

An exploration of Moral Absolutism:
How does Immanuel Kant's form of moral
absolutism compare to Thomas Aquinas' theory of
Natural Law?

Subject: Philosophy
Word Count: 3,421

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Introduction:

A. Morality, Definitions, and Context

The ideas behind morality have been crucial parts of the earliest societies. In order to create a functioning society, one must have rules and laws created, which are typically based on morality. In order to explain this overlap between ideas in varying cultures, philosophers turned to explaining morality and created concepts such as moral absolutism by asking “What is right and wrong? Why?”. Moral absolutism is the belief that regardless of context, any action can only be either right or wrong and they are inherent laws of the universe (Mastin "Moral Absolutism"). Moral absolutism has been around since the establishment of monotheistic religions where one God prescribes humans rules to follow such as the Ten Commandments of the Abrahamic religions or the “Dharam” of Sikhism. I chose these because I am an ex-Catholic who had to grapple with these questions and so I have experience with Aquinas’ theology. I’m going to investigate the question “how does Immanuel Kant’s form of moral absolutism compare to Thomas Aquinas’ theory of Natural Law”? I believe this is worth discussing because our morality is a part of our everyday lives. The actions we take under the belief of what is right and what is wrong are meaningful and it is important to be able to determine if anything could be objectively right or wrong. The answer one believes in could have a drastic impact on their life.

Immanuel Kant developed his moral philosophy throughout three works, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Metaphysics of Morals*. Thomas Aquinas’ established his moral philosophy throughout his “*Treatise of Law*” in his work “*Summa Theologiae*”. Kant’s and Aquinas’ theories are deontological in nature,

which means that they focus on what actions are right and wrong rather than the consequences of the actions. They are also meta-ethical in nature, meaning that they investigate how to determine what is good from what is bad. I will examine the similarities and differences to analyze which theory of moral absolutism is more internally consistent to end my investigation. To give an overview, in my investigation I found similarities such as both theories contain similar inconsistencies in their regard for intention and both theories require a rational agent to be perfectly consistent with certain things in order to be considered moral. I also found differences in the amount of rules required to describe their moral philosophy and also that while Aquinas is trying to prove morals through God's existence, Kant is trying to do the opposite.

We must first understand the context of Kant's and Aquinas' philosophies before exploring their specific moral philosophies, so that there is a basis of understanding for their explanations of morality. Aquinas' philosophy hinges on reason being the key to proving God's existence, the classical synthesis of faith and reason, from which he develops his moral philosophy. Kant's theory, however, taking place in a time long after Aquinas' theory, tries to separate reason from faith because of David Hume's "*Critique of Causality*". Kant was afraid that it would be destructive for both science and religion. He did this by separating natural reason and natural theology (which Kant defined as God, self, and essence) into the phenomenal and noumenal realms respectively. The phenomenal realm being human understanding of certain things and the noumenal realm being the actual essence of that things, "thing in itself" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) In this way, Aquinas' and Kant's philosophy are intrinsically different and therefore must be viewed based on the context of their development.

Kant's Moral Philosophy:

A. Kant's Definitions and Descriptions

Kant formulates his moral philosophy throughout three main works. The totality of these works assert and try to prove a rational version of moral absolutism. Kant's moral philosophy stems from his argument that reason and morality are proofs of God's existence. He asserts that there would be no point to morality or reason without the existence of a "future life", which is a refutation of existential nihilism. Existential nihilism is the assertion that there is no genuine purpose or intrinsic value in life.

Kant's most important formulation was the theory of the "categorical imperative". Before this, it is important to understand "hypothetical imperative" as well. A hypothetical imperative is the simple argument that applies to someone who wants to attain some form of goal, for example, "I must eat food to satiate my hunger". In contrast, the categorical imperative is a requirement and necessitates unconditional implementation. Kant states, in his first formulation, "act only according to the maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*). Kant divides the formulation into implying two duties, one being a perfect duty and one being an imperfect duty. To put it simply, it states that a rational agent should act in such a way that he/she would be fine with his/her action becoming universal law. He proposes that if lying became a universal law then everyone would lie and nothing said could be trusted thereby destroying the purpose of lying.

