

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

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As human beings, we all hold the basic assumption that we govern our own lives through a vessel known as the will. We assume that this will gives us some freedom to act as we choose, even if that freedom fits into a greater design of fate or predestination. We easily conceive of the notion that individuals produce a will to guide them through the decisions they face every day. However, if we reverse this conception, we must ask ourselves to what extent the will produces the individual. How does the will shape who we are and the choices we make? Perhaps the most important decisions we face are those of an ethical nature, the constant process of negotiation of what is right within the confines of society. The principles espoused by Immanuel Kant in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and by Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography put morality into social terms, mostly removing it from a supernatural or religious context, and choosing instead to understand it as a construct developed for the preservation and improvement of humanity. Kant argued that a good will is paramount to all else as it guides every moral decision to a consequence that is, by its very nature, right; Franklin sought to correct behavioral tendencies, by which the will would be adjusted for the better. If we use the metaphor of a moral compass, Kant would magnetize the compass with will, thereby setting it so that it absolutely and objectively points to what is right. Franklin, on the other hand, would take the compass apart, analyzing each element of the contraption so that it might better serve its possessor. In examining the works of these two men, we will strive to unravel how they respectively conceive of the will's place and purpose, how the will dictates morality, and the practical influence will has on human behavior.

These moral philosophers had two very different ideas of how the will dictates a course of action. Kant held a good will above all else, going so far as to say, “Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *GOOD WILL*” (9). He argues that any quality, whether it be intelligence or a great fortune, can only be called good if it is preceded by and put to use according to an individual’s good will. This is the starting point from which Kant derives his entire formulation of morality. As long as the will is good and legitimately pursues its end with all means it has within its power, it “would sparkle like a jewel all by itself, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment its worth” (10). Thus, Kant’s take on the will removes any shred of consequence from the equation. Even if a man were to commit gross misconduct according to our social standards, his actions could not be deemed wrongful as long as they aligned with his good will.

Benjamin Franklin’s approach to the will is far more mindful of results. Much of his philosophy is sewn into tales from his life. At one point, he tells us of a time in which he broke his ethical vegetarian diet by eating a piece of fried fish, finding a way to justify his willful decision at that time. He humorously declares, “How convenient it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do” (56). Franklin considers the power of reason superior to the will, since this faculty ultimately governs the choices we make. Franklin does not comment on whether his breaching of the vegetarian diet was a violation of what is morally right, but the example serves to show how our will is a product of the inclinations that sway us and how we can reason our way through a

rather ambiguous moral landscape should we so choose. For Franklin, the will is subject to an external world of perception and inclination.

Kant wrote of the will as an objective device that dictates how we meet with a world of external perception and inclination. He claims that “reason’s proper function must be to produce a will good in itself and not one good merely as a means” (12). Kant argues that reason creates the will, while Franklin illustrates how reason is the product of a pre-existing will. Franklin sheds light on the human use of will as a means, arguing that reason is a comforting justification that simply supports the decisions of the will. Kant establishes will as an end or a condition that precedes any other form of good. However, Kant also recognizes that reason can pervert the will. Kant puts Franklin’s example of fried fish into theoretical terms when he notes that reason can force the will and its stern concept of duties to be “more accordant with our wishes and inclinations. This is equivalent to corrupting them in their very foundations and destroying their dignity—a thing which even ordinary practical reason cannot finally call good” (26). Though Kant and Franklin conceive of will quite differently, they are both fully aware of how reason may distort the will.

Kant’s application of the will to morality can best be considered as a philosophy of ethical expansion. We start with a single and solitary will. This will is shaped by reason and a sense of duty, as well as instincts and the power of our inclinations. The will then produces a moral maxim in our actions. Kant argues for autonomy of the will, which dictates that one must “never choose except in such a way that the maxims of the choice are comprehended as universal law in the same volition” (57). If a personal maxim can be applied on a universal level, it can be properly called a categorical imperative. It is, therefore, absolutely morally good.

Franklin's moral approach is quite opposite: it is a philosophy of ethical contraction. It starts with a number of virtues and moral qualities that are accepted as good in and of themselves. It then applies these grand principles to the individual will one by one, through a process of personal, rational reflection. Franklin uses the metaphor of "him who having a Garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad Herbs at once, which would exceed his Reach and his Strength, but works on one of the Beds at a time," thereby moving from one fault to the next until the will has successfully been purged of all that impeded its goodness (98). For Franklin, imitation of what is morally right will eventually lead to a good will. Even his definition of humility calls for the individual to "imitate Jesus and Socrates" (96). Those that subscribe to his moral philosophy would utilize the ideal forms of specifically enumerated virtues in order to embody the best possible application of those virtues in the real world.

