

Chapter 2

KANTIANISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

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Even more than his theoretical works, Immanuel Kant's ethical writings can be said to effect a break with traditions of philosophy going back to the ancient Greeks. In particular, his "Copernican Revolution" in metaphysics, purporting to show that reason is incapable of gaining theoretical knowledge of ultimate reality, rules out the approach to ethics most common in ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy—one that depends on a metaphysical theory of the good, specifically the human good. In contrast to such "eudaimonistic" 460 theories, Kant provides an alternative conception, often called "deontological," of how reason functions in ethics, one that treats issues of right—of duty, obligation, and law—as amenable to formal or procedural solutions that do not presuppose any metaphysical theory of what material goods are. "Kantianism," then, generally refers to ethical theories that emphasize the need to justify moral and other norms under modern conditions of interest-pluralism—that is, in the absence of agreement over which material values *ought* to be preferred.

To the extent that Kantian theories depend, or seem to depend, on contingent assumptions—scientific assumptions about a disenchanted, deterministic world, perhaps, or historical assumptions about the rise of liberal society—they have drawn criticism from phenomenologically oriented philosophers. Phenomenologists hold that such assumptions must be put out of play, the better to describe ethical phenomena as they give themselves in concrete experience. Thus Max Scheler went so far as to "reverse" Kant's "Copernican Revolution"¹ and to strip practical reason of its critical role. To the Kantian, however, the phenomenological approach to ethics can look like an attempt to rehabilitate a premodern, metaphysically dogmatic conception of the relation between theory and practice. Jürgen Habermas, for instance, whose "discourse ethics" is a recent version of Kantianism, argues that Husserl's approach to ethics cannot do justice to the "norms of a universal legislation derived from practical reason," since he remains dependent upon an

¹ Philip Blosser, *Scheler's Critique of Kant's Ethics* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1995), 42.

objectivist “ontology, from which he unconsciously borrows the traditional conception of theory” as contemplation of the “given” order of the cosmos.²

A deep rift thus separates phenomenological and Kantian approaches to ethics, and it is no surprise that the early phenomenological response to Kantianism (for instance, in Husserl and Scheler) was almost entirely negative. And when Kantian motifs later began showing up in phenomenological works (as in the late Husserl, then Heidegger and Sartre), this did not stem from any systematic rethinking of the relation between the two philosophical tendencies. Though some recent phenomenological projects (for instance, Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* [1990]) try to do justice to the legitimate claims of both Kantianism and phenomenology, and though recent work in Kantian ethics (for instance, Christine Korsgaard’s *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* [1996] and Barbara Herman’s *The Practice of Moral Judgment* [1993]) emphasizes a side of Kant that is more congenial to phenomenology, a genuine dialogue has yet to be established.

Husserl claimed that “when abstracted from Kantian ‘metaphysics,’ Kant’s thinking and inquiry moves *de facto* in the framework of the phenomenological attitude,”³ but while there is some truth to this, the fact remains that far more than “metaphysics” separates Kant’s approach to ethics from Husserl’s and from most of the phenomenologists who followed him. Even shorn of its most characteristic “metaphysical” assumption—the distinction between phenomena and noumena—Kant’s idea that the ethical function of reason is not to cognize material values and goods but to legislate laws of conduct (duties, obligations) stands in marked contrast to the phenomenological view. Phenomenology—especially in Husserl, but arguably far more pervasively—operates with a conception of reason as the intuitive grasp of essences and their necessary interconnections; it tends toward a kind of moral realism as the correlate of a theoretical “science of values.” Kantianism, in contrast, rejects the view of ethics as a science and argues for the primacy of *practical* reason. Here moral philosophy is not a matter of attaining a certain kind of ethical knowledge, but of demonstrating the legitimacy of reason’s claim to *construct* norms—that is, to make values unconditionally normative (hence moral) by formulating them as laws of the will. Perhaps these two views of reason’s role need not conflict, but if rapprochement is to be sought it is first necessary to appreciate something of what motivates their differences. To this task the present

²Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968); *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 305.

³Edmund Husserl, “Kant und die Idee der Transzendentalphilosophie,” in his *Erste Philosophie (1923/24). Erster Teil: Kritische Ideengeschichte*, ed. Rudolf Boehm, *Husserliana* 7 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), 236; cf. “Kant and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy,” trans. Ted E. Klein and William E. Pohl, *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1974): 14.

chapter is devoted, though it makes no claim to being a comprehensive account of Kantianism, much less a thorough summary of its phenomenological reception.

1. PHENOMENOLOGICAL VALUE THEORY

In the “Prolegomena” to the *Logical Investigations* (1900), Husserl argued that “each normative, and *a fortiori*, each practical discipline”—hence ethics conceived as an account of what one ought to do—“presupposes one or more theoretical disciplines as its foundations.”⁴ His reasoning here reveals the deepest rift between a phenomenological and a Kantian approach to ethics. For Husserl, in order to judge that “a soldier should be brave,” for example, “I must have some conception of a ‘good’ soldier,” a conception that must be founded “on a general valuation which permits us to value soldiers as good or bad according to these or those properties” (LI, 84). In other words, the normative statement’s validity depends upon a non-normative, purely theoretical, account of what a soldier is (a functional definition) that specifies those properties that enable something to fulfill the function (hence be a valuable, “good,” soldier). If the theory shows that courage is among those properties, then the normative judgment “A soldier should be brave” is warranted. Husserl defines a “basic norm” as “the normative proposition which demands generally of the objects of a sphere that they should measure up to the constitutive features of the positive value-predicates to the greatest extent possible” and argues that “this role is, e.g., played by the categorical imperative in the group of normative propositions which make up Kant’s ethics, as by the principle of the ‘greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number’ in the Ethics of the Utilitarians” (LI, 85). But in this he misconstrues the fundamental difference between Kant’s ethics and utilitarianism, for Kant’s categorical imperative is not a “basic norm” in Husserl’s sense. It does not presuppose a theoretical account of “the positive value-predicates” of a certain domain of objects that are to be realized by adhering to it (presumably, “a good will”); rather, it expresses the ground of obligation itself — that which, prior to all consideration of whether my will or intention is virtuous (i.e., instances a functionally defined good), gives it the form of *law*, something unconditionally binding.