This is what is known as Kant's universalizability principle. He applies this universalizability principle by stating that actions which are moral are the actions which are consistent with the principle, i.e. lying is not consistent because if it were universal law that everyone followed, it would defeat its purpose; however doing good for its own sake is morally consistent because it does not defeat its own purpose as a universal law.

B. Implications and Functionality of Kant's Theory

Kant's theory of the categorical imperative is absolutist in nature. Things are either right and wrong based on what is rationally consistent and what one would will to be universal law. What is important about Kant's moral philosophy is that it does not include intent. No matter what happens, a rational agent's intent in their actions does not affect the morality of the outcome. This theory works, however, it is based on the principle that one cannot do a morally inconsistent thing for altruistic purposes. Kant argues that it would be wrong to lie even to save an innocent agent from a murderer, however, by allowing either to happen it becomes universalizability-incompatible. If lying is unacceptable because it should not become a universal law then allowing murder to the same extent should not be a universal law because it's not rationally consistent and defies the categorical imperative.

Kantian ethics implies that to be truly morally grounded rational agent one must be willing to be perfectly consistent, which makes being such a rational agent an impossibility in anything but a hypothetical world. This is different from a general form of moral absolutism

because it does not stipulate an inherent source of morality like a universal law, but rather the concept of an action becoming a universal law. The categorical imperative in this case is a framework for acting upon this theory of morality rather than just accepting a set of internally consistent laws to be true.

Aquinas' Moral Philosophy:

A. Aquinas' Definitions and Descriptions

Aquinas asserts his moral philosophy in his "*Summa Theologiae*" where he answers questions which forms his theory of natural law. He defines four types of laws: eternal, natural, divine, and human. Aquinas says "the very idea of the government of things in God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law" (Aquinas 161). What is meant is that eternal law is an actual part of God. Natural law is the reflection of eternal law in the rational mind which is based on first principles, first principles being propositions/assumptions that cannot be deduced. Divine law is a reflection of eternal law found in holy text such as the Ten Commandments. Human law must follow natural law and is based on both natural and divine law. It is law prescribed to humans by humans and "if in any point it deflects from the law of nature, it is no longer a law but a perversion of law" (Aquinas 170). Aquinas' moral philosophy stems predominantly from his theological beliefs, as he is a Catholic, who believes that God created and expressed morality, which he uses as a basis for his moral philosophy.

It asserts that there is an eternal law given by "Divine providence" or God. He goes on to develop that this eternal law is expressed through humans in a natural law. He states that rational creatures (i.e. human beings) are subject to Divine providence and have a share of "Eternal

Reason” (ER). This ER is the nature of law God created that describes the whole universe. Rational creatures share in this ER by participating in actions towards “its proper act and end” (Aquinas 161). This participation in ER by rational creatures is the natural law. Aquinas references psalms to show that the rational creature’s use of natural law is how it discerns good from evil and is nothing more than participation in the natural law. Aquinas also asserts that there are precepts to natural law, the first precept being that “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of natural law are based on this” (Aquinas 165). Aquinas’ argues that reason and instinct when together form natural law. Aquinas’ claims that we all seek out “the basic goods” which are natural instincts we have, that include, starting with the most important and continuing on, 1) self preservation, 2) reproduction, 3) to educate one’s offspring, 4) to seek God, 5) to live in a society, 6) to avoid offenses that would cause our society to turn against us, 7) to shun ignorance, because knowledge promotes survival (Green). He postulates that these basic goods are things we seek through the natural law, because God wanted a way for people who did not know of His existence to still be able to follow his divine command. He shows that natural law can lead to negative law’s or prohibitions, which when applied to a basic good can provide a positive injunction. A rational agent by this metric can deduce that do not kill is a natural law by the natural instinct to value one’s life through self preservation. The syllogism that explains this follows: my life is valuable, another’s life is like my life, therefore another life is valuable, therefore “I should not kill” and “do not kill” is a natural law. By applying a basic good to this argument we can come to a positive injunction. For example, the prohibition “do not kill”

can be paired with the basic good of life which leads to the positive injunction that we should promote life.

