Kant’s Foundations for Morality: We Make the Law for Ourselves

NOTE: The following text is excerpted from Michael Sandel’s (2009) book “Justice” and from transcripts of his lecture series which go by the same title.

Kant… thinks… we are all rational beings, which simply means that we are beings who are capable of reason. Kant argues that reason can [be in control], at least some of the time. When reason governs our will, we are not driven by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Our capacity for reason is bound up with our capacity for freedom. Taken together, these capacities make us distinctive, and set us apart from mere animal existence. They make us more than mere creatures of appetite. We are also autonomous beings, which is to say that we are beings capable of acting and choosing freely. Now, this capacity for reason and freedom isn’t the only capacity we have. We also have the capacity for pain and pleasure, for suffering and satisfaction. Kant admits the utilitarians were half right, of course we seek to avoid pain and we like pleasure, Kant doesn’t deny this, what he does deny is Bentham’s claim that pain and pleasure are our sovereign masters. He thinks that’s wrong. Kant thinks that it’s our rational capacity that makes us distinctive, that makes us special, that sets us apart from and above mere animal existence. It makes us something more than just physical creatures with appetites.

Now, we often think of freedom as simply consisting in doing what we want or in the absence of obstacles to getting what we want, that’s one way of thinking about freedom. But this isn’t Kant’s idea of freedom, Kant has a more stringent demanding notion of what it means to be free… When we, like animals, seek after pleasure or the satisfaction of our desires or the avoidance of pain, when we do that we aren’t really acting freely. Why not? We’re really acting as the slaves of those appetites and impulses. I didn’t choose this particular hunger or that particular appetite, and so when I act to satisfy it, I’m just acting according to natural necessity.
And for Kant, freedom is the opposite of necessity. There was an advertising slogan for the soft drink Sprite a few years ago. The slogan was “Obey your thirst.” There’s a Kantian insight buried in that Sprite advertising slogan. That in the way is Kant’s point, when you go for Sprite or Pepsi, you’re really, you might think that you’re choosing freely Sprite versus Pepsi, but you’re actually obeying something, a thirst, or maybe a desire, manufactured or massaged by advertising. You’re obeying a prompting that you yourself haven’t chosen or created…

People often argue over the role of nature and nurture in shaping behavior. Is the desire for Sprite (or other sugary drinks) inscribed in the genes or induced by advertising? For Kant, this [Nature vs. Nurture] debate is beside the point. Whenever my behavior is biologically determined or socially conditioned, it is not truly free. To act freely, according to Kant, is to act autonomously. And to act autonomously is to act according to a law I give myself--not according to the dictates of nature or social convention… …to act freely is to act autonomously and to act autonomously is to act according to a law that I give myself, not according to the physical laws of nature, or to laws of cause-and-effect, which include my desire to eat, or to drink or to choose this food and a restaurant over that.

Now, what is the opposite? What is the opposite of autonomy? For Kant, he invents a special term to describe the opposite of autonomy. Heteronomy is the opposite of autonomy. When I act heteronomously I’m acting towards an inclination or desire that I haven’t chosen for myself…

It is 3:00 a.m., and your college roommate asks you why you are up late pondering moral dilemmas involving runaway trolleys.

“To write a good paper in Ethics 101,” you reply.

“But why write a good paper?” your roommate asks.
“To get a good grade.”

“But why care about grades?”

“To get a job in investment banking.”

“But why get a job in investment banking?”

“To become a hedge fund manager someday.”

“But why be a hedge fund manager?”

“To make a lot of money.”

“But why make a lot of money?”

“To eat lobster often, which I like.”

This is an example of what Kant would call heteronomous determination—doing something for the sake of something else, for the sake of something else, and so on. When we act heteronomously, we act for the sake of ends given outside us. We are instruments, not authors, of the purposes we pursue.

Now, why is autonomy the opposite of acting heteronomously or according to the dictates of nature? Kant’s point is that nature is governed by laws, laws of cause-and-effect, for example. Suppose you drop a billiard ball, it falls to the ground, we wouldn’t say the billiard ball is acting freely. Why not? It’s acting according to the law of nature, according to laws of cause and effect, the law of gravity. And just as he has an unusually demanding and stringent conception of freedom, freedom as autonomy, he also has a demanding conception of morality. To act freely, is not to choose the best means to a given end, it’s to choose the end itself for its own sake. And that’s something that human beings can do and that billiard balls can’t. In so far as we act on inclination or pursue pleasure we act as means to the realization of ends given outside us, we are instruments rather than authors of the purposes we pursue, that are the heteronomous
determination of the will. On the other hand, in so far as we act autonomously, according to a law we give ourselves, we do something for its own sake as an end in itself. When we act autonomously we cease to be instruments to purposes given outside us. We become, or we can come to think of ourselves as ends in ourselves.