

Kant Review Dialogue 1

Micah Tillman

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In-Class Kant Review Dialogue 1

Tedrick: Hey Kant!

Kant: Why, hello there Fredward.

Tedrick: It's Tedrick. Fredward is my cousin.

Kant: You look just like Fredward to me.

Tedrick: I know. But look: I've got a question for you.

Kant: Fire away

Tedrick: How should I live my life?

Kant: What?

Tedrick: What should I do?

Kant: Whatever feels good, man. If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad.

Tedrick: What? So, you're a hippy now?

Kant: A what? "Hippy"? What in the world is that?

Tedrick: Something that will happen in America in the 1960's.

Kant: I see. So, you know the future then.

Tedrick: I do. But I still don't know what to do.

Kant: Well, look. I always say you have three choices. Either you follow Aristotle, or you follow Mill, or you follow me.

Tedrick: Really. You put yourself on a level with Aristotle. And Mill. Really.

Kant: No, not really. I'm just saying there are three basic approaches to ethics.

Tedrick: I don't care about ethics.

Kant: Yes you do. You want to know what you should do. That's ethics.

Tedrick: I thought that was morality.

Kant: Same thing.

Tedrick: Really?

Kant: As far as Mr. Tillman knows, anyway.

Tedrick: Okay. If you say so.

Kant: Alright then. Now, Aristotle's ethical theory was teleological. It said, you've gotta figure out what your telos is, and then you have to fulfill your telos.

Tedrick: "Telos," you say?

Kant: Yeah. Telos. It's the Greek word for "end."

Tedrick: So Aristotle's theory said you have to figure out what your end is, and then fulfill that end. That doesn't make any sense at all. What does he mean? Like, you have to bring yourself to an end or something?

Kant: No. He thought that humans have a "telos" (an "end"). The telos that humans have is to be human. That's the "end" or "goal" of being human. To fulfill your telos, therefore, is to be human in the fullest, most excellent, most awesome way you possibly can.

Tedrick: You just said "awesome." That's awesome.

Kant: I know, right? But seriously, teleological ethics answers the question, "What should I do," by saying, "You should do what an excellent, fully mature human would do." That is, "You should be what you are (i.e., you should be human) in the most excellent way you can."

Tedrick: That sounds good. Excellent is good, right?

Kant: There's nothing better than excellence. I mean, excellence is virtue, and virtue is perfection and that's great, right?

Tedrick: Right. But you say that like you don't believe it.

Kant: No. I believe it. I just don't think you can know for sure what perfection or excellence or virtue is.

Tedrick: Really? Wouldn't Aristotle say you can figure out what excellence or perfection or virtue is by studying human nature?

Kant: Sure, but human nature includes emotions.

Tedrick: So?

Kant: Well, do all rational beings have emotions?

Tedrick: No. A purely rational being wouldn't have emotions. It would just be a mind.

Kant: And do the rules of morality apply to all rational beings, or only to humans?

Tedrick: To all rational beings.

Kant: So Aristotle's teleological approach isn't going to work, is it?

Tedrick: What? You think we should jettison Aristotle's entire theory, which has basically held for 2,000 years, just because there *might* be rational beings who don't have emotions?

Kant: Okay. Well. Look. Think about it this way. The laws of morality are unconditional, right? They don't say, "If you want to be perfect, then you have to do this," or "If you're human, then you have to do that," or "If you're a dog, then you must do this other thing." Those are hypothetical imperatives. But the imperatives of morality are categorical, not hypothetical.

Tedrick: So you're saying that Aristotle's ethics—teleological ethics, or virtue ethics—can't be right because we can't know for sure what perfection (or excellence) is, *and* because it uses hypothetical imperatives?

Kant: That's what I'd argue. Those are the two biggest problems with it, in my opinion

Tedrick: Um. Okay. What would Mill say?

Kant: Mill's ethical theory is consequentialist. Consequentialists answer the question, "What should I do?" by saying, "You should do whatever has good consequences."

Tedrick: I thought Mill was a utilitarian.

