

Kant's Catechism for Moral Education: From Particularity Through Universality to Morality

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INTRODUCTION

Toward the end of "The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue," in the first section of *The Methodology of Ethics*, Immanuel Kant offers moral educators a number of recommendations regarding aims and procedures for fostering what he understands to comprise genuine moral virtue. Fundamental to the initial stages of this educational task, Kant maintains, is a moral catechism which he presents in the form of a dialogue between teacher and student.¹ While the dialogue is very short — Kant explicitly says it is but a fragment of a complete catechism to be filled in by the teacher in accordance with particularly given pedagogical circumstances — it identifies in introductory and general terms, both explicitly and implicitly, much of the substance and direction by which he believes our practices and policies of moral education should abide.² As a pedagogical device, the catechism is not so much a formulation of content specifying what one ought to believe and do as it is a curriculum of concepts and principles, questions and answers basic to the development of the understanding, abilities and dispositions constitutive of morally virtuous character. It is less a substantive doctrine and more a philosophy (*Lehre*) in the customary, non-technical sense of a fundamental orientation to life or a creed by which to think and live seriously/rationally. But it is a philosophy or creed, as I hope to show, that is addressed to our universal capacity for rationality by our own reason (*MV*, 150). My focus in examining the catechism will be on how particular moral affirmations and judgments bear universal entailments or implications and on the role of non-contradiction as a governing moral criterion in the development of rational deliberation as understood by Kant.

PARTICULARITY

The teacher initiates the dialogue by asking the student "What is your greatest, yes, your whole desire in life?" (*MV*, 149). It is immediately noteworthy that although Kant believes there to be no necessary connection between our desires, wants or prudential interests and genuine moral virtue, and that no end pursued in quest of our happiness and well-being can by itself justify the morality of a policy or action or define morally virtuous character, he is recommending here that the teacher begin with an identification of what, according to the student himself, would make him happy.³ It is the student's particularity that is being addressed and this through the implied suggestion that the attainment of happiness through satisfaction of our desires and interests is our final end. We should note, however, that the question is posed at a general and unifying level; it does not ask for one or two wants or interests that the student would like to have satisfied or met. The question is posed at a level intending the student to conceptualize comprehensively the kind of life he conceives worthy of pursuit. The student's response to the question, however, is total and complete silence. After awhile, the teacher suggests: "[Well, how about] [t]hat

everything should always go according to your wish and will" (*MV*, 149). Once again, total and complete silence.

The teacher then suggests: "It is called happiness (constant well-being, a pleasant life, complete satisfaction with one's condition) [*Glueckseligkeit*]" (*MV*, 149). Perhaps concerned about the prospect of yet another yawning silence, the teacher goes on immediately to ask the student whether he would share his happiness and good fortune with others if he had already managed to secure all the happiness in the world as defined above (*MV*, 149). The conditional, hypothetical frame of the question is important. Not only is it counter-factual in the case of the student; in Kant's estimation, the condition of such total bliss is an impossibility for all of us given the nature of human desires. As he writes elsewhere, "[I]nclinations change, grow with the indulgence one allows them, and always leave behind a still greater void than one had thought to fill" (*CPrR*, 99). For the moment, let us simply note the hypothetical condition in which the question places the student. What answer does the student give? He replies: "I would share it and make other people happy and contented too" (*MV*, 149). At this, the student's first utterance, the teacher praises him saying it is perfectly clear that he has a good heart (*MV*, 149). It is clear, then, that the student is not someone who has to learn virtue from scratch. We can assume that he is a member of a community who has already undergone socialization and acculturation into an institutionalized set of values and traditions which constellates a determinate conception or tradition of what it means to live the good life (*LE*, 247-51).⁴ Whatever it is that the student is required to learn in order for his virtuous disposition to evolve into genuine moral virtue, it will be learned upon the social foundations of his previous initiation into the traditions and institutions of his community.⁵

The direction of this further learning is signaled by what the teacher is now to try and identify in this good-hearted student: "But let us see if you have good understanding" (*MV*, 149). As Kant writes in his Lectures, "[a] kind heart does not necessarily imply a [morally] virtuous character" (*LE*, 245). Our discernments of the good and the bad in distinctly moral terms, together with our ability to do so objectively, requires understanding (*LE*, 23, 44, 245; *CPrR*, 133).⁶ The kind of understanding the teacher is to look for is illustrated by the following questions she now proceeds to pose to the student.

