Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, April 20

I. Kant's categorical imperative, version #1: Formula of Universal Law

On Tuesday, we saw Kant's argument that our moral duties must be independent of the consequences of our actions.
He concludes that there must be some rules which guide our actions categorically.
These rules are called the categorical imperative.
Kant presents one categorical imperative, in three versions.
The first version, the formula of universal law, says that one should act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law.

A maxim is a general rule of which an action is an instance.
The maxims of my actions are of the form:
Whenever I am in situation x, I shall do action y.
But, to fully generalize my maxim, to universalize it, I apply it to every one:
Whenever anyone is in situation x, he/she shall do action y.
So, Kant's claim is that if an action is to be moral, it must be possible to will the universalization of your maxim.
Maxims fail the categorical imperative test if they lead to contradictions.

As an example of how to use the formula of universal law, consider: Should I cheat on my philosophy test?
1. Determine your maxim, the rule that guides your action
2. Consider the situation if everyone did the same, if the maxim were to be universalized.
3. Would it be possible to will this situation?
No, because it would eradicate the notion of test-taking.

Take, for another example, lying, p 201.
The essence of morality, according to the formula of universal law, is universalizability.
So when we lie, we are actually willing that others lie to us.
But we do not want others to lie to us.
So we both want and do not want others to lie to us.
That makes it impossible to will a lie.
We can be inclined to lie, due to our base nature.
We are not willing a universal lie, only that we may be an exception to a universal law of truth-telling.

II. Contradictions and the formula of universal law

A maxim fails the first version of the categorical imperative if it leads to a contradiction.
There are two types of contradictions which can cause a maxim to fail:
1) Contradiction in the world; and
2) Contradiction in the will.

A maxim can fail because it is not possible to have a world in which a maxim is universalized.
Feldman mentions the case of jumping up and down while remaining motionless, p 218.
Or a maxim can fail because, though such a world is possible, it is not possible to will this world without contradiction.
If a maxim creates a contradiction in the world, it also creates a contradiction in the will, since it is impossible to will a contradiction.

See illustrations, pp 205-206; and especially Feldman's versions of them, pp 220-225.
The first two illustrations concern contradictions in the world.
The first illustration concerns suicide.
My generalized maxim is: Whenever I am in despair, I may kill myself.
The universalized maxim is: Whenever any one is in despair, he/she may kill him/herself.
The contradiction arises since it is natural to want to maintain our lives, which contradicts our maxim to kill ourselves.
Feldman correctly points out that the suicide example depends on a contentious claim that it is always and necessarily in our interest to further our own lives.

The second illustration concerns false promising in order to borrow money.
This example is much more convincing, like the lying or cheating examples above.
If every one were to promise falsely to borrow money, then no one would believe their promises.
The institution of promise making would disappear.
The utilitarian considers several factors which are irrelevant to Kant when evaluating the morality of false promising.
For example, the utilitarian worries about one's reputation, about whether I would like to live in a world in which promises are made falsely, and about whether one could actually get the money.
For Kant, all that is relevant is the impossibility of a world in which the maxim were universalized.
Feldman underestimates the strength of this example, by misrepresenting the world in which false promising is universalized.
Promising is an institution which could not exist unless promises were mostly kept.
If the maxim under consideration were universalized, the institution could not exist

The third and fourth illustrations concern contradictions in the will.
In these illustrations, the maxims can be universalized, it is possible to have a world in which every one follows the maxims, but there is a contradiction in willing the maxims to be universal.
The third example concerns laziness, and letting our talents rust.
Consider Jim Brown, Michael Jordan, or Ricky Williams; or Dave Navarro; or J.D. Salinger.
Still, while we think that wasting good talent is lamentable, it may not be morally wrong.
Feldman seems to think that it is possible for a rational person to be lazy.
Kant defines rationality in such a way that laziness, in this sense, is incompatible with rationality.
Kant's claim does seem too strong, but it captures our sense that the decision to spend one's life in a drug

haze rather than honing one's skills is a bad decision.

The fourth illustration, concerning imperfect duties to others, is, like the second illustration, more convincing.
Here, we are willing to neglect others in need.
But, if that maxim were universalized, we would also be willing to neglect ourselves.
So, we both want help from others, but do not want to help others.
Feldman thinks that this example is unconvincing, since we may never need help, p 225.
First, it is implausible that a person would never need help.
More importantly, it is irrelevant whether we actually would need help.
Kant is urging us to think about different possible worlds.
In a world in which every one neglected every one, such contradictions would surely occur.
The agent need not admit that he wants help in order to rationally need help.

Another way to see that we can not universalize the maxim of neglecting others in need is to consider that the maxim 'never help anyone' must fail.
So, it is not the case that we may never help anyone.
That is, we must help someone sometime(s).