No doubt this difference is made less perspicuous by Kant’s procedure, in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, of presenting the categorical imperative as “analytically” contained in the idea of a “good will,” thereby inviting the suspicion that the normativity of reason’s law is derived from that idea. However,

⁴Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, vol. 1 [1900], vol. 2 [1901]; *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 87 (hereafter LI).

though Kant introduces the categorical imperative in the context of an account of the “common rational knowledge of morals”—and so, in fact, in the context of a phenomenology of “ordinary moral consciousness”—this is not meant to establish the validity of the categorical imperative, but only to suggest that ordinary moral consciousness is not unfamiliar with the idea of obligation. Where the validity of the categorical imperative is established—in subsequent sections of the *Foundations* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*—it is not some theoretically determined idea of a “good will” that does the work. On the contrary, the categorical imperative provides the ground for defining what a morally good will is.

Phenomenologists have not been blind to this aspect of Kant’s ethics. On the contrary, Kant’s claim that pure practical reason is sufficient to define the moral goodness of a will is the target of two fundamental phenomenological criticisms: the first finds Kant’s view of reason excessively formalistic, and the second rejects his moral psychology as too thin to recognize the manifold ways in which moral norms arise within the overall nexus of our motivations, desires, valuations, and attitudes. Provide a richer phenomenology of moral experience as the context for a theoretical reflection on the norms implicit in evaluative life generally—so this argument goes—and the question of “unconditional” obligation that Kant places at center stage will evaporate.

Consider, for instance, the concept of a “will which is to be esteemed as good in itself without regard to anything else.”⁵ Kant’s initial point is a descriptive one: we do not judge the worth of the “will”—that is, the volitional intention oriented toward bringing about a certain effect in the world—according to whether that effect is in fact achieved. Normally, however, we do evaluate the will in terms of the goodness of the end it pursues, and this is where Kant raises the crucial question of what gives such a will *moral* worth. Is it the end, or the procedure through which it adopts that end? For Kant, it is the latter. Moral worth does not lie in the will’s object or aim, but in the fact that it acts “from duty.” Thus my act is not morally good because it aims to bring about some good thing in the world, but because it conforms to a formal law of reason that enjoins that the maxim of the act be universalizable. It is the latter that makes the act into a duty or obligation and provides the authority to override my possibly countervailing “inclinations.” Thus the question of whether the end to be brought about through my act is an objectively good one is, from Kant’s point of view, irrelevant: it is not the goodness

⁵Immanuel Kant, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik der Sitten* [1785]; *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 15 (hereafter FMM).

of the end but the will's conformity to the *form of law* that makes it morally normative.

Phenomenological value theory sees these matters quite differently. Though their positions diverge in important ways, both Husserl and Scheler criticize Kant's equation of reason with mere form (the form of law), arguing that no concrete duties can be determined without attending to the content of the act. Where Kant sees all such content as contingent or a posteriori—hence as an unsuitable basis for universal moral norms—the phenomenologists offer a theory of the *material a priori*, i.e., a theory of contents that, as “objective” goods and values, do not need to be brought under the form of law in order to exhibit rationality. Thus where Kant defines the motive of the good will (duty) in terms of its “respect for law”—that is, in terms of its willingness to test its maxim against the form of law (universalizability)—Husserl sees the motive to lie in the material of the desire underlying the will itself. Husserl's version of a categorical imperative—“do the best that is attainable under the circumstances”—is a law that describes the good will, but does not serve as its motive. So also in Scheler there is no specific moral motive, no formal motive of duty, but rather moral values are instantiated when the will brings about or realizes higher, in preference to lower, nonmoral goods. Against Kantian formalism, then, phenomenological value theory defends a material a priori and a *teleological* or “perfectionist” conception of ethics.

These two concepts—material a priori and teleological perfectionism—are closely linked, and arise from phenomenology's reflective, descriptive approach to moral experience. From the phenomenological perspective, Kant's sharp distinction between reason and “sensitivity” yields an anemic moral psychology that has disastrous results for ethical theory. By divorcing the supposedly formal law of the will from those material contents that derive from the “faculty of desire” (further reduced to “self-love”), Kant obscures the rich intentional weave of emotive, affective, and volitional life as it is lived. Specifically, Kant lumps all material incentives of the will—all particular objects of my desire—under the heading of “inclination” and argues that they are irrelevant for understanding the moral worth of an action, since no such incentive can give rise to an obligation.

There are several reasons for this. First, Kant argues that only experience can show whether some object or other will stimulate the faculty of desire, will incline me toward choosing it. Since for Kant experience can demonstrate no necessary connection between any object and my feeling toward it, the whole sphere of feeling lacks rationality. Second, to the extent that reason can establish necessary connections between some desired end and certain actions, these connections yield only “hypothetical” imperatives. *If* I desire the end, *then* I “ought” to engage in the actions that, as means, are required to bring it about. Since Kant holds that it is my interest in realizing the end that gives these actions whatever value they have, such hypothetical imperatives could yield universal obligations only if there is a



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