

John Rawls, His book of lectures on the philosophy of Kant

§5. The Absolute Value of a Good Will

I. Gr I:1-3 (393-394) introduces a fundamental part of Kant's moral doctrine: the idea of the absolute value of a good will and this value's being estimable beyond all comparison.

To begin: Kant opens the *Groundwork* with the celebrated statement, "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, that can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will."

The term "good will" is not defined, and Kant leaves us to gather its meaning from the first three paragraphs by seeing the difference between it and the things he says are good only with qualification.

Among the features of our person that Kant distinguishes from a good (or bad) will are these:

- (i) talents of mind: such as intelligence, wit, and judgment
- (ii) qualities of temperament: such as courage, resolution, and constancy of purpose; and among these qualities those particularly serviceable to a good will: moderation of affections, self-control, and sober reflection

Plainly, a good will is also to be distinguished from things wanted by our inclinations:

- (i) gifts of fortune: power, honor, wealth, and health; and
- (ii) happiness, as the complete contentment with our state, the satisfaction of our natural desires in a rational manner

Now, talents of mind, qualities of temperament, and gifts of fortune can be extremely bad when the will that makes use of them is not a good will. Even the secondary virtues, as we may call them—courage and self-control, resolution and sober reflection—have value only on the condition that they assist the will in pursuing universal ends. The primary virtues, let's say, are those the secure possession of which constitutes a good will: prominent among them are wisdom, a sense of justice, and (practical) benevolence. It is persons who have these virtues who are virtuous: particular actions issuing from these virtues have moral worth.⁹ Kant sees talents of

9. Note the distinction: let's say that persons are virtuous; particular actions have moral worth.

mind and qualities of temperament as gifts of nature, whereas a good will is not a gift. It is something achieved; it results from an act of establishing a character, sometimes by a kind of conversion that endures when strengthened by the cultivation of the virtues and of the ways of thought and feeling that support them (Rel 6:47-50).

2. Even happiness itself is not good without qualification. The prosperity and happiness of someone with no trace of a good will cannot give pleasure to an impartial spectator. The opening paragraph then concludes with a characteristic theme of Kant's moral thought:

A good will seems to be the indispensable condition of even the worthiness to be happy.

In the first *Critique* (B834), Kant distinguishes between the practical law derived from the motive of happiness and the practical law derived from the motive of making oneself worthy of happiness. The first he calls the pragmatic law (or rule of prudence), the second the moral law. He thinks of moral philosophy not, as he believes the Greeks did, as the study of how to achieve happiness, but rather as the study of how we are to act if we are to be worthy of the happiness we do achieve. This thought characterizes Kant's moral doctrine.

3. Kant proceeds in I:3 (394) to say that a good will is not good because of what it accomplishes or because of its fitness to bring about some independently specified and already given end. Even if those with a good will altogether lack the capacity to carry out their intentions (through lack of opportunity or of natural endowment), their good will still shines like a jewel, as having full value in itself.

This statement reminds us of Hume's remark: "Virtue in rags is still virtue" (T:584f.). But Hume's explanation differs sharply from Kant's. For Hume, virtuous persons are those who have qualities of character immediately agreeable to, or else useful to, themselves or their associates. His explanation of why virtue in rags is still virtue is that the imagination is more easily set in motion than the understanding, and even though no good is actually produced by the virtuous man imprisoned in a dungeon, we are moved in our judgment by sympathy with those who might have benefited from the good his character is fit to produce.

Kant cannot accept this view, for he rejects the idea of judging the moral worth of character by reference to an independently given conception of goodness, such as Hume's agreeableness and usefulness to ourselves and to others. In I:1-3 (393-394), we are told what a good will is only in a formal way: we know that persons with a good will have a firm and settled character, and consistently act from the principles of (pure) practical reason. From this we know that they adjust and correct the use of their gifts of nature and of fortune to universal ends as those principles require. But we don't know the content of these principles, and so we don't know how persons with a good will actually behave or what duties they recognize.

To conclude: a good will is always good in itself, under all conditions; whereas everything else is good only under certain conditions. And this is so whether the conditional good is a good in itself or good as a means, or both. Happiness, or the rationally ordered satisfaction of our natural desires, may be good in itself (when the ends desired and realized are permissible). But even our happiness and our enjoyment of painting and music are fully good only if we are worthy of them, or have a good will.

4. Kant says in I:3 (394) that a good will is estimable beyond all comparison, far higher in value than the satisfaction of our inclinations, indeed higher than the ordered satisfaction of all our (permissible) inclinations together (or happiness). A good will has, then, two special features: it is the only thing always good in itself without qualification; and its value is incomparably superior to the value of all other things also good in themselves. These two features mark the special status of the good will to which Kant refers (Gr I:4 [394-395]) when he speaks of the absolute value of mere will. The second of these features is that of lexical priority, as I shall say: it means that the value of a good will outranks all other values, no matter how great their measure in their own terms. The superior claims of a good will outweigh absolutely the claims of other values should their claims come into conflict.

Now, we don't yet know how to understand these two features, and it is useless to speculate at this stage. We know that Kant has both a formal conception of a good will and a formal conception of right. He begins with these two interdependent formal conceptions. The goodness of all other things—talents of mind and qualities of temperament, gifts of nature and of fortune, and happiness—is conditioned: their goodness depends on being

compatible with the substantive requirements on actions and institutions imposed by these formal conceptions. This is the general meaning of the priority of right in his doctrine.

But what those substantive requirements are cannot be known until we have worked through Gr II. Taken alone, much that Kant says in Gr I is misleading and can be understood only in light of what comes later.

§6: The Special Purpose of Reason

I: Gr I:5-7 (395-396) are important in explaining how Kant understands a good will and its connection with reason. Kant knows that what he has said about the absolute and incomparable value of a good will in I:1-3 (393-394) may seem extreme, even though it matches our commonsense judgments. To allay this feeling, he examines the question in light of the idea that nature gives us no capacity, including that of reason, unless that capacity is best suited for achieving its purpose.

For what purpose, then, do we have reason? Certainly not for the purpose of securing our own happiness, for nature could achieve that purpose much better by endowing us with the appropriate instincts.

The purpose, Kant thinks, for which nature did give us reason must be to produce a good will. Our having the capacity to reason and to understand the principles of reason is clearly necessary if we are to have a will that can take an interest in the principles of practical reason. So in a world in which nature distributes her endowments in a purposive manner, the purpose of our having reason must be to produce a good will. Certainly, one might object that there might be other candidate purposes, yet Kant thinks that in eliminating the purpose of forwarding our happiness, he has ruled out the only live alternative.

2. An important distinction is made in paragraph 7 (396) between the highest good and the complete good. The highest good is the good will, the condition of all other goods, even of our demands for happiness. Yet the good will is not the complete good: this is specified as a good will's enjoying a happiness appropriate to it. But nature can achieve that highest purpose even if the second purpose of achieving happiness should not be successful, or, as Kant says, is less than zero.