Would you give the sluggard [Faulenzer: couch-potato] soft pillows to while away his life in sweet idleness? Or the drunkard wine and other intoxicating spirits? Or the deceiver a charming appearance and captivating manners so as to dupe others? Or the violent person audacity and a hard fist so as to be able to overpower others? (*MV*, 149).

It is then pointed out to the student that these are all ways and means by which different people would have their desires satisfied, thereby attaining happiness and well-being as they conceive it. Faced with these examples, and perhaps aware in some way of the truth that "making a man happy is quite different from making him good," the student replies that he would not do such things.⁷ The teacher then explicitly articulates the student's affirmation saying that he recognizes that even if he were in a condition of total and complete happiness, he understands that his good will towards others must first reflectively assess and judge whether potential

recipients of his generosity and benevolence are “worthy of happiness” (*MV*, 149). Understanding here serves to direct already-acquired virtue within deliberation upon whether acts of benevolence actually contribute to the true good of the recipient and genuinely benefit the other’s worth as a person (*LE*, 196; see *G*, 61). The student’s own worth is, of course, also thereby implicated.

It is an important feature of the student’s understanding that he is apparently willing to distinguish between the actual desires, inclinations and interests people have come to acquire and the merit of providing for their satisfaction or fulfillment, either by themselves or by others. The student may have already learned this through his own past experiences of disappointment in the satisfaction of wants that did not live up to his expectations. But the criteria of such worthiness that must guide our benevolence are not given by the teacher at this point. Instead, the teacher is to probe the student’s understanding through the following question: “But as for yourself, you would probably have no hesitation in first providing yourself with everything you reckon in your happiness?” (*MV*, 149). The student’s own particularity is here being more closely examined through a consideration of how the student would treat himself as a potential recipient of his own desire- and interest- satisfaction rather than, as in the previous question, how he would treat others as potential recipients of his benevolence. How would he treat himself as the “object” of his own judgment and assessment?

Notice that the conditional framework of the teacher’s question has shifted. The circumstances of the student’s deliberation are now not those of complete and total happiness but of incomplete and partial happiness. In that the question asks the student how he would go about providing himself with desire — and want — satisfaction, the question now situates the student in precisely the same condition as were the others when they were being considered as potential recipients of his benevolence — as persons whose state of happiness could be enhanced. When it comes to his own particular judgment on whether he would first go ahead and provide himself with the happiness he wants, the student replies: “Yes” (*MV*, 149). Thus it appears that the student would not first consider the fulfillment of his wants and desires under a criterion of merit or worthiness applied to himself. His answer immediately raises the question whether being in this condition of only partial and relative happiness would also affect his generosity and benevolence towards others. Is the student’s virtuous willingness to share his happiness with others actually contingent upon his being in the condition of total and secure happiness, as a particular set of circumstances upon which his “virtue” is dependent and to which it remains relative? In other words, is his virtue an authentically moral virtue and is it genuinely his own? Or is it the sheer luck of the draw?

