of Pure Reason” for the perception of physical objects, and recalls that they had no specific objects in mind but set out to tackle the perception of all sensible objects by the senses and their interpretation by the mind. He then sets out a set of Categories of Freedom, in order to “produce the reality of that to which they refer (the intention of the will)”.

1. Quantity

Subjective, according to maxims (practical opinions of the individual)

Objective, according to principles (precepts)

A Priori, both objective and subjective principles of freedom (laws)

[While Kant calls this Category ‘Quantity’, in line with his practice in the first Critique,it appears to be more a list of how an agent can make choices.]

1. Quality

Practical rules of action

Practical rules of mission

Practical rules of exception

[Again, while Kant follows his previous practice, this Category is about how an agent takes action or pursues the next step after making an initial choice.]

III Relation

To personality, to oneself

Reciprocal, to others

[This Category applies to the agent’s relation to or with other agents.]

IV Modality

Permitted or forbidden

Duty or contrary to duty

Perfect or imperfect duty

[The Category applies directly to the restrictions or control the moral agent ought to place upon the action proposed; i.e. to duty].

Kant seems here to be describing a process of making a (moral) decision followed by action: the sequence he envisages is freedom giving the agent choice, then taking action which will affect (or be relevant to) both the agent and others. Constraining this action, made under conditions of free choice are the Categorical Imperative and, stemming from that, the concept of duty.

He is content it seems to propose a strategy for acting morally and judging morally under freedom – not detailed guidance or rules. The law (i.e. the Categorical Imperative with its various corollaries) can be applied to each and every relevant choice and action. What he does not say he how in life, with its cross-cutting moral currents, we can dissect out the truly categorical from the heteronomous.

Of the Typic of Pure Practical Judgement

The strange word “typic” here may be a misspelling of “type”. By it Kant seems to mean “framework”.

Good and evil, which determine the objectives to which the will is directed, are, according to Kant, supersensible. This makes for a difficulty in applying these concepts to the everyday phenomenal world of the senses.

He contrasts the Schema described in the Critique of Pure Reason, where Categories are applied to sense data. Here, the Schema apply to intuitive thinking about physical objects. There is no such equivalent with the Categories of Freedom he has derived above.

In pure practical reason, we are reliant on our understanding not our imagination, and therefore on the Categorical Imperative, which Kant says is based on what everyone does anyway. “If everyone permitted himself to deceive, when he thought it to his advantage; or thought himself justified in shortening his life as soon as he was thoroughly weary of it; or looked with perfect indifference on the necessity of others; and if you belonged to such an order of things, would you do so with the assent of your own will?” The problem is that people are weak, and also deceive themselves into thinking their actions are justified when they are not – what would nowadays be called cognitive dissonance.

He warns against anything approaching a Schematic approach to practical reason, which would result in intuition of moral worth or action. This in turn could lead to mysticism, or behaving well in the expectation if going to Heaven, which is not a foundation for the moral law. The moral law has to be based on reason, not imagination, even though paradoxically our starting point for the supersensible Categorical Imperative has to be experience of the phenomenal world.

[NOTE: What Kant seems to be doing here, and throughout this Critique, is inventing two approaches to philosophy: one is the essential (scientific, sensory based) approach relating to universal, repeatable observations of the world; the other is the existential (mind based, ideas dependent) approach relating to concepts of what the world seems to be like to the individual agent. He calls these differently conceived worlds phenomenal and noumenal (or, sometimes, supersensible) and he struggles to unite the two. He does not succeed because the task is impossible. But he does usefully point out that the existential problems of right and wrong, i.e. morality, can be related to an essential rule, the Categorical Imperative, for practical purposes.

He takes the argument too far in the version of the Categorical Imperative that refers to natural laws. He also believes, as an Enlightenment man and an admirer of Newton, that such laws are simple and teleological. We now know (thanks to the Theory of Evolution and also the Quantum Theory to name but two examples) that natural laws are anything but simple and that they are not teleological but occur and are fulfilled as a result of chance. They are, however, paradigmatic in the sense that they belong to a class of philosophical or theoretical frameworks which can be revised. Kant’s system also works as a paradigm in that sense.]

Of the Motives of Pure Practical Reason

This section might nowadays be looked on as psychology.

He starts by saying: “What is essential in the moral worth of actions is that the moral law should directly determine the will”. He points to a distinction between acting legally and acting morally: an action which does not just conform to the letter of the law is wholly good; otherwise it is only moral in the letter. An agent should act in the spirit of the law.