Kant: He was a utilitarian. Utilitarianism is one kind of consequentialism. The utilitarians answer the question, "What should I do?" by saying, "You should do whatever increases the total amount of pleasure in the world, or decreases the total amount of pain in the world."

Tedrick: Why do they say that?

Kant: Because they think that increasing pleasure and decreasing pain is good. Either way, you're making people more happy, and making people more happy is good. Therefore, if you do something that increases the total amount of pleasure in the world, and decreases the total amount of pain, you are doing something that has good consequences.

Tedrick: Sounds reasonable enough.

Kant: True.

Tedrick: So . . . what's wrong?

Kant: Same thing as was wrong with teleological ethics.

Tedrick: What? "We can't know for sure what pleasure is," and "it uses hypothetical imperatives?"

Kant: Basically. I mean, if you ask utilitarians, they'll say that pleasure is the same as happiness. But I say that happiness is just the satisfaction of all your inclinations. But everyone's got different inclinations, so happiness is different for different people.

Tedrick: So what? Happiness is different for different people. What's that got to do with morality?

Kant: Is morality the same for everyone, or does every person have a different morality?

Tedrick: It's the same for everyone.

Kant: Exactly. But if we based morality on happiness, and happiness was different for everyone, then morality would be different for everyone. And that's crazy.

Tedrick: Okay. I see your point.

Kant: And I also say that you can't know for sure what will satisfy all your inclinations all at once. And furthermore, if you just try to base morality on pleasure, you're trying to base morality on something that doesn't matter. Emotions have no intrinsic value.

Tedrick: You're sure about that? You really think emotions have no value?

Kant: Yep. But ethics is supposed to tell you what it is good or valuable or important or worthwhile to do. So you can't base morality on something that doesn't have any goodness or value or importance or worthwhileness. And besides, the rules that utilitarians come up with are hypothetical. They say, "If you want to increase pleasure, or decrease pain, you have to do this," or, "Since you want happiness, you have to do that." And we all know that the imperatives of morality have to be categorical.

Tedrick: Okay. So, you think you can't base morality on perfection or excellence (since we can't know for sure what it is), we can't base morality on happiness (since happiness is different for different people, and we can't know for sure what will make us happy), and we can't base morality on pleasure (since emotions don't matter).

Kant: Right. And we can't base morality on perfection or excellence or happiness or pleasure, because if we do any of those things, we'll end up using hypothetical imperatives. And you can't base morality on hypothetical imperatives.

Tedrick: So does that mean that there's no way for me to tell what I should do?

Kant: No. You can know what you should do.

Tedrick: What? You have your own theory of morality?

Kant: Yes. Don't you remember?

Tedrick: Yeah, I remember. I just don't remember what your theory is.

Kant: My theory is that you should do your duty. It's called "deontology."

Tedrick: Your duty is called deontology?

Kant: No, my ethical theory is called “deontology.”

Tedrick: That’s a stupid name.

Kant: Says the man named “Tedrick.” But hey, call it “duty ethics,” if that makes you happy.

Tedrick: Okay. But how do I know what my duty is?

Kant: Your duty is to be rational. Your duty is to follow the rules for acting that come from your Reason.

Tedrick: Why?

Kant: Because being rational is what makes you what you are. You’re a rational being. So it’s your duty to be rational. Reason is what makes you you, and so it’s your duty to follow the rules of Reason.

Tedrick: So, if I were to ask you what I should do, you would tell me, “Do your duty”?

Kant: Yes.

Tedrick: And if I asked you what my duty is, you would say, “Your duty is to follow the rules that come from Reason.”

Kant: Yes.

Tedrick: Do all rules come from Reason?

Kant: No. Some rules come from your emotions and desires (which I call your “Inclinations”). Your emotions and desires tell you to do things, just like Reason tells you to do things. Your emotions and desires tell you to follow certain rules, and Reason tells you to follow certain rules.

Tedrick: Why should I follow Reason’s rules, and not my Inclination’s rules?

Kant: Because you are Reason, and you are not your Inclinations. Your Will is Reason, and your Will isn’t your Inclinations. Therefore, if your Will is going to act like the kind of thing it is, it has to follow the rules that come from Reason.

Tedrick: So you’re a teleologist.

