

## Reason to Revolt: On Kantian Ethics and Revolution

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In introducing Kant's ethics in *Practical Philosophy*, Allen Wood writes, "While confessing to a 'wishful participation approaching enthusiasm' for the French Revolution, Kant nevertheless sees revolutionary social upheavals as both wrongful and counterproductive."<sup>1</sup> This seems to be a prevailing attitude among Kant scholars, despite the apparent contradiction that, regardless of his confessed leanings, Kant held revolution and rebellion to be unconditionally unjustifiable. It is extremely unlikely that Kant was simply unaware of the paradox, especially considering the other paradoxes he so meticulously addressed with regard to rebellion and revolution. Could it be, as some have speculated, that Kant censored himself for fear of governmental reprisal? Or was Kant so rationally detached from his own philosophy that his near-enthusiasm represents a complete personal disconnect? Fortunately, Kant himself did not leave this matter entirely to speculation and conjecture. From the Formulation of Universal Law (FUL) to the Formulation of the Kingdom of Ends (FKE) to Kant's own commentary on the matter of revolution, a number of clues indicate that

<sup>1</sup> Kant, xxx.

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Kant's commitment to the immorality of revolution is not as absolute as it is often portrayed.<sup>2</sup>

### Revolution and the Formulation of Universal Law

The FUL states that one should “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”<sup>3</sup> Our first concern, then, must be with the maxim which, when acted upon, constitutes a revolutionary or rebellious act. It behooves us, however, to take some preemptory action against potential objections by beginning with an evaluation of revolutionary maxims according to the FUL. This is due to a reportedly common misconception that the Categorical Imperative (CI) in its various formulations is the be-all and end-all of Kant's moral theory. There are voluminous evaluations of various maxims according to the FUL, due at least in part to its formulaic presentation (as opposed to the arguably more nebulous FKE). But as Mark Timmons notes:

In some cases a maxim will fail one of Kant's tests (yielding a negative verdict about the corresponding action) but the action is not morally wrong (false negatives), and in other cases a maxim that features a wrong action will pass Kant's tests, yielding a mistaken positive verdict about the act (false positives).<sup>4</sup>

Does this completely invalidate the FUL? No—but it serves as a stern warning to those who would build complete ethical systems from this single formulation. Timmons goes on to suggest two caveats under which we must operate in applying the FUL. First, we must apply the FHE to strip maxims

<sup>2</sup> We shall assume for our purposes that the Formulation of Humanity as an End in Itself (FHE)—“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”—would be applied when evaluating *how* one may conduct a revolution, not *if* one may do so (Ibid. 80).

<sup>3</sup> Kant 73.

<sup>4</sup> Timmons 171.

down to their morally relevant components before applying the FUL, eliminating false positives.<sup>5</sup> Second, we must consider the FUL evaluation a sort of “decision procedure” not for declaring maxims moral but for weeding out clearly immoral maxims, thus accounting for false negatives.<sup>6</sup> So we will analyze revolutionary maxims according to the FUL only in order to establish the possibility that they are moral.

With that in mind, we are in need of a maxim for analysis. The simplest revolutionary maxim, it would seem, is “I will overthrow the current government.” Can this maxim be universalized? According to Christine Korsgaard, maxims may be tested against the FUL in two ways:

A maxim which cannot even be conceived as a universal law without contradiction is in violation of a strict and perfect duty, one which assigns us a particular action or omission. A maxim which cannot be willed as universal law without contradicting the will is in violation of a broad and imperfect duty, one which assigns us an end, but does not tell us what or how much we should do towards it.<sup>7</sup>

It should be obvious that our initial maxim cannot survive such tests, but lest we be accused of deciding the matter by fiat, we shall elaborate. Very simply, if everyone were always committed to overthrowing the current government, no one would form governments and there would be none to overthrow; this contradiction reveals our initial maxim to violate a perfect duty. Furthermore, it seems contradictory to will that any government—even one that benefits or protects oneself—should be overthrown; our initial maxim also violates an imperfect duty.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Whether or not the scholars here consulted have the “correct” interpretation is an argument beyond the scope of this paper; thus for our purposes we shall rely upon their reasoning without further discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Korsgaard 135.