The student’s answer also raises the related question of his understanding of the role of his own subjective particularity within his deliberations. Is the student here illegitimately privileging himself over others? The teacher’s next question following the student’s affirmative reply would seem to run along this track: “But does it not also occur to you to ask whether you yourself might be worthy of happiness?” (*MV*, 149). The teacher is now to consider that the student may fail to understand

something. For the student appears to be operating with a double-standard or at least a very malleable ruler. The measure applied to others is not the measure applied to oneself. When considering others as potential recipients of his benevolence, he acknowledged that he will be governed by a criterion of merit or worthiness; when placed in the same hypothetical position as the others, he replies that he would not govern his decision-making in accordance with such a criterion. The student seems to be illegitimately exempting himself from a treatment that he affirmed to be applicable to others. It is as if the student is committed simultaneously to two contradictory propositions or policies of action: 1) Whenever I am deciding whether to satisfy wants and desires of others as potential recipients, I shall consider whether my benevolence would genuinely contribute to their worthiness to be happy; and 2) Whenever I am deciding whether to satisfy my own wants and desires, I shall first proceed to do so without considering my own worth or merit. As such, it cannot be said that the student is “excusing” himself from the policy as applied to others for this would imply some legitimate factor proffered in differentiating between others and the student’s own particular situation. Rather, it appears to be a case of illegitimate exemption, for now the student is in the same — or, at least, relevantly similar — position as the others: a condition of only limited happiness and well-being, one in which he is the potential recipient of (his own) bestowals of happiness. In privileging his own particular case without justification, the student seems to be contradicting the policy he himself acknowledged as being applicable to others.

UNIVERSALITY

The policies or rules we subscribe to and act upon — Kant calls them “maxims” — comprise for Kant the main locus of attributions of moral virtue (*G*, 69). The policies to which we commit ourselves define the kinds of motives of which we are capable; as such, they determine the moral character of our volitions, the moral quality of our will. “Moral culture,” Kant writes, “must be based on ‘maxims,’ not upon discipline — the one prevents evil habits, the other trains the mind to think.”⁸ In thinking about the policies underlying action and deliberation, we are examining not only the moral quality of any given policy but also, at the same time, the relations between the policies we are implicitly and explicitly upholding. In order to see what this involves for Kant, we need to consider how the property of universality affects the policies we decide upon. More precisely, we need to consider the logically universal entailments or implications of adopted policies.

Consider how, apparently unbeknownst to the student, the logical quality or property of universality characterizes the student’s policies and this along three different dimensions each bearing its own universal entailment or implication. First, in affirming that he would apply the criterion of worthiness to be happy within deliberation upon whether and how to share his happiness with others as potential recipients, the student commits himself to such governance with regards to all potential recipients of his benevolence. In no case would he intend his generosity to conflict with an other’s worthiness to be happy. Closely related to this first way in which the affirmed policy bears universal implication is the student’s implied assurance that all instances or cases of his deliberation upon whether to share his

happiness with others will involve deliberation in light of the criterion of worthiness to be happy. These universal implications of his own affirmations ought to prevent the student from subscribing to the contradictory of either proposition or policy. If he is committed to those two policies (or either one), then rational consistency forbids him to also maintain the policy of deploying this criterion only in some cases but not others or only with reference to particular persons and not others (A-O contradiction). Only the legitimate profferal of some feature exempting his accordance with (either of) the universal policies could serve as a justifiable excuse, but the student does not offer any. On our interpretation, supported by the movement of the teacher's questioning, the student ends up negating or denying his rational obligations here: while the universal (denotative) scope of the policy extends to and includes himself as a potential recipient and, correlatively, extends to all cases of (his own) deliberation on such matters, he denies accordance with the universal implication by exempting himself, without excuse, from the legitimate scope of his policy's applicability and validity.

A third universal implication of the student's affirmation determines the denotative scope not only of potential recipients as "objects" of deliberation and cases or instances of deliberational activity of such kind, but also of potential subjects of deliberation. In saying that he would apply the criterion of worthiness in his deliberations, rational consistency requires the student to prescribe accordance with this criterion for all deliberating persons engaged in relevantly similar deliberative cases (of deciding whether to extend one's benevolence and generosity to potential recipients). In terms of this universal implication, it would be irrational because contradictory for the student to claim that he, as one particular subject of deliberation, should abide by the criterion of worthiness but no other subject engaged in the same or relevantly similar deliberative matters or problems should be so governed. (It is equivalently contradictory to maintain/prescribe that all should so abide, but some — that is, I or certain others — may not.) Again, if some deliberators (himself or others) are to be legitimately excluded from the entailed universal scope of the student's policy, then some reason must be provided and the student provides none.