The moral law does not supply motives – but it is there to produce an effect on the mind. Morality is purely abstract and motiveless, and self-love, self-regard and self-satisfaction are all irrelevant to morality. Morality does not exist to make the agent feel good.

Kant lists various personal psychological motivations people imagine lead them to ‘do good’: desire, hopes, and fears – anything that makes our self and our feelings the determiners of moral worth. But such feelings and motivators are not reliable guides to moral judgement. Reason should be the only source of moral feeling.

He asks what word could be used to summarise the attitude and motivations of an agent acting in the spirit of the Categorical Imperative. Obeying the moral law gives rise to self-respect and respect for others. It is respect, he says, which “applies always to persons only, not to things”. Respect is immune from the influence of rank and class. It is quite possible to respect a humble person. Respect does not imply worship or even admiration. He quotes Fontenelle: “I bow before a great man, but my mind does not bow.” Kant adds that if he encounters a humble man in whom he perceives uprightness of character “my mind bows whether I choose it or not, even though I bear my head never so high that he may not forget my superior rank.” Respect is “a tribute we cannot refuse to merit, whether we will or not; we may indeed outwardly withhold it, be we cannot help feeling it inwardly.” It is also “inasmuch this respect weakens the impeding influence in inclinations by humiliating self-esteem”. It

We need to accept that psychological motives, interests, maxims and concerns apply to agents in the world (‘finite beings’) where there is a subjective-objective conflict in determining moral action. Ordinary mortals need such guidance from their emotions, a Divine would not. Esteem for the moral law, i.e. the Categorical Imperative, applies therefore to the practical person in the world, producing an interest in obedience to the law but also respect for the law itself. The two need to come together so that respect for the law becomes habitual.

Respect and duty are linked. Duty, Kant says, is “a determination to actions, however reluctantly they may be done… An act of duty is not necessarily suggested by any inclination on the part of the agent, but is commanded and actually brought about by reason through the practical law; whence this feeling obtains a name, that of respect.”

He makes a further bald statement of duty ethics: “The former (legality) is possible even if inclinations have been the determining principles of the will; but the latter (morality), moral worth, can be placed only on this, that the action is done from duty that is simply for the sake of the law.”

He considers acting from love. But he rejects this as a primary motivator behind duty and respect on the grounds that “we are legislative members of a moral kingdom rendered possible by freedom…but yet we are subjects in it, not the sovereign, and to mistake our inferior position as creatures and presumptuously to reject the authority of the moral law, is already to revolt from it in spirit, even though the letter of it is fulfilled”.

He realises this view contrasts with the first of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength and Him only shalt though serve”. He says that you cannot be commanded to love. Love might be an ideal to strive towards, and the Gospel sets it out as such, but it is not much use as a practical precept. Love is something we come to it through our duty towards others and not by assuming any command to love.

He moves on to the alternative of urging the agent to beware of the concept of “pure merit”. This leads again to self-love, vanity and so on, and has nothing to do with duty. Such motives are pathological (in the sense of abnormal or fanciful); “they produce…a vain, high-flying, fantastic way of thinking, flattering …with a spontaneous goodness of heart that needs neither spur nor bridle”. Assumptions of pure merit leads to fanaticism and arrogance. He criticises in these respects the Stoics and their concern with moral fortitude, and also sentimental writers, and their concern with romantic love.

There follows something of a peroration on duty:

Duty connects us with the world of the supersensensible, but allows us freely to live in the world of the sensible. It is inviolable. He says that duty manifests itself with “the sublimity of our nature (in its highest aspect)”while at the other times showing our inconsistencies with our supposed standards and thereby striking down self-conceit. Duty does not necessarily lead to happiness either individually or generally, and certainly not necessarily in the short term. But it leads to the respect of others and for others and living with one’s conscience in the Kingdom of Ends.

Critical Examination of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason

Kant now embarks on a comparison of pure speculative reason (as set out in the firstCritique) and pure practical reason, as set out in the present work.

He has covered much of this earlier: practical reason is not concerned with objects, it seeks only to supply a law which is a priori. So the Analytic in the present Critiquereverses the process set out in its predecessor. The latter was divided into first the Aesthetic and then Logic, but the order is reversed in the Critique of Practical Reason.The Logic in this case is sub-divided into principles and concepts; the Aesthetic (unlike in Critique of Pure Reason) considered only feeling and was not sub-divided. The Critique of Practical Reason moves from a bald statement of the Categorical Imperative to the definition of good and evil and from that to a statement on the determination of the will via duty and respect. So pure speculative reason derives the law from observations; pure practical reason defines the law first and justifies it.

