

**DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS and SELF-DEFENSE**

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## Introduction and Background

It seems appropriate, as we begin our study of ethics, to examine a specific system of ethics and explore its application to a single human activity. The system of ethics selected is that put forth by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804); and, the human activity is purposeful homicide committed in self-defense.

A brief background of ethics, Kant's philosophy of ethics, and a statement regarding homicide are first in order.

Ethics is a study of human conduct and its problems. Four of the problems addressed by moral philosophers are: (1) the highest good or ultimate aim of the conduct; (2) the source of knowledge regarding right and wrong; (3) the sanctions of moral conduct; and (4) the motives prompting right conduct.

The highest good, the *summum bonum*, is ascribed to either happiness, perfection or duty. Happiness is generally accepted in the last resort to be what man seeks: happiness with the individual's physical or mental pleasures; community happiness; or happiness of others. Perfectionism is the theory that the highest good is achieved with the fullest and harmonious development of all human capacities. Perfectionism can be partitioned into the three categories noted above for happiness. Duty is the *summum bonum* when it serves as a constraint on moral behavior. Thus right conduct is judged by the sense of duty prompting it. "There is, according to this view, a 'categorical imperative' an unconditional law of duty, which demands obedience, whatever the consequences may be, and implicit obedience to this categorical imperative is the highest and only ultimate good." [E.B. V.7, p.759]

According to Kant, the categorical imperative directs us to: "act only on that principle which thou canst at the same time will to become a universal law." [E.B. V.8, p.775]  
"Apparently the essence of evil consists in treating one's own case as exceptional." [E.B. V.7, p.759]

How do we know the difference between right and wrong? One means for distinguishing right from wrong is ascribed to feeling as opposed to pure reason. This vague feeling is like aesthetic appreciation of beauty. [E.B. V.7, p.760] A second means to determine right from wrong is credited to intuition, and distinguished from pure reason. "Kant held that, 'an erring conscience is a chimera' Pope (Alexander Pope, 1688-1744) suggested that, 'our consciences are like our watches; none go just the alike, yet each believes his own'" [E.B. V.7, p.760]

What is the authority of this sense of duty to command or inhibit behavior? Three sanctions of morality are identified: religious, political and social. These sanctions furnish motives for moral conduct. [E.B. V.7, p.760] The religious sanctions furnish motives such as love of God and fear of hell. Political sanctions include fear of punishment and rewards attainable from election. Social sanctions include gaining favor and facing ostracism. "With the sanctions of duty (nomism) there is no motive except

that of respect for the moral law. Personal fear and hope it would concern as selfish motives; and actions prompted by political or social motives it would characterize as legal but not moral [E.B. V.7, p.761]

The ethic attributed to Kant may be summarized as follows: "Though duty excludes regard for private happiness, the *summum bonum* is not duty alone, but happiness combined with moral worth; happiness is a reward for duty and the only adequate rational ground for believing in the existence of God." [E.B. V.7, p.775] The categorical imperative is an unconditional law of duty demanding obedience whatever the consequences.

Homicide is defined to be the killing of a human being by the act, procurement, or omission of another. Homicide is neutral in that it is not necessarily a crime, as when done in self-defense, in the lawful execution of a criminal sentence, or as the only possible means of arresting an escaping felon. [Black, p.734]

Technically, homicide is categorized by such terms as justifiable, excusable and felonious. Excusable homicide includes self-defense, where an individual's action is not prohibited by law. Justifiable homicide is committed intentionally but without evil design and under circumstances of necessity or duty. "Homicide by necessity is a species of justifiable homicide arising from unavoidable necessity, without will, intention or desire." [Black, p.735] "Self-defense is the protection of one's person or property against some injury attempted by another. (Self defense is also) The right of such protection." [Black, p.1359]

## The Thesis

The thesis is that there is a categorical imperative, an unconditioned law of duty, to commit homicide to preserve oneself or another. The expression here is intended to be quite precise. The thesis does not state a categorical imperative not to kill, as might be put forth by some jurors recently trying murder cases here in the U.S.; nor, does it state a categorical imperative to kill generally, as might be advanced by religious extremists in Iraq or previously those in Ireland.

Analyzing the thesis as an ethical problem, we begin with the proposition that the highest good is adherence to duty (deontology). We measure the right versus wrong of self-defense by the admittedly vague notions of feeling and intuition. A stronger measure of right versus wrong would spring forth from pure reason supporting the will to live or to will the continued life of another. The act of self-defense is sanctioned by religion (at least all of the major religions practiced in the western world), by the state based on law, and by society. Societal support is weakened by those whose minds are influenced strongly by emotion.

It would seem clear that life is the greatest gift that one can be given for it represents the culmination of all creation. Is this life, or that of another, so little valued and cherished as

to be expended, acceptably, by the lawless act of another? On the contrary, because our life is so highly regarded, we have a duty to see to its preservation; only expending it to meet our duty to preserve the lives of others, or to preserve a place and way of life required to live in and prosper.

Our duty to preserve self and others is clear. Kant specifically addressed leaving persons in distress to shift for themselves, stating that such cannot be willed to be a universal law, for it carries a contradiction, namely that when we ourselves are in distress, we cannot help desiring that others should help us [E.B. V.8 p.775]

Thus it is concluded that one has an ethical duty to take the life of another if that other threatens one's life or the lives of others. Were this not the case, and the extreme of being bound by duty not to kill prevailed, our earth might be populated by very few. And, God would have created these few presumably for their own aggrandizement; we being created only for their purpose.

The world may well witness the circumstance where individuals, generally take the lives of others in obedience to their ethical senses of duty to religious or perhaps social beliefs. There are several historical examples of this: those in Iraq and Ireland cited earlier; those associated with the inquisitions and the Christianization of Central and South America; and those associated with the Nazi crimes of World War II.

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**Three quotations [E.B. V.8&13] regarding Kant's ethic, worthy of memory:**

öThe realization of duty is impossible for any being which is not capable of self-determination.ö

öThe impelling promptings of sentiment can be mistaken for the commands of the categorical imperative.ö

öThe realization of reason, or of human wills so far as rational, thus presents itself as the absolute end of duty; and we get, as a new form of the fundamental practical rule, act so as to treat humanity, in thyself or any other, as an end always, and never as a means only.ö

**Two quotations from Morals and Dogma [Pike, XXVII and XIV Degrees]:**

öWhen we ask an honest man why, despite his urgent necessities, he has respected the sanctity of a deposit, he answers, because it was his *duty*. Asked why it was his *duty*, he answers, because it was *right*, was *just*, was *good*.ö

öWe should toil and die, not for Heaven or Bliss, but for Duty.ö

## **References**

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