A fourth consideration, objectivity, now emerges. The three universal policy-implications of the student's own affirmations may be viewed as different dimensions of one and the same objectively-intended claim bearing one and the same objectively-intended prescription: the claim that this kind of deliberation itself requires accordance with this specific criterion and the consequent prescription that such a criterion ought to be employed within such deliberation (exceptions to the rule requiring justification, legitimate excuse). The emergence here of the consideration of objectivity means that appraisals of moral judgment, action and virtue are not comprehensively pursued simply under the criterion of rational consistency and the principle of non-contradiction. Objectivity is also a criterion and this in the form of correctness or rightness. The understanding the teacher is fostering in the student is one of logical consistency in his affirmations and between these and their universal entailments. However, the teacher is also attuned to a criterion of objective rightness

that is also part of the prescriptive or legislative function of reason. What reason prescribes to us is a form of self-governance by the universal implications of the particular policies we adopt in our own case — a governance that is universally applicable to and objectively binding upon ourselves and all others as rational persons situated in relevantly similar circumstances. If morality were only a matter of consistently following through on the universal implications of one's decisions and commitments, we would be in a position to infer moral probity from logical consistency. But coherent integration between beliefs motivating action guarantees neither truth nor the moral correctness of our judgments, decisions and actions. Part of the student's developing realization that his obligation as a rational person to consistently abide by and not contradict the universal entailments/prescriptions of his own judgments and commitments is the understanding that this is an obligation precisely in so far as it is not conditional upon or relative to the wants, desires and prudential self-interests making up his own subjective particularity, or the particularities of others. The teacher must now find a way of bringing the student to realize for himself that his illegitimate privileging of his own particularity comprises a contradiction of his own acknowledgement that he should deploy the objective criterion of worthiness within deliberation, and that such a contradiction or denial is both irrational and immoral. Indeed, immoral partly because irrational.

MORALITY

Let us now return to the dialogue. While the subtle charms of words may at times initiate happy conversions, the true test of what the student has learned thus far resides not in recitation but in the application of his understanding to concrete situations and predicaments requiring judgment for their management or resolution (*MV*, 146, 152). The teacher is now to provide him with one: "For instance, if a situation presents itself in which you can get yourself or a friend a great advantage by an artfully thought out lie (and without hurting anybody else either), what does your reason say to that?" (*MV*, 150; see *LE*, 227). To this, the student's reply is now readily forthcoming: "I should not lie, though the advantage to me and my friend be as great as ever you please. Lying is mean and makes a man unworthy to be happy. Here is an unconditional constraint by a command (or prohibition) of reason, which I must obey. In the face of this, all my inclinations must be silent" (*MV*, 150). It appears as if, having suddenly undergone a kind of moral phenomenology of the soul, the student has not only autonomously appropriated the criterion of worthiness within judgment but recognizes as well its universally binding, self-implicating character as an objective criterion. Reason prescribes or legislates to him that if all persons are made unworthy through their acts of lying in order to secure advantage, and he is one who has a moral interest in his own worth, he ought not to perform such acts. And a fortiori, he ought not to not make it a policy of doing so in the sense of developing a disposition to perform such actions. Seemingly, there is now neither illegitimate self-exemption nor exclusion of particular others from the universal implications of the policy his decision not to lie affirms. He seems now to be fulfilling his rational obligations and he goes on to call the necessity he recognizes here his duty (*MV*, 150). The teacher is now once again to articulate explicitly the point or juncture at which the dialogue has arrived Kant writes: "Accordingly, the

observance of man's duty is the universal and sole condition of his worthiness to be happy; and these two are one and the same" (*MV*, 150).