Kant: What?

Tedrick: Your theory isn’t any different from Aristotle’s.

Kant: What are you talking about!?

Tedrick: Listen to yourself. You’re saying that to be moral is to do your duty, and that to do your duty is to be rational, and that being rational is being what you are, since you are Reason. You’re saying that your telos is to be the kind of thing you are in the most full and excellent way you can, and since you are a rational being, your telos is to be a rational being in the most full and excellent way you can. You’re

saying your duty is to fulfill your telos, which is to be rational (which means to follow the rules that come from Reason).

Kant: Alright. You got me. My “deontological” theory is really a kind of “teleological ethics.” But don’t tell anyone.

Tedrick: Why not?

Kant: Because that’s just Mr. Tillman’s crazy theory, that’s why. And we all know not to believe what Crazy Mr. Tillman says.

In-Class Kant Review Dialogue 2
 Micah Tillman
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In-Class Kant Review Dialogue 2

Tedrick: I think it's time you told me about categorical imperatives.

Kant: Okay. What do you want to know?

Tedrick: What are they?

Kant: They are imperatives that apply to all rational beings, no matter what.

Tedrick: What's a rational being?

Kant: It's a being that acts according to its conception of laws.

Tedrick: What does that mean?

Kant: That means that rational beings can choose to follow one law, or choose to follow another. They don't just follow laws automatically, but can think about which law to follow, and then make a decision about which law to follow.

Tedrick: Okay. How does that help us figure out what the categorical imperative is?

Kant: Well, if a rational being is the kind of being that makes decisions about which laws to follow, that leads us to ask which laws a rational being should choose to follow.

Tedrick: A rational being should choose to follow the rules that come from Reason.

Kant: Exactly. But does Reason give different rules to different people?

Tedrick: No. Reason is Reason. Reason isn't one thing for one person, and another thing for another person. So, Reason will tell everyone to do the same thing. Reason will give the same laws to everyone.

Kant: Well, there you have it. If a rule isn't a rule that Reason could give to everyone, then it can't be a rule that comes from Reason. If Reason couldn't give the rule to everyone, then the rule must come from the Inclinations.

Tedrick: But we should only follow the rules that come from Reason.

Kant: Right.

Tedrick: And that means we should only follow the rules that our Will could make for everyone.

Kant: Why?

Tedrick: Because Will and Reason are the same thing.

Kant: Good point. Okay, so here's how we'll phrase the first formulation of the categorical imperative (CI1): "Only follow those maxims that you can will to become a universal law."

Tedrick: That sounds good. But which maxims can't you will be become a universal law?

Kant: Any maxims that would contradict themselves if you made them into a universal law, and any maxims that would lead your Will to contradict itself if it made them into a universal law.

Tedrick: What?

Kant: Okay, think about it this way: there are three kinds of maxims. The first kind of maxims *contradict themselves* if you make them universal laws. The second kind of maxims don't contradict themselves if you make them universal laws; however, your Will would *contradict itself* if it wills that they become universal laws. These first two kinds of maxims are bad. The third kind of maxims don't contradict themselves if you make them universal laws, and your Will won't contradict itself if it wills that they become universal laws. This third kind of maxim is good.

Tedrick: I need some examples, man.

Kant: Okay, try this one. Here's a maxim: "When I need a favor, I must make a false promise in return." CI1 tells us to ask whether this maxim would contradict itself if we turned it into a universal law. It also tells us to ask whether our Will would contradict itself if it tried to turn the maxim into a universal law.

Tedrick: Okay, so does the maxim, "When I need a favor, I must make a false promise in return," contradict itself when you try to make it a universal law?

Kant: Yep. If you universalize the maxim, "When I need a favor, I must make a false promise in return," you get the universal law, "Everyone must make a false promise in return, whenever they need a favor." And that just couldn't work.

Tedrick: Why not?

Kant: If *everyone* had to lie when they needed a favor, no one would do favors for anyone else. Everyone would know that everyone else was lying when they asked for a favor, and therefore no one would help anyone else.

Tedrick: Interesting.

