

Lecture: Decisions, Decisions

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Have you ever found yourself standing in front of a food counter, wondering whether to choose the healthier, but not very appealing alternative, or go with the less healthy but tastier option? Perhaps you've been in a situation where you've been having a great night out with friends and really wanted to have that next drink, but knew that you had to drive home and that you'd already reached your limit. Or maybe you have been trying to keep a tight reign on your spending and only purchase what's necessary, but spot a shirt in a store window that you are just dying to have.

We've all found ourselves in situations like these, where we have to decide between what we *want* and what we think is *best*. Moreover, we all know what it's like to feel almost helplessly pulled toward those things that we desire, even when we believe that we shouldn't indulge those desires.

Some philosophers have argued that experiences like these show that there is a significant difference between what we *desire* to do, and a conception of what we *ought* to do; moreover, they maintain that what we *ought* to do should not be based on what we happen to want or desire but on what *reason* determines to be best. If the right thing is to choose the healthy alternative at lunch, that's the right thing when I am not tempted by something unhealthy, but it's *still* the right when I *am* tempted. No matter what's going on with my fluctuating and unpredictable desires, I make the best decisions when I step back from them and let my decisions be guided by my reason.

Now it could be objected that decisions that are based on reason in this way are still dependent on desires, just not my more immediate ones. For instance, reason makes a judgment to take the healthy alternative rather than the unhealthy one out of a desire to be fit, which may override a more immediate desire to have that slice of pizza. The philosopher Immanuel Kant did not deny this point, but he argued that when we are talking about what we *morally* ought to do, we're talking about something that applies to *everyone*, independently of anyone's own particular interests or desires, no matter how deep those desires might be. This means that reason not only has to step back from my immediate desires, but *all* of my desires in order to determine what is right. Only then will we be sure that we're doing what we truly *ought* to do, not just what we happen to *want* to do.

Kant offers us a moral principle called the "Categorical Imperative" to describe what it would mean for reason to make a choice in a way that is independent of any desires. This principle then allows us to determine what our moral duties are. Now, duties are often thought of as restrictions on our freedom – telling us what we *must* do regardless of whether we like to or not, like the orders given to a soldier. However, Kant makes

the bold claim that the opposite is actually the case: that acting morally and following one's duties is the freest possible kind of action. How could this be?

Recall earlier when we talked about giving into temptation and desire when we know it's not the right thing to do, and how that often is experienced as a lack of control, or a lack of freedom; on the other hand, when we overcome temptation and do what we judge to be best, we experience this as being *in* control, capable of acting on our own choices rather than being overrun by impulse and desire. Kant thought that this shows how the more we exercise rational control over our choices, and the less those choices are based on what we happen to desire, the more we exercise freedom and control. Well, moral duties, we saw, are what reason says we ought to do independently of *any* desire. Accordingly, if rational control equals freedom, and following one's moral duty is the exercise of total rational control, then following one's moral duty equals total freedom.

This is a challenging and often puzzling argument, particularly since its conclusion says the opposite of what we're used to thinking when it comes to the relation between morality and freedom. But it's a powerful claim nonetheless, and one that deserves the kind of careful consideration that it has received ever since Kant originally proposed it.