We need to ask now as to how this application was made. How did the student come to understand the act of lying for such a purpose, together with the act's universal implication as policy or disposition, to be contrary to the worth of personhood and, hence, to be morally forbidden? How is what he has learned about the rational obligation to coherently abide by the universal implications of one's decisions and commitments at work in leading him to judge such actions to be morally wrong and forbidden? In light of Kant's own arguments on this issue, we can attempt a brief speculative reconstruction of the application of the student's learning to this particular case.⁹

Applying what has been learned, we ask: If one were to lie for the sake of securing advantage — say, to ask someone for a loan of money promising to repay it shortly but really having no intention whatsoever of doing so — what universal policy or maxim would be entailed by such an action? The policy that it is permissible for anyone to make a lying promise in order to further one's interests or extricate themselves (and/or others) from some hardship. It is clear that in light of the requirement of logical consistency, one could not exclude oneself, without legitimate excuse, from being the potential "recipient" of others' deception. So the universal policy implied also prescribes that others may deploy deceptive means against oneself when their prudential interests are at stake. This time, so it appears, the student's reasoning is not ensnared in any contradiction or inconsistency: there is no double-standard and no illegitimate exemptions of oneself or particular others as subjects or recipients of action are claimed.

But things begin to look different once we recall that any autonomously self-imposed obligation to act in accordance with universal implications of one's policies must involve a legitimating claim regarding the objectivity of policies as prescribed. To endorse coherently the universally binding character of a policy (always, we recall, as applied to a specified relevant class of acts and persons) is to differentiate the policy from merely subjective policies marked by unwarranted features of one's particularity that may rest in bias, illegitimate exemption, vested interest or some other form of partiality.¹⁰ For Kant, rational commitment to a policy entails an endorsement of its objectivity where such endorsement is criterial for both the commitment to and the justifiability of a policy. Indeed, the criterion of objectivity requires that we critically assess the universal implications of the policy we are considering by examining whether that policy can really be a universally binding one. Does the policy allow itself to be universalized as an objective policy — one valid for all rational persons as either subjects of deliberation or as otherwise affected by the policy? (Policies that are universal and objective and which, as such, state obligations or duties Kant calls "moral laws.") This means that deciding on a particular course of action in full cognizance of its prescribed universal policy-implications neither makes the policy morally correct nor the prescribing volition or will a morally virtuous one. Universal(ized) policy implications of a decision may reveal a moral obligation to refrain from acting on that decision.¹¹ On Kant's account of the lying promise, this is precisely the case:

Suppose I seek, however, to learn in the quickest way and yet unerringly how to solve the problem “Does a lying promise accord with duty?” I have then to ask myself “Should I really be content that my maxim (the maxim of getting out of a difficulty by a false promise) should hold as a universal law (one valid both for myself and for others)?... I then become aware at once that I can indeed will to lie, but I can by no means will a universal law of lying; for by such a law there could properly be no promises at all, since it would be futile to profess a will for future action to others who would not believe my profession... and consequently my maxim, as soon as it was made a universal law, would be bound to annul itself (G, 70-1).

In this way, it emerges that the student is to recognize a moral duty not to lie in his given circumstances as the conclusion of a pattern of reasoning that does uncover contradictions within the attempt to universalize the implied policy or practice. Because of these contradictions, the policy cannot be an objective one — one universally applicable to and binding upon all.