Kant repeats yet again that the empirical principle of defining moral good by attainment of happiness cannot work. He says, “the philosopher…cannot take any intuition as a foundation [for moral reasoning]”. What he can do is to try to determine a pure principle from an empirical one. This Kant claims to do by thought experiment. He gives the example of a man who is otherwise honest (i.e. he has a generally good will) but who decides to lie for gain. Such a man can be reasoned with in such terms as lack of respect for his own person and principles of truthfulness, and the fact that if he saw someone else doing such a thing he would not think it right. So he would deem it his duty not to have acted in the way he did.

Kant concedes that there is of course nothing wrong with seeking happiness and the happiness of others. But at the “moment that duty is in question we should take no account of happiness”. It may indeed be a moral duty to promote happiness e.g. to acquire skill or wealth to fulfil our duty, or to relieve poverty which itself can lead to transgressions against the moral law though need. But the principles of morality (the Categorical Imperative, duty and respect for others) are absolute. Kant likens them to the principles of geometry.

He turns next to freedom. In the deterministic world of pure speculative reason, freedom has no place. But in the world of pure practical reason, it is a postulate of the moral law. Nonetheless the concept of freedom has to be derived and not merely observed. Classical determination in the phenomenal world is derived form the causality of events in time. But freedom in practical reason is a thing in itself, not determinable in terms of causation by one event following another antecedent event. So how can freedom and causality in time be combined?

Kant looks at a wrong doing following on from a set of Circumstances (e.g. desire for an object causes a subsequent theft). The putative cause is not, however, the real cause of the theft: the perpetrator still has a free choice left. He then looks at psychological freedom, or, as he describes it, “a chain of events in the mind”. But this does not exist either; one idea does not cause another in any predictable way as in a physical system [such as two billiard balls colliding and the one deflecting the other].

Agents have a choice about what they do. Without this choice there would be no morality and no possibility of a moral law. [It is significant that even now, when social background, psychology and context are taken account in judgement of a wrong doing, the element of at least some freedom of choice by the perpetrator is still considered to be important, and in most cases paramount.]

Kant sees time as the factor of concern here. In the physical world event A causes event B and B happens after A. In morality, choices are made by the will and action follows but it is the choices that are the key drivers. It is futile to try to argue moral principles from consequences to these choices – the freedom and therefore the moral judgement must be centred on the choices themselves, not by waiting to see how they work out and then pronouncing them good or evil. If the moral law is fixed by reasoned principle and not consequence, then it is this that determines the agent’s action outside of time, and the consequences are irrelevant to whether the law has been broken or not. Kant maintains that in morality, “reason recognises no distinction of time, and asks only whether the event belongs to me, as my act, and then always connects to the same moral feeling with whether it has happened now or long ago.”

So, freedom of the will, i.e. choice is a priori – we cannot imagine a human being without it. This leads to action, and action is mediated by guilt and indicated by conscience unless the action conforms to the moral law (Categorical Imperative). The practical way to work in life is therefore through duty, and this apparent control gives freedom in the long run.

Kant, never satisfied, still sees a possible difficulty. It lies in the combination of the concept of freedom of the will with the world of sense and causality, or the boundary between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. How can two such worlds co-exist?

He has a unique solution to this. If the world is deterministic, and only so, freedom of the will would be an illusion. But if the a priori attributes of time and space exist only as a concept in the phenomenal world, but not in the noumenal world, then freedom of the will can exist. As he put it: “the distinction being that between the existence of a being in itself (noumenal world) and that of appearance (phenomenal world)”. This might be seen as the Plato’s cave problem, but Kant does not refer to Plato but to Spinoza, who said that space and time are essential attributes of the Supreme Being Himself. [This is, of course typical enlightenment thinking. Newton considered that he was trying to “know the mind of God”, and deism rather than full scale atheism was common among Enlightenment thinkers.]

According to Kant, Spinoza thought that space and time were accidents of creation. Kant disagrees, and considers the process of creation as part of the noumenal, supersensory world and therefore something we cannot know about since all our information about the process of creation comes from the senses. In the practical world we have to work with time and space; God may not – he could stand above this world. [This is closer to modern theories of the creation of the universe than one might think. There is a theory that time and space only developed in our universe from multi dimensional strings, which would give rise to many different mutiverses. This is set out in Stephen Hawking’s book The Grand Design. Hawking provocatively proclaimed at the time of publication that M theory, as it is called, dispenses with the concept of God. If we substitute strings for God, Kant could still be right; and Spinoza could be right also – the four dimensions we have ended up with in this universe is a matter of a quantum accident.] If existence in time and space belongs only to appearances and the act of creation is not a phenomenon in time and space, then we are entitled to look beyond a time and space world – if only we could see beyond it.