B. Implications and Functionality of Aquinas' Theory

It implies that in order for one to do good, or what is right, one must be a participant in natural law, meaning that one must both act accordingly to ER (and thereby to God) with intention. For one to fail to act towards God's will, or act without intent to follow His will, then one fails to be moral. This is different from a general form of moral absolutism because typically intent to act is not included in doing right or wrong, but because God is who prescribes what is right and wrong, it means that He would be able to distinguish intent and therefore who means to do right and who means to do wrong. This correlates with intent to morality and creates an absolutist theory based on both intent and action.

On the other hand, Aquinas' argument has a flaw in the fact that it is contradictory to his purposes. It hinges on a God who can sense intent, in order to know if one is following His will. As a Catholic, Aquinas believes in an omnibenevolent God (i.e. a God who cannot commit evil acts), therefore, an omnibenevolent God who can distinguish intent would deem a person who acted with good intentions but accidentally did not follow the natural law an irrational agent and thereby immoral. For example, if one were to steal food for self preservation, they would be in violation of the sixth basic good, in order to satisfy their first basic good which would be considered immoral. Such an event could occur in the opposite direction too. If one were to neglect their need for self preservation in order to avoid a societal offense, it would also be

considered immoral. In both cases the person is trying to act in accordance with basic goods which define natural law, but in both cases they fail to adhere to the basic goods. It would seem that an omnibenevolent God would put intent over action though. This theory works, but only on the premise that there is a God which ER stems from to begin with. This expression of Natural Law theory is a theological formulation of moral absolutism. It asserts that God created ER and our participation in ER is natural law. Since it is God who is creating ER, rational creatures must base their morals on the absolute nature of God's will or else they will not be participating in natural law. Aquinas asserts that irrational creatures can also partake in ER, but because they don't do it "in an intellectual and rational manner" then there is no participation in eternal law, it only seems like there is. Aquinas is thereby saying that in order for an action to be right it must also be intentional, with respect to ER.

Comparison

A. Similarities

Aquinas' and Kant's arguments are both similar in the fact that they have similar contradictions within them. They are both inconsistent because they show a lack of regard for intention. Since both become inconsistent with themselves as soon as one considers a rational agent with the intent to do good, but failing, as in Aquinas' case, or do something slightly evil for the greater good, as in Kant's case. Although lack of regard for intentions of the individual is normal for moral absolutist theory, it still ends up making their arguments inconsistent rather

than give a consistent reason as to why intent can be ignored. In another sense, Kant's moral philosophy is similar to Aquinas' because of Aquinas' formulation of basic goods help provide a framework similar to the categorical imperative, which allows a rational agent to deduce what is moral, similarly to the natural law. They are also similar because they both stipulate that a rational agent must be perfectly consistent in order to be moral, even when it seems like they should not act perfectly consistent. In Kant's case, a rational agent cannot act against the categorical imperative in any way or else they are immoral. In Aquinas' case, a rational agent cannot act against the natural laws passed down by God in any way or else they are immoral. Although the categorical imperative that Kant formulates and the natural goods that Aquinas' derives are both inconsistent, they both provide reasonable ways in which a rational agent can deduce what is right and wrong. In many situations, their means of deriving what would be right or wrong could work.