Immanuel Kant applies the will to moral structures with his concept of categorical imperatives, which in its own way echoes Plato's theory of forms by calling for the human will to live up to a standard of objective necessity. We should keep in mind that Kant's "will is a faculty of choosing only that which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as practically necessary (i.e., as good)" (29). Kant argued that the will is subject to two types of imperatives, or decisions in which one ought to decide a certain way. According to Kant's moral system, "The categorical imperative would be one which presented an action as of itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end," while the hypothetical imperative depends on potential ends, as an action may yield good in the future (30). Kant holds the categorical imperative in higher esteem than the hypothetical, as it is his basic formulation for determining all that is morally good. He goes on to deduce that "there is, therefore, only one

categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (38). To return to the metaphor of the moral compass, Kant is referring to the principle that causes the needle, or will, always to point north, in the direction of what is right. If we can reasonably conclude that our maxim should become universal law, then it is necessarily and morally good.

Benjamin Franklin’s moral compass was once not so precise as to point in one direction: as a young man, Franklin “concluded that nothing could possibly be wrong in the World, & that Vice & Virtue were empty Distinctions, no such Things existing” (74). Franklin would later claim that this directionless take on morality, justified by his notion of the deistic providence of God, was in fact false and that his publishing of these ideas in a “Pamphlet was another Erratum” (62). He uses the term *erratum*, a word for the printer’s mistakes that were listed separately and corrected within the published work, to refer to the moral errors in judgment he made during his lifetime. Kant strove to establish perfection of the will as a moral precedent, while Franklin took on “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (94). Once again, we see that these two philosophers have inverse approaches to establishing the path of moral goodness. A critical evaluation of their moral structures should next explore how their concepts can be applied on the practical level.

While Kant proves to be a brilliant moral theoretician, Franklin gives a personal account that is readily applicable to the world in which we live. Kant expresses a certain distaste for moral philosophy that is “in the habit of catering to the taste of the public by mixing up the empirical with the rational in all sorts of propositions” that confound attempts at deducing anything with pure reason (4). While this approach forces one to deal with the logical

metaphysics of Kant's work, it reduces the practicality of his work in such a way that the reader struggles to derive any concrete means of altering daily life activities. In contrast, Franklin includes an anecdote in his work that is tangential to the story of his life and yet essential to his conception of morality. He tells of a woman who lived her life entirely for charity, giving up everything, while living on nothing. She mostly secluded herself from society, yet a priest visited her residence on a daily basis. He questions how she "could possibly find so much Employment for a Confessor? O, says she, it is impossible to avoid *vain Thoughts*" (66).

Although Franklin was impressed with the frugality of this woman, he seemed to be amused by the way in which she isolated herself for a greater moral cause. Although this woman probably had a will that was pure and good, her life really did not amount to much. Ironically, she probably adhered to the Kantian moral construct more than the vast majority of humans ever have or will, since she did everything in her power to ensure that her will did not deviate from good; nevertheless, her state is not a practical or reasonable possibility for most people. While most would agree that we ought to try to live up to Kant's guidelines for a good will as it dictates morality, whether such a life is possible and worth our dedication is an entirely different matter. However, it seems indisputable that some attempt must be made. Franklin claims that he was "made a better and a happier Man than [he] otherwise should have been, if [he] had not attempted" to strive for moral perfection through a gradual correcting of his flaws and errors (101). Eventually, he realizes that he has more moral defects than he could adjust with practical reason. Kant maintains that humans can achieve a greater world and live by a good will "only when we scrupulously conduct ourselves by maxims of freedom as if they were laws of nature" (81). Kant's vision of a pure moral world, in which people submit their liberty

and will to an unyielding rule of ethical universality, may be idealistic, much like Franklin's attempt to correct himself to the point of moral perfection. However, only by these ideals can the standards of moral behavior be set so that people, and the society to which they belong, may be permanently improved.

Even though Kant and Franklin have two very distinct approaches to how we are to will our moral actions, they would both agree with the proverb, "Good-Will, like the Wind, floweth where it listeth" (Franklin 183). This insight applies not true just to philanthropic action, but to all measures that are preceded by a good will. Ultimately, both philosophers place the issue in the hands of the individual. Kant gave us a theoretical formulation for exhibiting good will. He emphasized that the individual must conduct himself according to the maxims by which he has chosen to live. Franklin's approach is more empirical. He called upon the individual to seek moral improvement by making a daily commitment to conscious and consistent self-evaluation. Franklin adhered loyally to a chart system in which he kept each virtue in mind, with the hope that "some of [his] Descendants may follow the Example & reap the benefit" (102). Although everyone would undoubtedly benefit from following in Franklin's footsteps, I am skeptical about our ability, and even our motivation, to be truthful in tracking our own moral development. Perhaps we would be better off taking the Kantian approach to heart, considering the universal implication of each and every ethical decision we make. Both approaches have their limitations, so it is up to the individual to decide which moral view, if any, to live by, for it is difficult to justify the superiority of one approach over the other; after all, where there's a will, there's a way.

Works Cited

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