Since freedom of the will is, according to Kant, undeniable, what Category of reason does it belong to? There follows here a long and involved argument which is both hard to follow and inconclusive. Kant is looking for a Category which is not dependent on the senses but on an Idea. He seems to settle on the Category of Modality (see above), which is motivated by duty.

With that, Kant summarises what he has said, has a final swipe at the empiricists, and concludes Book I, the Analytic section of this Critique.

Book II Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason

As with the first Critique, by dialectic Kant means an enquiry into contradictions or antinomies raised by the Analytic.

Of a Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason Generally

He first looks at the idea of a summum bonum, or highest good.

This is an ancient Greek concept meaning the highest wisdom. Whatever its precise definition, it is an ideal or goal. In the Analytic Kant has shown that the highest good cannot be defined as a starting point for morality; he started more modestly from the Categorical Imperative. He tends towards the idea that the summum bonum is actually just another term for the moral law, but in order to be sure of that he needs to consider it in more detail.

Of the Dialectic of Pure Reason in Defining the Conception of the Summum bonum

The summum bonum can be defined in two ways:

1) the supreme (i.e. not subordinate);

2) the perfect (i.e. not part of a greater whole, but self-contained).

Kant says that the Analytic takes virtue (i.e. worthiness to be happy) as the “supreme condition of all that appears to be desirable”. In this sense, virtue is the supreme good. But to be perfect, worthiness as well as happiness would be required, and happiness is not the measure of the good. In other words, happiness and the good do not always go together.

For two elements to be united in one concept their relationship must be either analytic (have a logical connection, or be identical) or synthetic (have a real connection or be causal). For the summum bonum, virtue and happiness must be analytically or synthetically connected. The Epicureans saw an analytical connection (happiness means virtue and vice versa); the Stoics saw a synthetic connection (happiness is possible only through virtue).

Both were wrong in their reasoning, according to Kant. They manipulated their definitions so that while the Epicureans maintained that happiness was the whole of the summum bonum and virtue the maxim for its pursuit; the Stoics maintained that virtue was the whole and happiness consisted in possessing it. Kant concludes that the summum bonum is not practically possible on either ground.

He further concludes that “it is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the summum bonum by freedom of the will: therefore the condition of its possibility must rest solely on a priori principles of cognition.”

I The Antinomy of Practical Reason

Actually, virtue and happiness have no guaranteed connection, and if this is so, thesunnum bonum is impossible, and it cannot be the foundation of the moral law.

II Critical Solution of the Antinomy of Practical Reason

While virtue and happiness are not related (either analytically or synthetically) in the phenomenal world of the senses, Kant suggests that they might be in the noumenal world. (The Greeks were looking for a connection in the phenomenal world.) In the supersensory (but nonetheless intelligible) world of the mind, the “determination of the will directly by reason is a source of the feeling of pleasure, and this remains a pure practical not sensible determination of the faculty of desire”. Given that we live in the sensible world, duty is likely to be the mainspring of moral action. Happiness, then, is self-contentment, in which one is conscious of needing nothing. This contentment is connected to consciousness of freedom – it is intellectual contentment, not sensory. An inclination to, say, beneficence, is not likely to bring such contentment. Sympathy and empathy are actually interruptions to reason, and will not necessarily lead to happiness. Reason, on the other hand, brings a contentment of the mind akin to bliss. So morality is the supreme good, and while happiness constitutes its second element, it is only an intellectual response to living virtuously.

III Of the Primacy of Pure Practical Reason in its Union with the Speculative Reason

Is practical reason superior to speculative reason? Kant suggests that not only is this a valid question but it form the criterion for which system has the highest priority claim. All reason is ultimately practical. If the two systems are combined, practical reason normally has the primacy but only if the combination is not merely arbitrary but founded on a priori principles. But practical reason must not go against speculative reason.

IV The Immortality of the Soul as that Postulate of Pure Practical Reason

Kant view of this is ultimately rather simple. In the practical world, humans are not perfect though they may strive, through duty and the categorical imperative, towards perfection. But to achieve perfection would require virtually infinite time – hence the soul must be immortal if it is to achieve perfection with out these props.