Universalizing a maxim does not mean that if every one acts as I do, then it is morally permissible.
It means that we have to imagine a world in which every one acts as I do.
An action will be immoral if such a world is impossible.
Even if such a world is possible, an action will be immoral if we can not consistently will such a world.
Note that (consequentialist) considerations of whether we would like to live in such a world are irrelevant.

III. Distinguishing the categorical imperative from the golden rule

While the formula of universal law sounds a bit like the golden rule, it differs in several important respects, as Feldman notes, pp 219-220.
The Golden Rule says that the actions we perform which affect others are only permissible if we are willing to have others affect us in the same way.
The golden rule is thus silent on actions which only affect one's self.
Kant, for example, believes that suicide is (at least sometimes) morally impermissible, as is neglecting one's natural talents.
The first and third illustrations involve duties to oneself.
The second and fourth involve duties to others.

More importantly, as long as I am willing to be treated badly, the golden rule allows me to treat others badly.
If I am willing to be punched, I can punch some one.
There are masochistic people in the world, but it seems wrong to think that they are permitted to harm others.
According to the categorical imperative, it is irrational to want to be mistreated, and we may never mistreat others.
Universalizing does not mean: if every one does it, then it is morally acceptable.

IV. Version #2 of the Categorical Imperative: The Formula of the End in Itself.

Never use humans as a mere means.
Mere means involve deceit and coercion.
E.g. involving some one in a plan to which they would not consent.
All humans are due respect as rational persons.
All rational beings are equally able to make and break the moral law.
All things have either a price (and so have value only conditionally, or hypothetically) or dignity (and so have unconditional, or categorical value).
Persons have dignity - they are the source of value, p 209.

V. Version #3: The Kingdom of Ends

The kingdom of ends is a positive version of the categorical imperative, p 211.
It recognizes that we, as the makers of ends and sources of value, have goals and desires.
These ends should mesh with the ends of all other rational beings.
Remember that humans have value exactly because they can create value.

VI. Morality and hypothetical imperatives

Utilitarianism makes morality into a system of hypothetical imperatives.
Moral commands cannot be hypothetical imperatives, according to Kant, because then you would be worrying about the consequences.
Kant argues that morality can not be about the consequences of our actions:

>   1. Consequences are out of our control.
>   2. Morality is within our control.
>   So, morality can not be based on consequences.

If morality were based on consequences, it would not be about duty, but self-interest.
Further, our ability to reason does not seem to lead us to happiness, p 197.
If our ability to reason has any purpose, it must be independent of goals, it must be good in itself.
We should seek our happiness since it will help avoid temptation away from the moral law.
But, our own happiness is not a moral matter.
Even if we are inclined to violate the moral law, we can act morally.
The moral quality of our action will be determined only by the content of our will.

VII. Autonomy and the categorical imperative

Since the commands of morality do not come from the consequences, they must come from ourselves.
Kant calls the fact that we give the moral law to ourselves autonomy.
He implicitly assumes two axioms, that we are free to act, and that morality is possible.
Then, he argues for autonomy:

      1. A moral action must be done, independently of your desires.
      2. So there must be some reason to do it.
      3. The reasons do not come from outside of us.
      Therefore, we give the moral law to ourselves, i.e. we are autonomous.

Premises 1 and 2 are supposed to be obvious.
Premise 3 relies on the insight that external motivation is a consequentialist notion.
If we act for external reasons, then we would undermine the universal character of morality.
For, external conditions are always different, and not controllable by the individual.
Consider the role of examples in our discussion of utilitarianism.
Kant denies that these examples can really tell us anything, p 203.
For, they involve how we feel about something, our intuitions and inclinations.
Kant calls systems based on hypothetical imperatives heteronomous.
But, discussions of morality should proceed exclusively by pure reason.
Then, the rational subject gives the moral law to himself, and the system may be pure and autonomous,
independent of capricious desires or circumstances.

The concept of autonomy is closely linked to the concept of freedom.
For Kant, our moral freedom consists in the irrelevance of external factors to our morality.
Freedom, then, is our ability to make and obey the categorical imperative.
Note that one is most free when one is following the objective moral law, which constrains you from
acting otherwise!

VIII. Comparisons between utilitarianism and Kantian deontology

	Utilitarianism	Kantian Ethics
	Action-Guiding, moral theory	Action-Guiding, moral theory
Why should one be moral?	Pain/ Pleasure Favor/ Disapproval	Duty , not inclination
What, generally, determines if an action is good or bad?	Consequences in the world	One's own Good Will
What tool do we use to evaluate actions?	Greatest Happiness Principle	Categorical Imperative Test
What is the minimum we have to do to be moral persons?	Create the greatest happiness for the greatest number	Never break the moral law, the CI
How can we exceed the moral minimum?	There is no supererogation. One must consider one's own interests impartially.	Sometimes aiding others in meeting their ends.
Why do persons have value?	They can be happy.	They are the bearers of rational life.
Compare the theories in terms of scope and precision.	broad scope, imprecise	narrow scope, precise