Kant: And just think about it. If everyone knew everyone else was lying when they made a promise in return for a favor, no one would accept anyone else's promises. And that would mean no one ever really gave anyone else a promise. And that would mean no one ever really made a promise. And that means that the law which tells everyone to make false promises actually makes it impossible for people to make false promises. So, the maxim contradicts itself if you make it a universal law.

Tedrick: Okay. But what's wrong with that again?

Kant: Well, if a maxim contradicts itself when you make it a universal law, then the Will can't will that it become a universal law. You Will can't will a contradiction. And that means if a maxim contradicts itself when it becomes a universal law, then the maxim doesn't come from the Will itself; that is, the maxim doesn't come from Reason.

Tedrick: Okay. Now give me an example of a maxim that doesn't contradict itself when you make it a universal law, but your Will would contradict itself if it willed that the maxim become a universal law.

Kant: Okay, try this one: "You must not develop your intellectual abilities." That law would work, even if you universalized it. It would become the universal law, "Everyone must not develop her or his intellectual abilities." And everyone could go around not developing their intellectual abilities. It would be possible for everyone to follow it.

Tedrick: So, it wouldn't contradict itself if you universalized it.

Kant: Right. But if your Will willed that the maxim become a universal law, your Will would contradict itself.

Tedrick: Why?

Kant: Because your Will is Practical Reason, and Reason wants everything to be rational. And the only way everything can be rational is if everyone acts completely rationally. And the only way everyone can act completely rationally is if everyone has fully developed her or his intellectual abilities.

Tedrick: So, basically, if your Will made it a universal law that everyone not develop their rational abilities, it would be Willing that you and everyone else be irrational. And therefore, your Will would contradict itself, because your Will—which is Practical Reason—would never tell you to be irrational.

Kant: Exactly.

Tedrick: Okay. Now give me a maxim that passes the CII test.

Kant: How about, "Tell the truth." If you universalize that maxim, it becomes the universal law, "Everyone must tell the truth." And that would work. Everyone could go around telling the truth. The maxim doesn't contradict itself.

Tedrick: But would your Will contradict itself if it willed that that maxim become a universal law?

Kant: Nope.

Tedrick: But I don't always want to tell the truth, and I don't always want other people to tell the truth about me.

Kant: I know. But that's your Inclinations talking, not your Will. Your Will is Reason, and Reason always wants the truth. So, if you willed that everyone follow the maxim, "Tell the truth," your Will wouldn't contradict itself.

Tedrick: So, the maxim “Tell the truth” is one I’m allowed to follow, because it passes the C11 test. I can will that it become a universal law because (a) it wouldn’t contradict itself if it became a universal law, and (b) my Will wouldn’t contradict itself if it willed that the maxim become a universal law.

Kant: Exactly. And that means it’s probably your duty to tell the truth.

Tedrick: *Probably?*

Kant: Right. What we know is that the maxim, “Tell the truth,” *could* come from Reason. Now we have to find out whether it *does* actually come from Reason.

Tedrick: How do we find that out?

Kant: We have to study Reason itself.

Tedrick: Oh right. Metaphysics of morals and all that.

Kant: Right.

Tedrick: When are we going to do that?

Kant: In another book. Actually, in another two books

Tedrick: What are they?

Kant: *Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Tedrick: Sounds fun.

Kant: I think so. But, then again, I’m weird.

Tedrick: It’s true; you are. But did you say that that last one was “C11”?

Kant: Yeah.

Tedrick: That means there’s a C12?

Kant: Yep.

Tedrick: Okay. What is it?

Kant: Well, let’s start over.

Tedrick: Start where?

Kant: With the question of what the Will is.

Tedrick: The Will is Practical Reason. In other words, the Will is Reason when Reason is making decisions about which laws to follow.

Kant: Exactly. And to make a decision about which law to follow, you have to have some end or goal or reason for choosing that law.

Tedrick: How does that help?

Kant: Well, what kind of end should the Will have, when it goes to decide which law to follow?

Tedrick: It would have to be the kind of end that every Will has, just because it is a Will.

Kant: What kind of end would that be?

Tedrick: I don't know. What?

Kant: Think about it. What is the end of the Will? What goal does every Will have, just because it's a Will?

