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Humes 103

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18 October 2024

Pledged.

Reasoning in Reality: Immanuel Kant's Morals in Our Immoral World

I find Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* an intimidating piece, distanced from reality not only by its complex content but also its esoteric rhetoric. However, as I focus on the linguistic construction of Kant's isolated passages "Imperatives in General" and "Classification of Imperatives," both his arguments and their relationship to their real-world context become clear: Kant's ideas are neither abstract nor irrelevant but constitute crucial guidance for a world lacking morality. My line-by-line analysis of Kant's writing reveals that his discussion of imperatives depends on reality both to provide its linguistic framework and to validate its purpose. I conclude that Kant does not consider imperatives as metaphysical experiments, separate from the world of his readers. Instead, I understand them as a concrete guide for moral action.

To me, Kant's rhetorical structure—which highlights the real world he and his readers inhabit—demonstrates his work's pragmatic rather than metaphysical applications. For example, his discussion of problematic hypothetical imperatives as "concerned with well-being" demonstrates his awareness of "pleasure['s]" centrality to human decision-making, despite its contradiction with his Supreme Principle (Kant 530, 531; Jankovic). Although he asserts that reason "ought" to form the basis of human action, he defines reason in the context of an irrational environment (Kant 531). He thus invites his readers to recognize his ideas as part of

what “actually happens in the case of men” rather than abstract philosophy (530). Kant’s rhetorical emphasis on the discrepancy between rationality and reality implies that he does not, as I first thought, separate his work from the real world. Instead, he establishes reality as a relevant context for his ideas, allowing me to view them as practical and therefore approachable.

Once he has situated his work within the real world, Kant proceeds to explain his ideas not as a contradiction of, but a response to, real-world imperfections. He indicates that will or “practical reason” can be “good without qualification” (530). However, he stipulates that will strays from goodness “in virtue of its own nature” (527). Although Kant suggests that will and reason “ought” to direct human action, he also acknowledges that they are frequently absent from the real world and proposes his moral reasoning in response (530). Given this line of thought, I realize that Kant’s theories are not constructs from an ideal reality. Instead, they react to the non-ideal world within which they exist, offering practical guidelines for ethical action.

Kant’s theories on imperatives depend on the irrationality of reality, illuminating what I believe he intends as the purpose of this excerpt: practical corrections for the imperfect world from which his ideas emerge. Imperatives “[tell] me which of my possible actions would be good,” he explains, emphasizing the Supreme Moral Principle as “law which must be obeyed” not only in an idealized thought experiment but also in the everyday world he and his readers inhabit (530, 531). Kant’s thoughts do not exist in isolation from reality; instead, they respond to it. When understood as guidelines for everyday morality instead of abstract philosophy, his work no longer seems abstruse. Instead, it becomes personally relevant as I seek to understand ethical reasoning, offering insight that is not abstract but instead concretely applicable.

Works Cited

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