V The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason

The summum bonum consists of a perfect harmony of morality leading to happiness – not something that happens in this world except in the ‘intellectual bliss’ arising from doing one’s duty in the light of the moral law. However, if we assume a world in which the sunnum bonum exists as defined, and where morality leads to happiness, then God needs to exist – not as the creator of the phenomenal universe – but as the ultimate moral facilitator. God and the immortality of the soul are necessary suppositions if the sunnum bonum is to be attained. In short: no God then no immortality of the soul and no sunnum bonum.

Kant emphasises that that it is unnecessary from the point of view of speculative reason to assume the existence of God. (He has already shown this is the in the equivalent section, of Dialectic, in the First Critique.) It is a duty for us to promote thesunnum bonum because of a subjective want. We cannot suppose the existence of anything without the evidence of sense based on speculative reason. Nor is it “necessary to suppose the existence of God as a basis for obligation in general.” This rests on the autonomy of reason itself.

The existence of God therefore rests on faith – faith not initially in God but in thesunnum bonum and the necessity to strive for it.

The Epicureans and Stoics expected the sunnum bonum to be realised in a single lifetime. Christians also expect the sunnum bonum to be realised in due course but expect it to take longer than a lifetime. Hence they introduce a supernatural element. Kant sees this as compatible with his reasoning except that Christians have incorporated the concept of God as issuing divine laws into their teaching, whereas he claims to have reached similar conclusions by pure practical reason. Kant sets out his position succinctly in a telling piece: “Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we should make ourselves happy, but how we should become worthy of happiness. It is only when religion is added that there also comes in the hope of participating some day in happiness in proportion as we have endeavoured to be not unworthy of it.”

Kant further sees a parallel between his reasoning and Christianity, especially between his Kingdom of Ends and the Kingdom of God. He also accounts for many of the other aspects of God (omnipotence, power, knowledge, presence, goodness) to imply an absence of limitation. These can be summarised as God at the lawgiver, governor and judge; the supreme object of metaphysical perfection. [This is an example of Kant the enlightenment man. Everything is going forward; he has overworked sense of teleology.]

V I Of the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason Generally

Kant here provides a useful summary of what he has been saying. He has three postulates: immortality, freedom, and God:

Immortality is a practically necessary condition of a duration adequate to “complete the fulfilment of the moral law” i.e. achieve the sunnum bonum.

Freedom is the necessity to suppose the independence of the sensible world from the intelligible world (i.e. phenomenal from noumenal).

God follows from the sunnum bonum .

He considers that these concepts are not available from speculative reason.

But is this all an illusion? Kant says he doesn’t know. He thinks it all fits with the moral law as he has expounded it. What he says is worth quoting:

“Is our knowledge, however, actually extended in this way by pure practical reason?… Certainly, but only from a practical point of view. For we do not thereby take knowledge of the nature of our souls, nor of the intelligible world, nor of the Supreme Being, with respect to what they are in themselves, but we have merely combined the conceptions of them in a practical concept of the sunnum bonum as the object of our will, and this altogether a priori, but only by means of the moral law, and merely in reference to it. … But how freedom is possible, and how we are conceive this kind of causality theoretically and positively, is not thereby discovered; but only that there is in such a causality is postulated by the moral law and in its behoof. It is the same with the remaining ideas, the possibility of which no human intelligence will ever fathom, but the truth of which, on the other hand, no sophistry will ever wrest from the combination even of the commonest man.”

V I I How is it possible to conceive an extension of pure reason in a practical point of view, without its knowledge as speculative being enlarged at the same time?

This is a rather abstract question and Kant tries to answer it initially by leaving aside its theological aspects, and by equating the sunnum bonum with the categorical imperative. But he finds this impossible without incorporating his three other postulates: immortality, freedom and God.

He is inclined to conclude that practical reason adds no reality to speculative reason and it does not make for or excuse excesses of religion which speculate about the supernatural.

Immortality, freedom and God remain as an explanation of the moral law and its unity with the sunnum bonum, and (in spite of going over the ground again and again) he can get no further.

So does a conception of God belong to physics (plus metaphysics) or morals? After a long discussion Kant makes a clear statement:

“The conception of God, then, is one that belongs originally not to physics, not to speculative reason, but to morals.”