Tedrick: Um.

Kant: What is the Will?

Tedrick: Reason.

Kant: But does every Will act rationally all the time?

Tedrick: No.

Kant: So what does the Will want? What is its mission?

Tedrick: To be rational. It wants to be what it is. Its mission is to be truthful about itself in how it acts. Its purpose is to not pretend to be something it's not. The Will wants to be Reason. Its end is to be itself in the fullest way it possibly can.

Kant: Exactly. The Will is its own end, because the end of the Will is Reason, because the Will *is* Practical Reason.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: So that means your Will is an end, and my Will is an end, and every Will is an end. That means every rational being is an end.

Tedrick: Okay. So every rational being is an end. How does that help us figure out CI2?

Kant: Well, think about it. If every rational being is an end, would it be right to treat any rational being as if she or he were just a means to fulfilling one of your Inclinations?

Tedrick: No. If you treated a rational being as if she or he were just a means to fulfilling one of your Inclinations, you'd be lying about that person. The person would actually be an end, but you'd be treating her or him as if he or she were not an end.

Kant: And what's wrong with lying?

Tedrick: You can't will that the maxim "You must lie" become a universal law. That's C11.

Kant: Exactly. So, C12 says, "Treat every rational being as an end, not just a means." If you treated a rational being as a mere means, you'd be lying about the kind of thing that the rational being is, and lying violates C11

Tedrick: So, C12 is based on C11, and C11 is based on testing for two different kinds of contradiction?

Kant: You could look at it like that, yes. However, you could also say that C12 is based on a test for contradiction as well.

Tedrick: How?

Kant: Well, look at it like this. Is being rational the same for everyone? Or is being rational one thing for you, and another thing for me?

Tedrick: Being rational is the same for everyone.

Kant: So Reason is the same for everyone. Reason isn't one thing for you, and something else for me?

Tedrick: I guess not.

Kant: Would my Reason ever contradict your Reason?

Tedrick: No. How could it? It wouldn't be rational if it contradicted Reason!

Kant: Exactly. So if your Will says that your Reason is an end, then your *Reason* says that your Reason is an end. (Your Will is Practical Reason, after all, and that means whatever your Will can only say what your Reason says). And if your Reason says that it is an end, my Reason can't treat your Reason as a mere means. If my Reason treated your Reason as if it were a means, then my Reason would contradict your Reason, since your Reason treats itself as an end. But that's impossible, since Reason can't contradict Reason. So, I have to treat you as an end; I can't treat you as a mere means.

Tedrick: I'm lost.

Kant: Okay. Think about it this way. My Reason treats itself as an end. My Reason says that becoming more like Reason is something that my Will should want. After all, my Will is Practical Reason, and therefore my Will automatically wants to be itself.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: But you have Reason too, right?

Tedrick: Right.

Kant: So, if my Reason said that it itself is an end, then it is saying that Reason is an end.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: But, if my Reason said that your Reason is just a means, then it is saying that Reason is *not* an end.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: So, my Reason would be saying that Reason is an end, and that Reason is not an end. And that's self-contradictory.

Tedrick: What's wrong with that?

Kant: Self-contradiction is irrational! Reason can't contradict itself, any more than gravity can repel itself. It's impossible. And that's the point of C12. We all have to treat all rational beings as if they are ends, and not as if they are mere means to some other end. Otherwise, our Wills and Reasons will contradict themselves, which is impossible.

Tedrick: So, is it enough for me to just not treat you as a mere means? Or do I actually have to do good things for you?

Kant: Just because you're not treating someone as a mere means, doesn't mean you're actually treating him or her as an end. Just because your Reason isn't actively contradicting itself, doesn't mean it's really in harmony with itself.

Tedrick: So, I not only have to not contradict the principle that every rational being is an end, I have to act in harmony with that principle?

Kant: Right. And that means you actually have to help other people, in addition to helping yourself (you're a rational being, after all, and therefore you have to help yourself as much as anyone else). You actually have to treat all rational beings as ends. Rational beings have to be the "ends" (or "goals" or "reasons") for which you choose to follow the laws that you choose to follow.