Can we save our maxim with any morally relevant additions? Indeed, Kant himself gives us a model for doing so. He writes, “There is a categorical imperative, Obey the authority who has power over you (in whatever does not conflict with inner morality).”<sup>8</sup> Now if we consider the addition in parentheses a sort of caveat, then it is an exception to the statement and the statement becomes a hypothetical imperative rather than a categorical imperative. So, integral to the imperative, inner morality must be morally relevant in the case of obeying authority. Can the same be said for maxims? If we revise our initial maxim accordingly, we get: “I will overthrow the current government when it is evil.” Nothing here may be stripped away through application of the FHE, so the maxim stands as containing only morally relevant information.

Using Kant’s definition of evil (“an object of aversion in the eyes of everyone”), this maxim is also easily universalized.<sup>9</sup> If everyone always acted to overthrow an evil government, by definition the only government left would be good government; there is no contradiction in conception. And again by definition, eliminating an object everyone is averse to cannot possibly be a contradiction of will. For even if evil people desire an evil government, as Jeffrie Murphy notes, a difference exists between what one wills and what one desires:

[It may be argued that] no man desires to suffer punishment for wrongdoing. Thus, since I would not desire to suffer punishment for wrongdoing, I would be willing inconsistently and thus immorally if I ever willed punishment for others. . . . [But it follows from Kant that] a rational man can *will* his own punishment even if he does not *desire* it.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, it may be argued that evil people desire an evil government, but that does not mean they necessarily will such a government. So in the case

<sup>8</sup> Kant 505.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy 163, emphasis added.

of revolution and the FUL, it would appear Korsgaard's suggestion that "Kant's conclusions can be blocked by his own procedures" was an accurate one; our revised maxim may be successfully universalized.<sup>11</sup>

### Revolution in the Kingdom of Ends

That our revised maxim, "I will overthrow the current government when it is evil," may be universalized, however, indicates only that it *might* be moral and that it bears further consideration. Now we must consider the FKE, which demands that we "act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends."<sup>12</sup> This formulation of the CI presents some interesting issues not revealed by the FUL. Specifically, it does not lend itself to formulaically generating a system of ethics from raw maxims. Neither does it offer any concrete boundaries for such a system. Instead the FKE presents an "admittedly ideal" description of a society in which the CI is practiced.<sup>13</sup>

Though it may not be immediately obvious, this creates a problem for our revised maxim. For so long as it is first "asked what is laid down as right (where principles stand firm *a priori* and no empiricist can bungle them), then the idea of the social contract would remain in its incontestable authority . . . as a rational principle for appraising any public rightful constitution."<sup>14</sup> In other words, once created from rational principles, government authority is absolute and inviolable. If we lived in a kingdom of ends—and according to the FKE, we should act as though we do—then of course the government would be founded upon rational principles. But does this invalidate our maxim? Or would our maxim be acceptable as merely moot due to the impossibility of an evil government in the kingdom of ends?

<sup>11</sup> Korsgaard 134.

<sup>12</sup> Kant 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 301.

Of course, it is a logical impossibility (and thus irrational) for any government, no matter how despotic, to tolerate revolution. “For, that the constitution should contain a law . . . authorizing the overthrow of the existing constitution, from which all particular laws proceed . . . is an obvious contradiction.”<sup>15</sup> But there is a much larger concern here. Not only must the government not provide for its own overthrow, but it would seem that we ourselves must not act upon our revolutionary maxim by virtue of the fact that in an ideal world it would clearly be either immoral or impossible to do so.