His reasoning is given as follows:

God’s existence cannot be proved by physics or metaphysics for the reasons (infinite number of syllogisms) set out in Critique of Pure Reason. We are “obliged to assume that something of which in itself we have otherwise no conception, in order to frame a conception of the possibility of what we see before our eyes”. We don’t know enough. Logic runs out. But God, if He exists, would possess the highest perfection, and be all knowing (omniscient), eternal and omnipresent.

Kant tries to consolidate his position by repeating that pure practical reason, unlike pure speculative reason, is not of empirical (i.e. observed by senses) origin but is “a priori in the pure understanding”, and can “refer to objects independently of the intuition of them”. So pure practical reason “is defined by such predicates as are necessarily connected with the pure practical purpose, given a priori with its possibility”.

VI I I Of Belief from a Requirement of Pure Reason

Kant says again that while pure speculative reason cannot prove God’s existence, neither can it refute it. But he is certain about the concept of beauty and the moral law, which cause rational beings to strive towards the sunnum bonum. Without thesunnum bonum there would be no moral law. Belief consists in equating God with thesunnum bonum – a perfection to be strived for. But it is a belief, not a provable certainty. Speculative reason has nothing to say about the sunnum bonum, but we need to work towards it and therefore we need to assume God’s existence. [Note: Kant the deist, enlightenment man and assumer of teleology!]

Furthermore, Kant says, there is the question of proportioning happiness to the worthy, which doesn’t happen in this world. For this teleological end to work out will need an unlimited time – hence we must assume an eternal life after death. He speaks of “the exact harmony of the kingdom of nature with the kingdom of morals, which is a condition of the possibility of the sunnum bonum“.

Kant says that belief (like love in the First Commandment – see before) cannot be commanded, but emerges from practical reason. Belief might waver, but it can never be reduced to unbelief.

I X Of the Wise Adaptation of Man’s Cognitive Faculties to his Practical Destination

Kant repeats that there are limits to the deductive powers of pure speculative reason (i.e. maths and science).

Why should there be limits? Because God would set limits so as not to rule by fear and command. He would require mankind to reason out morality and obey the moral law not because it is in his own interests but because it is his duty to do so. God leaves Himself as a matter of conjecture to avoid what would otherwise be a command and control situation.[A strict deist line of argument!]

He closes at the main part of the critique with this statement:

“The unsearchable wisdom by which we exist is not less worthy of admiration in what it has denied than in what it has granted”.

Methodology of Pure Practical Reason.

Kant sets out a prospectus for moral education. He summarises some of what he said so far:

“we need to respect of the moral law and beauty for their own sake”

“the spirit of the law is more important than its legality”

“people are capable of being moral, but they will cheat.”

He says that people like to discuss moral issues. We need to build on this.

He sounds off about education. People need the right examples – not the overly pious, martyrs and the super-meritorious. It takes philosophers to set out an answer on moral questions. Above all, examples should demonstrate respect for the moral law, by parable if necessary.

“Principles” he says “must be built on conceptions – on any other basis there can only be paroxysms” [By which he seems to mean suddenly emotional outbursts of quasi-moral feeling!]

“The moral law depends on obedience, from duty not from predilection, which cannot and ought not to be presupposed at all”. Kant is clear that people have to be taught morality and duty.

He gives a sales pitch for his ideas, as follows:

“we should all attend to rights and not wants”

“our senses and emotions can mislead us, but reason will keep us on a clear moral path”

“duty actually releases us from temptation and inclination … and in the end it makes us satisfied within ourselves”

CONCLUSION

He starts with a world famous passage:

“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect to them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and enlarges my connection there to an unbounded extent with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and moreover into limitless times of the periodic motion, its beginning and continuance. The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity, but which is traceable only by the understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent but in a universal and necessary connection, as I am also thereby with all those visible worlds. The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates as it were my importance as an animal creature, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital power, one knows not how, must again give back the matter of which it was formed to the planet it inhabits (a mere speck in the universe). The second, on the contrary, infinitely elevates my worth as an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even all the whole sensible world, at least as far as may be inferred from the destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination not restricted the conditions of limits of this life, but reaching into the infinite.”

He goes on to celebrate the success of Newtonian physics in explaining how the world works. He says he is trying to emulate Newton’s achievement in the moral field. He recommends a scientific approach to everything and decries visionaries:

“Science (critically undertaken methodically directed) is the narrow gate that leads to the true doctrine of practical wisdom”.

And he ends with another clear statement about the role of philosophy in all this:

“Philosophy must always continue to be the guardian of science, and although the public does not take any interest in it subtle investigations, it must take an interest in the resulting doctrines, which such an examination first puts in a clear light.”