

## **Cheating and Kant's Moral Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to examine cheating in the light of Kant's Moral Philosophy. Part 1 will present a humble sketch of Kant's Philosophy of Desire, Choice and Will. Part 2 appropriates Kantian Will and the human subject to cheating and the culture of corruption. And the last part offers alternatives, projects and recommendations to address the morals of cheating.

**Keywords:** Kant, Cheating, Moral Philosophy, Corruption

## Desire, Choice and Will

Kantian will is one of the most complicated philosophies ever produced. I should never pretend to be an expert on this field as many of you have truly digested all the works of Kant, but just please allow me to share my reflections on the basics of Kant's Moral Philosophy via Jenifer Uleman's, *An Introduction to Kant's Moral Philosophy* (2010).

The complication of the Kantian *will* occurs because as a human faculty, it, at the same time desires, makes choices and issues action-guided principles. As a faculty that desires, it means it wishes and wants. The will desires for something it wishes to accomplish or achieve. It also wants an object or state or even status that gives goodness. As a faculty that makes choices it means that it has the capacity to decide between possible ends. It has the autonomy to choose from among the multifarious aims of action. And as a faculty that renders action-guiding rules it means that it has the capacity to formulate and carry out maxims that will govern one's action. Kant calls this in the groundwork of the *Metaphysics of Morals* as the 'subjective rules for action.' In addition, it chooses from among the many formulations of maxims by which it wants to govern its action.

This strange formulation of Kantian will is further complicated by its very nature as thoroughly rational and thoroughly free, and also often incompletely rational and incompletely free. While it cannot help being thoroughly rational in a basic sense, Kantian will is only rational in a perfect, complete or full sense when it identifies, adopts, and is guided by the best reasons; similarly, while it cannot help being thoroughly free in a basic sense, Kantian will is free in

a perfect, complete or full sense only when it is determined by those parts of the self that are our best parts.<sup>1</sup>

**Desire.** Kant said that the capacity for desire is the capacity to be, by means of one's representations, the cause of the objects of these representations.<sup>2</sup> Kant's definition of desire is a step higher than our common conception of desire which is to wish for or crave for or long to achieve something. Essentially, for Kant, desire is to move toward the realization of something of which one has an idea.

Human beings have the capacity to desire because we have the capacity to carry out, produce, achieve or do what we desire. The object of our desire will not remain as such because we may always have the means to make it a reality. Although Kant is aware that not all of our desires will turn to reality, we always have the strongest faculty to organize our energies and capacities to realize something that is in our mind. We may have physical or material limitations but that does not limit our capacity to desire.

Nonetheless, Kant's notion of desire is still similar to our common conception of it inasmuch as it animates us toward something we want but do not yet have. What we want, wish, long and incline to do or have, become in themselves the driving force to achieve them. Here we have to emphasize that desire is coming from internal forces and not derivative of something external or instinctive to us.

Human desire is different from the desires of animals. Animals seem to have the desire to survive and to reproduce. They may also channel their energies and efforts to carry out what they desire. But for Kant, this is not necessarily desire.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Jennifer A. Uleman. *An Introduction to Kant's Moral Philosophy* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Metaphysics of Morals*. trans. Mary Gregor (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6:211.

These are only movements structured by representations and goals. Human beings, being able to represent things by means of concepts, have reason and thus are capable of processing more complicated representations of desire. This is called the capacity for choice.

**Choice.** After having identified our capacity for desire, Kant continued to identify yet another faculty exclusive for beings– the capacity for choice. In *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defines capacity for choice as doing or refraining from doing as one pleases. What needs to be emphasized here is the addition of reason to desire. Reason will help choose to do or not to do the one that we desire.

How do human beings, being able to represent by means of concepts, become rational? For Kant, a concept is an abstracted representation of that which contains all and only the characteristics that would qualify something to be an instance of the concept. The concept of a student, for example, is an individual who is enrolled in an academic institution and who is duty bound to pass the academic requirements and to obey the rules and regulations of the institution.

This concept of a student is not peculiar but comprehensively unanimous to all kinds of students. From this concept, we may be able to make judgments in our differentiation of one from the other; or one similar to the other; or one that completely contradicts the other. Concepts give us mental standards. Thus, we are able to distinguish honest from dishonest students, or determined from irresolute students.

Making judgments of one peculiar concept to the other invokes reason and justification. To invoke reason is to be rational. This has to be seen, though, in its most basic sense. Yet, this will bring us to the necessary transformation of the capacity for desire to the capacity for choice.

When our capacity for desire supersedes external forces or instinctive formulations, it creates a gap between stimuli and action. This gap paves a room for choice. Thus, human rationality makes us capable of weighing options, considering alternatives, taking into account our preferences, and therefore choosing possible courses of action.