Or so Kant’s critics might have us think. For at this point they can lay out the heavy philosophic artillery—whether through casuistry or consequentialism, it is easy to assail a position as idealistic as this. Even Korsgaard concludes that “morality itself sometimes allows or even requires us to do something that from an ideal perspective is wrong.”<sup>16</sup> But in the very act of introducing empirical examples, Kant’s critics lose their ability to meaningfully discuss pure reason of any kind, including the CI and its formulations. Pure reason is transformed into practical reason at such a juncture. This is not to say that the CI is “impractical” and devoid of meaning in applied ethics—only that “reason would overstep all its bounds if it took upon itself to explain how pure reason can be practical.”<sup>17</sup>

But now we have digressed somewhat and perhaps muddied the waters with sundry objections to what initially seemed a straightforward matter: whether Kant’s ethics and his attitude concerning revolution can be rationally reconciled. The idealism, practicality, moral content, and true meaning of the CI all appear relevant, on one hand, to our discussion. After all, no summary of Kant’s ethics could be considered complete without an explanation of the all-pervasive CI—and an ethics devoid of all practicality would of course be moot. On the other hand, Kant makes it very clear that in the instant the ideal meets the practical, “explanation ceases”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Korsgaard 135.

<sup>17</sup> Kant 104.

and “nothing is left but *defense*.”<sup>18</sup> This seems to preclude further (explanatory) discussion.

A brief recap may help us to connect these loose ends and return to the primary issue. We have established the possibility that a revolutionary maxim, “I will overthrow the current government when it is evil,” is a moral maxim. We have also established that in the ideal society, the kingdom of ends, our maxim would be either immoral or impossible to act upon. We have also seen that Kant advocated both acting as if the ideal were present and acting according to practicality, both empirical and otherwise. But at this point the ability to explain is lost and one must rely solely upon defense. In order to proceed, then, we must turn to a slightly more practical discussion of revolution, in which we will see just how defensible our maxim is.

### Revolution, Empirically Speaking

We shall begin with the evaluation of Kant scholar Wolfgang Schwarz, who argues that revolution is indeed morally wrong without regard to the circumstances. According to Schwarz:

What about a state which inflicts injustice, wrong, and even arbitrary death on its citizens? Can it enjoy such far-reaching inviolability? If we speak of a state as an institution capable of externally and internally protecting its citizens generally and of uniting them, the constitutive civil foundation is accepted as in force and forbids any reversal. Where a state exists, in whatever crude beginnings or degenerate forms, its laws, and they alone, determine all relations of public life. Otherwise there is anarchy, and nobody will find himself concerned with the problem of a right of resistance.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>19</sup> Schwarz 129.

Were it not for Kant's comment concerning the French Revolution, this interpretation (and others like it) might pass wholly unquestioned. Certainly it seems to echo the comments Kant himself made. For when he speaks of revolution, Kant does not seem the least bit concerned with oppressive governments or what have you. At one point he goes so far as to claim that "if a people now subject to a certain actual legislation were to judge that in all probability this is detrimental to its happiness, what is to be done about it? Should the people not resist it? . . . On the part of the people, there is nothing to be done about it but to obey."<sup>20</sup>

Note a few key differences, however. Nowhere in his evaluation does Schwarz mention happiness, which seems to be the key "deprivation" in Kant's statement. Conversely, Kant does not mention injustices while Schwarz focuses on them. We have already seen that Kant's kingdom of ends supposes a government with something much more refined than "crude beginnings." Furthermore, if we look to a footnote on the same page, we see a most interesting caveat. Kant notes that "if [an unjust law were passed] it is easily seen that a whole people could not agree to a law of this kind, and it is authorized at least to make representations against it."<sup>21</sup>

"At least" is an interesting choice of words. That Kant did not instead write "at most" is particularly revealing, especially considering the otherwise limiting nature of his discussion. Of course, "at least" gives only a low-side boundary; where one meets the upper limit is simply not stated. In addition, this footnote specifically references an unfair taxation situation resulting in an imbalance of responsibility; how much more reason to "at least make representations" against unjust laws resulting in, for instance, arbitrary deprivation of life? The longer one dwells on the possibilities introduced by this particular footnote, the more one must wonder why Kant has been interpreted so narrowly with regard to the matter of revolution. But if we are to admit any sort of consistency between Kant's feelings for the French Revolution and his philosophy as written, it seems probable

<sup>20</sup> Kant 297.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



that the list of acceptable actions against unjust governments includes not just the making of representations, but, where necessary, revolution.

