

IMMANUEL KANT

Stephanie Spoto
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Monterey Peninsula College
GENT 10/410: The Age of Reason (1690-1775)

What is totalitarianism?

- Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (1999)
- Two ways of thinking about totalitarianism:
 - 1) the liberal Enlightenment tradition is the antithesis to totalitarianism
 - The force of rule rather than consent
 - The forceful dissemination of an ideology which claims authority over consciousness
 - The violation of boundaries between public and private life
 - The use of rhetoric of rationality to justify what is irrational
 - 2) Totalitarianism arises from the liberal Enlightenment tradition
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Totalitarianism and the Modern Nation-State

- ‘I think...that the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything that ever before existed in the world; our contemporaries will find no prototype of it in their memories. I seek in vain for an expression that will accurately convey the whole of the idea I have formed of it; the old words *despotism* and *tyranny* are inappropriate; the thing itself is new and since I cannot name it, I must attempt to define it.’
 - Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
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- J.L. Talmon and Michael Halberstam → passage is early recognition the development of totalitarianism as related to “the modern ideal of political self-determination and emancipation.”
- Totalitarian movements are not aberrations of the modern nation-state (not about lapsing into savagery) → but in the “intellectual foundations of modern democratic society”

Kant and totalitarianism



- Kant's concept of *totality* tilts into totalitarianism
- Halberstam: "it emerges with greatest clarity as a departure from Kantianism, drawing substantially on the resources available to use from within the Kantian tradition"
- Focus on this because interested in history of the "law" → such a concept is not inevitable, but merely convenient to consolidations of power

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)



- Born to Lutheran Protestant family in 1724
- Brought up in **pietist** house: Lutheran movement which focuses on literal interpretation of the bible and individual piety/religious devotion
- Struggled to reconcile his religious upbringing with his belief in science
- Often said that he led a very strict schedule, and that he never travelled more than 15 miles from his home

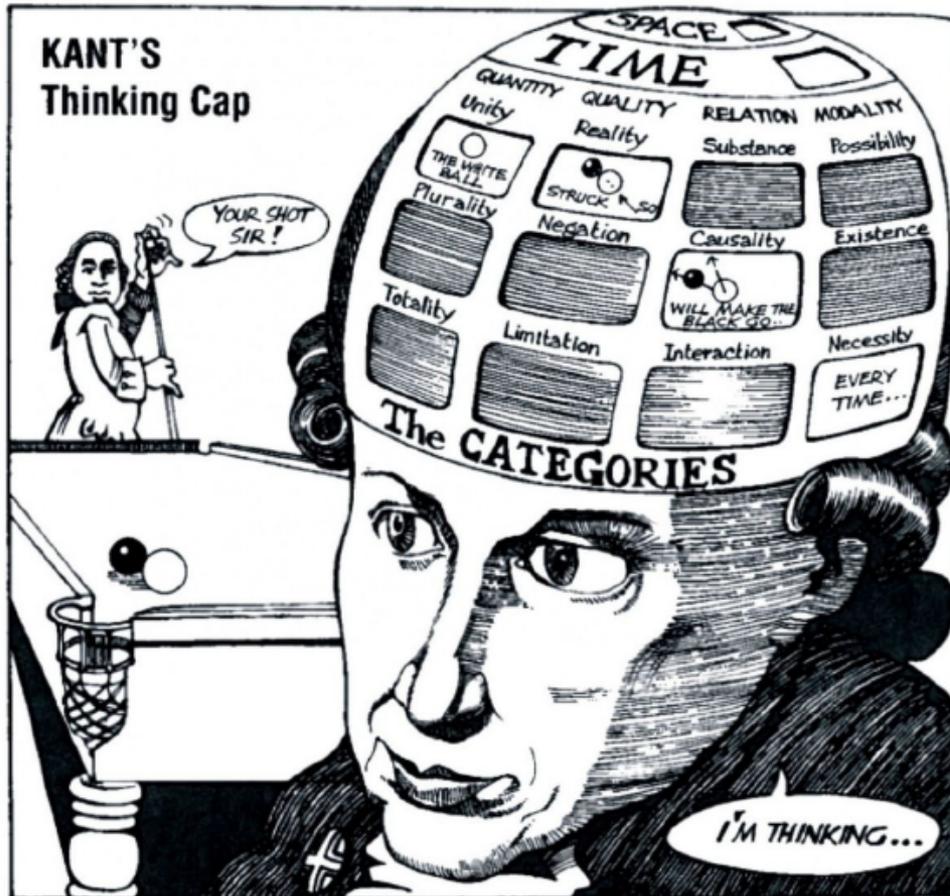
What is Enlightenment? (1798)

- Halberstam often uses the word “emancipation” → unlike “freedom” and “autonomy”
 - Requires something to be emancipated from
- Kant: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”
- Retreat to an almost solipsistic account of morality and moral code
- The person who seeks “ethical relations” as immature
- The Enlightenment project offers emancipation from the other