Another important element to consider in Kant's capacity for choice is the principle of causality. Kant insists in *Metaphysics of Morals* that when something is desired or chosen by rational beings, action towards that object is initiated. The free and rational choice of that which one desires does not end in the choice itself, but it must essentially effect something. Although, again, like desire, we may not be able to do all means to achieve the object of our choice but for Kant, being able to effect or cause something out of one's capacity for choice is already conclusive.

**Will.** Aside from directing desire and choice to action, Kant made sense with his moral philosophy by explicating will. For Kant, the Will is the capacity for desire considered not in relation to action but rather in relation to the ground determining choice to action.<sup>3</sup> He further clarifies that the will is not directed to actions but immediately to giving laws for the maxims of action.<sup>4</sup>

There are two important aspects to consider in Kant's Will. One is the capacity to desire and to choose and the drive to initiate action. The second aspect of Kant's Will is that it provides rational guidance for action. These two aspects, however, are not distinct from one another, rather, they are only two sides of the same coin.

Kant's Will almost always operates with both aspects at once. This is to say that when we desire something, our rationality will bring us to choose the best and thus lead us to

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:213.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:226.

action. At the same time, our act of choosing is based from a self-generated maxim. This is how the complete will works as one – as ground and law-giver.

With the will nicely drawn as both the capacity to choose and the capacity to give itself grounds for choosing, Kant esteems the will as practical reason itself.<sup>5</sup> Practical reason is reason employed to guide practice or action. “Reason would need the capacity to furnish and represent principles, the capacity to choose from among principles, as well as to judge cases in light of those principles and to figure out how to act accordingly”.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the will is reason in its practical employment.

The ability to cause and order my action to be in conformity with the internal laws or maxims or guidelines that I represent to myself is the complete manifestation of the will. To do this, first, I must have a kind of internal mental life so that I can represent a law or a guiding principle to myself. Second, I must be able to decide which law or guideline I shall endorse to myself to guide and order my actions. Third, I must be able to scrutinize my actions if they are in fact in accordance to the law I have chosen.

### **Cheating and the Culture of Corruption**

In this section, we shall try to appropriate the moral philosophy of Kant especially the Kantian Will to cheating. We will also situate cheating as only a minute speck of the whole culture of corruption.

To cheat or the act of cheating is to deceive or to mislead somebody for personal gain. To cheat is to break the rules in an attempt to gain an unfair advantage. Cheating may occur in various forms. There are massive cheating in relationships, languages, homes, companies, communities, governments, churches, and so forth and so on. The

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:213

<sup>6</sup> Uleman, 2012, p. 33.

examples cited in the introduction are the immediate experiences I had as a school teacher. As we are in this conference of academicians, we might as well use the examples of cheating in the classroom as our way of appropriating Kantian Moral Philosophy.

Students enrolled in an academic institution and have followed the institutional rules and regulations may have a very legitimate desire to pass the course and become a successful professional. In extension, this is not only the desire of the students but also of their parents and the teachers and those who are involved in the academic formation of students. This makes this desire communal in nature.

The student desiring to pass the course and to become a successful professional has all the ability to organize his/her energies and resources to make this desire into a reality. Therefore a student strives and gives his best in developing his knowledge and skills in order to carry out his desire. In the same way, other individuals involved in the student's academic formation animate everything possible to help the student achieve his desires.

The desire to pass the course and to become successful is neither instinctive nor is just a product of external stimuli. A motivated student with this desire is necessarily driven by an internal goal. Nonetheless, as soon as he is confronted with different conditions and situations, he is able to process them vis-a-vis his desired goal. This process now is his capacity for choice.

The mere rationality of the student provides him with concepts of a student desiring to pass the course and to become successful. The overarching concept of this desire eliminates all the other smaller desires along the way and gives him the free hand to order his desires. The rational and free choice will even direct all other desires to cause the reality of the ultimate desire. On the other hand, the rational

and free choice will also eliminate and purge other desires that are inconsistent with the ultimate desire.

The student's *will* will bring about the capacity to desire to pass the course and to become successful because he is able to choose and to animate his riches to reach his goal and at the same time to provide for himself the rational guidance to cause the reality of his goal.

Cheating is inconsistent with all these processes because this is inconsistent with the very being that desires, in the first place. We have defined students as individuals enrolled in an academic institution that freely and willingly follow the institutional rules and regulations. Every institution regulates cheating, deceit, corruption, academic integrity and the like. Students who cheat, though they may initially have the desire to pass and become successful, only manifest that their desire is not coming from internal drive but from an external (or worse) instinctive goal.

Second, to cheat is also contradictory to *cause* the desire to pass the course and to become successful. Cheating will definitely bring the student to failure inasmuch as the institutional rules and regulations are concerned. Success here refers to a promising professional in his own field. Success here does not refer to a successful cheater (unless perhaps one studies to become a professional cheater, but I suppose no academic institution is offering this). Therefore, a student may have a correct desire but to cause or to animate the realization of this desire is contradictory.