But we cannot leave the argument there. For Kant clearly does condemn revolution in enough cases that his focus is on the immorality of revolt while he merely footnotes the possibility of a moral revolution. Kant's declaration that people have no right to revolt specifies that they ought not revolt against that which appears detrimental to their happiness. For of happiness Kant states, "One cannot . . . act on determinate principles for the sake of being happy, but only on empirical counsels."<sup>22</sup> As the empirical counsels that deal with happiness cannot trump the "legislative will and . . . freedom" from which the legal state originates, revolution cannot be justified by a people seeking some greater happiness—but it can be justified by a people seeking justice and rationality.<sup>23</sup>

Might not a revolution involve both motivations? Quite possibly—indeed, from a historical perspective, while revolutions are instigated by idealists, they are won or lost depending on which side appears to promise the greater happiness to the masses. Clearly, arbitrary executions, burdensome taxation, or any other unjust governmental practice will naturally contribute to general unhappiness. Consequently, it might under certain circumstances be difficult or even impossible to determine whether a revolution were moral, because it appears that the morality of a revolution depends upon its being conducted for the right reasons. But this should sound familiar to any student of Kantian ethics. For one of Kant's most basic statements regarding morality is that moral actions must be performed "not from inclination but *from duty*."<sup>24</sup> An act done from inclination and not from duty is, for Kant, immoral. In short, one's *intentions* make all the difference in any given situation—even revolution.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>23</sup> Schwarz 129.

<sup>24</sup> Kant 53.

## Conclusion

Clearly Kant spoke in support of revolution in some form. What more faithful interpretation of a system of ethics than the one given by its author? We may only speculate as to why Kant chose the focus he did, devoting significantly more time to the evils of revolution than to its possible moral justifications. Certainly the political climate during his lifetime would not have favored a more revolutionary attitude. And there is always the concern that license given to those who are justified is often claimed by those who are not. But further discussion must be relegated to historians or, perhaps, the realm of speculation; we simply have no knowledge of Kant's motivation in this matter. But whatever his reasons, where Kant chose to focus his discussion of revolution does not justify overlooking those passages in which he indicates the possibility of a moral revolution and hints at the requirements for such a movement. For once such passages have been acknowledged, it becomes easier to see how the CI in all its formulations supports everything Kant said (instead of merely what he wrote).

In retrospect, this should not be surprising. Of the Kantian ideal, the kingdom of ends, Korsgaard writes, "it is not feasible always to live up to this ideal, and where the attempt to live up to it would make you a tool of evil, you should not do so."<sup>25</sup> This is exactly in line with Kant's assertion that we ought to obey authority insofar as it does not conflict with morality. It seems clear that failing to rise against an evil government that enacts unjust laws would make one a tool of evil. In the end, it becomes clear that one of Kant's most basic principles held the answer all along. "Understanding, wit, judgment . . . are undoubtedly good and desirable for many purposes, but they can also be extremely evil and harmful if the will which is to make use of these gifts of nature . . . is not good."<sup>26</sup> Once one has established a good will, actions and consequences fail to be in themselves morally significant—their moral content is provided by the good

<sup>25</sup> Korsgaard 153.

<sup>26</sup> Kant 49.

will, not the other way around. Had Kant's participation in the French Revolution ever graduated beyond the category of "wishful," perhaps he would have made this more explicit with regard to the subject. But as it is, an appeal to the text shows us that for Kant, anything, revolution included, is justified when it springs from a good will.

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