The Critique of Pure Reason (1781)

- Kant constructs system of natural laws which require no external/empirical verification
- Reduction of difference → unify concepts
- Concepts are representations that are sense mediated, and then ordered/categorized by reason → determined by similarity (sharing similar properties)
- Reduction of plurality into unity (claims this does not create totality)
- Two defenses scholars make against the claim that Kant's system of totalities leads to totalitarianism:
 - 1) System of unities are distinct from totality (systems unify concepts rather than force them into totality)
 - 2) If totality, not totalitarianism because it does not negate plurality

Systematic Unity



- Universe exists and is “already certain *it itself*”
- Judgement needed to carry out subsumption of the particular to the universal
- Particulars are examined in relationship with universal law → if they conform to the law, then the law can be said to be universal
- Systematic unity is necessary not only “subjectively and logically” but “objectively also”

Kant's categories

- Project of “complete knowledge” reveals itself as a totality when looking at Kant's categories (especially of quantity): unity, plurality, and totality
 - First two categories (unity and plurality) are independent characteristics
 - The third category (totality) is a combination of the first two
- Works hard to argue that totality differs from “mere contingent aggregate” of concepts → mirrors and then replicates system of totalization
 - *The law must therefore rest upon pure transcendental, not empirical, grounds. For if it rested on empirical grounds, it would come later than the systems, whereas in actual fact it has itself given rise to all that is systematic in our knowledge of nature.*
- System of universalization more related to totalism than unity

The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all, and without reason no coherent employment of the understanding, *and in the absence of this no sufficient criterion of empirical truth*. In order, therefore to secure an empirical criterion we have no option save to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary [*emphasis mine*]

The Categorical Imperative



“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.”

- A **categorical imperative** must be obeyed at all times, and in any circumstance
 - Absolute, unconditional requirement
- **Deontology**: normative ethical theory → right and wrong based on system of rules rather than the consequences.

Reason over observation

- CI : rationally imperative, objective principle; unconditional in their application
- this imperative must be followed regardless of desires, changing circumstances, or natural inclinations.
- morality does not derive from instrumental rules or criteria to which reason must conform
 - the CI—like Kant's natural laws—results from a rational will which creates the laws dictating its application.
- issues of morality must be addressed as an *a priori* philosophy, not concerned or referencing human behavior or culture.
- bound by the CI as the highest principle of morality, and its moral requirements are unconditionally necessary → meaning that they must be applied across all instances regardless of the particularity of their occurrence.

Experience v. Reason

- Empirical observations tell the moral agent nothing about whether a particular law is suitable in a certain situation or to what scope the law should be extended
 - Experience/observation: can merely tell the observer how one might be considered in the eyes of others or how pleasing the experience of following the law might be.
 - Any appeal to *a posteriori* examination would create corrupted notions of moral duties
 - there is “no genuine principle of morality that would not have to rest merely on pure reason independently of experience.”

Benjamin Constant

Challenge to Kant's CI

- In 1797, Benjamin Constant challenged Kant's maxim that it is our unconditional moral duty to tell the truth
 - If it is wrong to lie under any circumstances, society would be impossible and there would be no way to defend oneself.
 - Lying is right or wrong depending on the context → who is the recipient of the false information
- Kant's response is blunt: To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally, one not to be restricted by any conveniences”
- Relies on farfetched story telling:
 - If someone were to tell the murderer honestly where the friend is, then perhaps they have already fled or have been saved.
 - In relying on fantasy, has not the moral subject risked sacrificing his friend in order to maintain moral purity?

Kant and the Third Reich



- Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: records the testimonies of Adolf Eichmann, (Nazi *SS-Obersturmbannführer* and major organizer of the transportation of Jews into ghettos and then to the concentration camps.)
- Many other former Nazi officers and collaborators attempted to argue that they were merely “following orders”
 - Eichmann emphatically declared that he had maintained high moral standing and had modelled his moral judgement after Kant’s precepts, especially his categorical imperative.
- He was able to define Kant’s *CI* to the judge: “I meant by my remark about Kant that the principles of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws.”

- Eichmann → heavily influenced by Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, and though he laments that there came a point in his facilitation of state violence when he felt he was "no longer master of his own deeds," he manages to renegotiate this moral self-failing by reformulating the *CI*:
 - "Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator of law of the land."
- Nazi general Hans Frank's formation of the *CI*, well known in the Third Reich, supports Eichmann's refiguration of Kant's precept:
 - "The categorical imperative of action in the Third Reich reads as follows: Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of your action, would approve of it."
- Distortion of Kant's *CI* replaces the discovery of morality through rational inquiry with the adherence of morality dictated from an authority, tilting Kant's moral philosophy into totalitarianism.
- The relationship between moral goodness and obedience to legal authority is clear in Kant's work:
 - He insists "on the duty to obey even oppressive rulers."