Third, cheating is not a rational choice. This is only a choice of a desperate, lazy, apathetic, wandering and misled individual. A student may think apparently that cheating will cause him to pass the course. Upon closer examination, cheating may bring the student a passing figure but he actually failed the course. The 'figure' is only derived from deceit and not reflective of the actual performance of the student. Definitely, cheating is not the correct and rational

choice to achieve the desire to pass the course and to become successful.

Fourth, by virtue of the causality of choice, cheating is not necessarily in accordance with an absolute universal rule. Student A, being a cheater, cannot obligate student B to cheat too. Never will cheating become coherent with Kant's principle of causality because for Kant, causality needs always to be governed by laws.

Fifth, cheating does not fit into the third dimension which is the will and the Kantian will in general because in his *Groundwork*, Kant insists that the will is thought to be the capacity to determine itself to acting in conformity with certain laws.<sup>7</sup>

We can continue our enumeration of the appropriation of Kantian Moral Philosophy to cheating but it is also proper to situate cheating as only a tiny part of the whole culture of corruption. In this part of the paper, I will only expose the mechanisms of the culture of corruption as it is the overarching umbrella of cheating, deceit and the like. The culture of corruption can also be the route by which all these sophisticated systems of cheating are all directed to. I may not be able to apply aptly and justly the moral philosophy of Kant to the complications of the culture of corruption (let alone the experts do that) anymore, but the understanding of petty cheating in the light of Kantian Will will surely bring a closer scrutiny of the widespread culture of corruption.

Corruption, on the one hand, is commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gain. Culture, on the other hand, is defined as a set of ideals, values, and standards

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<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (USA: The Liberal Arts Press, 1959), 4:427.

of behavior.<sup>8</sup> Culture of corruption then, means the adoption of abuse and deceit as ideal and standard of behavior in relationships, communities, governments, economies and politics. It involves members of the private and public sectors, and it shows its face in a wide array of illicit behavior such as bribery, extortion, fraud, nepotism, graft, pilferage, embezzlement, falsification of records, influence-peddling, and contributions to election campaigns.

Raul Goco skilfully writes: “Corruption undermines the legitimacy of governance and strikes at the moral fiber of the people... Corruption hurts everyone. It deepens poverty. It distorts social and economic development, it erodes the provisions of essential public services and it undermines democracy.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, corruption as a culture is tolerated and is even kept on. Corruption in the public and private sector in the Philippines is pervasive and deep-rooted.<sup>10</sup>

The culture of corruption is not only tolerated and has become pervasive but it has also become institutionalized. It has turned into a way of life and an outlook towards public office.<sup>11</sup> To complicate this whole web of deception, the Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) contends that “Corruption has become a charge being used by corrupt people to protect themselves and to stifle reform. The whole fight against corruption is in danger of being corrupted”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Wiliam A. Haviland. *Anthropology* (Belmont California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning Inc., 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Raul I. Goco. “A Call for United Nations Declaration to Combat Corruption.” in *The Philippine Star*, October 10, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Amando Doronilla. “WB: Corruption in RP Deep-rooted.” in *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 6, 1999, page 19.

<sup>11</sup> Florangel Rosario-Braid. “The ‘Whistleblower’ – A Mechanism for Anti-Corruption.” in *Manila Bulletin*, June 28, 2003, page 6.

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, AFP. “Indonesia Most Corrupt in Asia Pacific; RP 4<sup>th</sup>.” In *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 10 2010, p. A-7.

To end, let us go back to what Kant tells us about the will that legislates for itself. "...The Autonomy of the will provides the moral agent the capacity to legislate the moral law within. Since the moral law comes from within, a person is morally required to do the good accordingly. Otherwise, the individual violates his capacity for self-rule".<sup>13</sup>

### **Our Way of Proceeding**

Individuals and societies may easily fall short of hope that there is nothing that we can do to counter the culture of corruption. Have we fought enough against cheating in self, in the classroom, in our school, in our community? Have we contributed enough in the legislation of corrupt practices in the home or in the local government? Have we denounced enough the culture of corruption?

What I propose first, as our way to proceed, is to review our very own moral duty to become active formators of our students. We can never underestimate the influence that we have in the rational formation of those students entrusted to us. By rational we mean their being able to stand for the good with moral autonomy.

Second, something can be achieved in lobbying for the legislation and intensive implementation of policies and laws against cheating and corruption. When rules against cheating are set in the classroom, the message is already very clear right from the very start. When students are properly oriented with the school's policies against cheating, the standard is already established. When organizations like the Social Ethics Society initiates the lobbying of ordinances against corruption in the local council, social conscience is also formed.

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<sup>13</sup> cf. Christopher Ryan B. Maboloc. *Ethics and Human Dignity* (Manila: Rex Bookstore Inc., 2010).

Third, the fight against corruption should be taken as a categorical imperative. Since corruption “hurts” everyone, to denounce it is prophetic and unconditional in nature. Denouncing what brings death to humans and society is always the right thing to do. This way, we are making the moral worth of each man inviolable.

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