One can detect not one but two contradictions here: (1) a simple logical contradiction of the kind we have seen above in which one fallaciously excludes oneself (or others) from a universal policy, and (2) what we can call a “practical contradiction,” involved in the attempt to universalize lying promises for prudential purposes as a policy or practice.¹² The difference seems to be that the latter form of contradiction involves a negation or denial of a condition necessary for the attainment of the purpose or end intended by the performance of the action. For a lie to be successful (as intended), a certain trust is required on the “recipient’s” part. A lie must be believed to work. But to universalize such action is to prescribe universally what is entailed by (the decision to perform) such an action as a policy or practice: that all may be deceitful in such circumstances. This prescription, however, if universally followed, would erode precisely that trust necessary for a lie to succeed as intended. The policy is not an objectively binding one in that its universalization is not coherently possible in this case — the maxim thus “annuls itself.” The other contradiction, the logical contradiction, conforms to the pattern we have already seen and illustrates again the negation of the rule of non-contradiction. In deciding to lie for his own advantage (or someone else’s) he would once again be double-dealing, exempting himself without excuse from the universal policy or practice his end requires others to abide by for the possibility of its success. For Kant, both contradictions reveal in different ways that the policy of making lying promises for one’s advantage could not as such “fit as a principle into a possible [coherent] enactment of universal law” (G, 71; See also *CPrR*, 25). Consequently, it cannot be an objective policy or maxim universally applicable to and binding upon all rational persons. A lying promise, our student seems to have learned, doubly fails to transcend one’s subjective particularity. As Kant puts this, “[I]t is requisite to reason’s lawgiving that it should need to presuppose only *itself*, because a rule is objectively and universally valid only when it holds without the contingent, subjective conditions that distinguish one rational being from another (*CPrR*, 18).¹³ In having come to understand this, the student has autonomously appropriated the “supreme principle of morality” (the Categorical Imperative in one of its formulations): “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (G, 70).¹⁴ His moral education is now complete and he is free to pursue his happiness as he sees fit.

1. Kant's understanding of "education" is tied to the transcendental perspective his epistemological writings consistently rely upon and articulate. On related though independent formulations of education from a "transcendental" perspective, see Harvey Siegel's, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988) and *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997). See also John Wilson's account of education as a "transcendental enterprise" in *Preface to the Philosophy of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) and "Education versus Society," *Oxford Review of Education* 23, no. 3 (1997): 333-43.
2. Kant says that the teaching of the catechism must always be suitably tailored to the age, sex and "rank" of the student. See "The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue: Part II" of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis, 1964), 152. This book will be cited as *MV* for all subsequent references. For Kant's views on stages of education corresponding to age differences, see *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 247-51. This book will be cited as *LE* for all subsequent references.
3. See "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason" in *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. and ed. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 90-100. This book will be cited as *CPrR* for all subsequent references.
4. Although moral character, in differentiation from virtues engrained via acculturation, is formed primarily via the learning and understanding of "doctrine" (*LE*, 249). On the priority and independence of moral education vis-a-vis religious doctrine, see *MV*, 147, 153, and 161; *LE* 22, 39, 40-1, 76 and 81; *Kant on Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1906), 105.
5. In this connection, see the incisive interpretation in Barbara Herman's "The Practice of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Philosophy* 72, no. 8 (1985): 414-36.
6. Moral understanding and criteria are not, however, necessarily opposed to our self-interested pursuits of happiness (*CPrR*, 78).
7. The quote is from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (New York and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 109-10. This book will be cited as *G* for all subsequent references.
8. *Kant on Education*, 26.
9. See *CPrR*, 25 and "On the Relationship of Theory to Practice in Morality in General," in *Kant's Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 70-71, for other instructive cases worked by Kant.
10. In the philosophy of education, the "transcendental" status of principles of objectivity, impartiality and universality is most systematically developed and applied by Harvey Siegel. See references in note 1 above. See also "Siegel's Transcendental Quest: An Examination of *Rationality Redeemed?*" *Paideusis: Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society* II, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 13-25.
11. I cannot here address Kant's arguments on the issue of motivational "ertness/inertness" of reason to affect or govern desires, inclinations and emotions. See *G*, 78; *CPrR*, 63, 68, 69, 71, 73, 98, 126. See also Marcia Baron's, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).
12. My interpretation of practical contradictions is indebted to Christine M. Korsgaard's reading in "Kant's formula of Universal Law," *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77-105.
13. See also *LE*, 13 and 37; *G*, 55, 69-70, 112; *CPrR*, 31, 56.

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