

The Missing Voice of the Student: Kant's Monologue on Morality

Thomas Fuhr
University of Tübingen

Walter Okshevsky uses Immanuel Kant's "Moral Catechism" to reconstruct Kant's theories of ethics and moral education. We can distinguish two main theses Okshevsky is proposing.

The first thesis is that according to the moral catechism, moral learning follows three steps. The teacher first asks the student to reflect on his desires in life. She addresses the student in his particularity. In a second step the student learns that his maxims should not only apply to him but to every situation and person. That is, he learns the principle of universality. The third and the second step actually overlap; but we can nevertheless distinguish one from the other. In the third step the student learns that maxims must not only apply universally, but that they must also be objective.

I basically agree with this interpretation of the moral catechism, although I will later discuss whether the student is really addressed in his particularity. Okshevsky defends his interpretation by meticulously following the lines of the interaction between the teacher and the student. Another reason to agree with the interpretation is that the distinction between principles that are universal, but not objective, and those which are both universal and objective concurs with Kant's distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives.

The categorical imperative is not only universally valid, but is also binding without respect to subjective desires. It is valid for every rational person; that is, it is not only universal, but also, as Kant says, "objectively necessary."¹ Therefore, in working out the difference between universality and objectivity, the essay gives a valid interpretation not only of Kant's theory of moral education but also of his ethics. Thereby it is shown that Kant's moral catechism coheres with Kant's views on education and ethics as expressed in his other writings, and that the "moral catechism," therefore, is a useful guide for a reconstruction of Kant's thinking about ethics and moral education. I would only like to add that according to Kant's "Methodology of Ethics," in which the moral catechism is included, moral reasoning with the student is only one part of the entire process of moral education. The other part is the cultivation of morals through practice as outlined in the chapter "Ethical Ascetics."²

Okshevsky agrees with both Kant's ethics and the theory of moral education. He holds that the steps of reasoning in Kant's moral catechism do in fact lead to the development of moral character. By learning the principle of objectivity, the student's moral education is, according to Okshevsky's second thesis, "complete."

I do not see that Kant's moral catechism is of great worth for a theory of moral education. Catechisms comprise a genre mainly influenced by Martin Luther's "Small Catechism" and "Large Catechism."³ These catechisms are not dialogues in the sense that all partners share and discuss their thoughts. They are not even mainly

in the form of questions and answers. They rather explain basic elements of Lutheran religion at a level comprehensible to those with limited knowledge in religion. That is more or less what Kant is doing in his moral catechism. He explains his ethical theory to a student using the form of questions and answers. But the student does not play any genuinely active role. He is simply expected to give the answer the teacher needs to hear in order to proceed with the explanation of her preconceived theory.

Moreover it is not correct to claim that the moral catechism starts “from common human reason,” as Kant believes.⁴ Teacher and student do not engage in a meaningful conversation about the student’s thoughts on happiness and morals, at least not in any significant detail. Therefore, the student is not at all addressed in his particularity. What strikes me most about the catechism is the passivity and yet silence of Kant’s imagined student. Kant starts the catechism with a question by the teacher. She asks: “What is the greatest, yes, your whole desire in life?” No answer from the student. Given the need to go on, the teacher answers the question herself. The answer is: “That everything should always go according to your wish and will.” The next question is: “How do we call such a condition?” Once again, no answer from the student. The teacher fills the gap by explaining that the condition is called happiness.

The first two questions do not stimulate the student to think independently about morals and the good life. The first one is too difficult, the second one asks for a specific technical term the student does not know. I am not surprised that the student keeps silent. I asked myself whether I could answer Kant’s first question. I still think I could not. I do not know what my “whole desire in life” is. But I do know that I do not desire to live in a world where everything would always go according to my wishes. I rather tend to think that it enriches my life to live in a world in which my wishes are not always fulfilled. However, of particular importance here is the question as to how could a child know what his whole desire in life is? If we as adults are not able to answer Kant’s first question, I doubt that children would be able to answer it in any meaningful and sincere way.

In his answer to the third question, the student has to decide whether he would share his happiness with his fellow men or not share it. It is only now that he breaks his silence, since the question is easy to understand and answer. Theoretically, he could say that he did not care at all about his fellow men. But he cannot possibly do that, at least not if he has developed some minimal sympathy for others and some basic understanding of their longings. Therefore, the question is rhetorical. It does not give any live alternatives to ponder over and decide upon. Rather, it only asks the student to confirm that he is able and willing to think and feel ethically at all.

The answer to the fourth question regarding whether he would provide sluggards with pillows, drunkards with wine, and violent persons with a hard fist, is a simple “No, I would not.” Two more questions are answered short and clear. In consistent fashion, the questions do not give the student a chance to leave the path paved by the teacher. The inner voice of the student is still silent and never addressed; he gives the teacher the answers she wants to hear. As we have seen with the prior questions, the questions do not stimulate independent thinking.

Then, the teacher asks the student whether he would lie if the lie gave him or his friends an advantage and would not hurt anybody. Here the answers from the student radically change in style. From this point on, the student gives detailed answers. They are well worked out. He speaks about human dignity, unconditional constraints by commands, prohibitions of reason and happiness as a human wish that depends on the work of an all-powerful being. He also speaks of being unworthy for happiness when a duty is not fulfilled.

This change in the style and content of the student's answers indicates that in fact the main learning is to occur at this point of the catechism, as Okshevsky suggests. But I yet doubt that the student would in fact follow the teacher's path at this point. Until now the student was silent or simply followed the teacher's reasoning without being engaged in significant moral reflection. But now the content of his speech as well as its style are identical to the content and style of the teacher's speech. That is, even after the turning point of the dialogue, the student is still not genuinely engaged. He is just a well behaving student trying to give the teacher the answers she wants to hear.

Kant's moral catechism is not a real dialogue between the student and the teacher, but an explanation of Kant's moral theory. It is in fact a monologue, not a dialogue. As an explanation of Kant's moral theory, I doubt that it is convincing. Why should some short explanations be able to convince the student of Kant's ethics, while many readers of Kant's several books on ethics are still in doubt?

1. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by J.W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 25.

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, trans. by J.W. Ellington (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 154-55. See also the "Methodology of Ethics" in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

3. Martin Luther: *Der Große und der kleine Katechismus*, ed. Kurt Aland and Hermann Kunst (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1985).

4. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 147.