B. Differences

Aquinas' and Kant's arguments for moral philosophy are different in one way because of the difference between Aquinas' precepts and Kant's single categorical imperative. Kant's singular precept is all that is needed to describe the first formulation of his moral philosophy, while Aquinas' required multiple precepts derived from a single precept. Another way their arguments for moral absolutism are different is that Aquinas' is trying to prove the existence of absolute morals from God's assumed existence, while it was Kant's goal to do the exact opposite and separate absolute morals from the existence of the divine. Aquinas' and Kant's arguments are

also different because, while they both require a rational agent to compare their prospective action to a maxim, either by universalizability or the first precept, to ensure they are acting rationally, Kant's universalizability principle is something a rational agent can check on his/her own and does not exist through a rational agent, but instead provides a comparison for the rational agent, however, natural law is something that is defined by God through man (i.e. given to man).

C. Consistency

After examining both Aquinas' and Kant's moral philosophy that Kant's moral philosophy is more consistent than Aquinas' and overall a better theory. One main reason is because Kant's moral philosophy describes more useful techniques of determining right from wrong. It is more simple to use the categorical imperative to determine the morality of an action than it is to deduce what is natural law. Natural law seems to have no basis in being able to determine right from wrong prior to the action given, because what is valuable to one agent may not be valuable to another. Aquinas' argument also lacks consistency because it relies heavily on the presupposition of God and ER. Not only does Kant succeed in providing a moral philosophy that can be utilized by a rational agent who wishes to do a moral act; however, his inconsistency in argument is minor and fixable. Kant's minor problem of intention can be solved mostly by ending the false dichotomy that acts are either moral or immoral. In reality certain acts can be viewed as more immoral than others, therefore in this instance, lying to save someone's life is not immoral because saving someone's life is worth more than a lie. Aquinas' problem with

intention cannot be so easily fixed. It relies on God determining what is moral based on intent, however we cannot change God's actions.

Conclusion:

A. Subjectivity

Aquinas' and Kant's moral philosophies have their similarities and differences. Their similarities being lack of regard for intent and requiring perfect moral consistency. Their differences being the difference between Aquinas' precepts and Kant's categorical imperative and Kant's theory requires only a rational agent while Aquinas' theory requires God. Thus the research question "how does Immanuel Kant's form of moral absolutism compare to Thomas Aquinas' theory of Natural Law" is, to a certain extent, answered. In my comparison I came to the conclusion that in the end Kant's moral philosophy is more logically consistent. In the end, the decision on which is more consistent is subjective to the person. In this regard, I lean more towards Kant because of his removal of God from the human ability to make moral decisions. In reality I believe that our ability to make moral decisions comes from our evolutionary past, which is a more relativist form of morality; that no objective moral truths that exist. It's important to note that both Kant's use of the categorical imperative and Aquinas' creation of the basic goods to form natural laws are both still useful for determining what is right and wrong, even if some may not think they are necessarily objective/absolute. Either way the reality is that both moral theories are subjective. Each one posited that there was the existence of absolute moral values, but Aquinas' necessitated the use of God, while Kant sought to deliberately

separate the two. The subjectivity lies in how both philosophers thought it best to formulate morality. It just so happened that Kant believed that connecting God to reason to create morality was not the correct formulation. Conversely Aquinas' believed that by connecting God to morality, his existence would prove the existence of absolute moral values. In this sense, it is logical that the whole of the differences within their philosophies can be summarized by the subjective nature of morality. Kant did not seek to fix the lack of regard for intent with his argument because that's something both Aquinas' and Kant agreed on.

B. Closing Statements

It has now been centuries after both of their deaths, yet their ideas still live on. Perhaps by reinvigorating the ideas they both had, we can come to new conclusions about meta-ethics and the true nature of morality. By investigating the differences in opinion on what is right and wrong, and then going into more critical thinking on the differences between what determines right and wrong, there is a creation of unity. By understanding what makes two opposing sides different, it opens up to new ideas of how they could come together. By bridging the gaps between one morality and the other we can create more novel ideas. The investigation of contrasting opinions contribute to what we know as philosophy today and to the philosophy of the past. In this way, not only are Kant's and Aquinas' theories intrinsically linked, but so is the rest of subject.

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