

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, March 1

I. Quiz: Describe one criticism of utilitarianism.

II. How, for Kant, do we determine what our duties are?

The simple answer is that our duty is to obey the categorical imperative.

An imperative is a command.

Hypothetical imperatives take the form, "If you want A, then do B."

Categorical imperatives take the form, "Do B." See p 60.

Moral commands cannot be hypothetical imperatives, according to Kant, because then you would be worrying about the consequences.

III. The Categorical Imperative

We still need to know precisely what these commands of morality are.

There is one moral law, according to Kant, but there are three versions of the CI.

So there is one rule in three supposedly equivalent forms.

Version #1: Formula of Universal Law, p 60.

Version #2: The Formula of the End in Itself., p 62.

Version #3: The Kingdom of Ends, p 63.

IV. Version #1: Formula of Universal Law

Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law.

That is, 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 it, consider: Should I cheat on my philosophy test?

1. Determine your maxim, the rule that guides your action

O'Neill says to erase all reference to particulars of time and place in your intentions.

'I will cheat here and now' becomes 'cheating in general'.

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.

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.

Here, we are not willing a universal lie, but only that we may be an exception to a universal law of truth-telling.

V. Two types of contradictions

There are two types of impossibility, 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.

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 #2 and #4.

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

O'Neill stresses this one: never use humans as a mere means.

'Mere means' involve deceit and coercion, p 79.

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 on conditionally, or hypothetically) or dignity (and so have unconditional, or categorical value).

Persons have dignity - they are the source of value, p 64.

VII. Version #3: The Kingdom of Ends

This is more positive take on the categorical imperative.

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.

VIII. 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's argument 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.

Moreover, if morality were based on consequences, it would not be about duty, but self-interest.

IX. Autonomy and the categorical imperative

If the commands of morality do not come from the consequences, which are beyond our control, they must come from ourselves.

Kant implicitly assumes two axioms (statements):

We are free to act.

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 don't come from outside of us.

Therefore, we give the moral law to ourselves, i.e. we are autonomous.

See p 64.

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, p 57.

X. A Kantian Vocabulary

Right intentions: intending to obey the categorical imperative.

Good will: the desire to do one's moral duty.

Moral duty: to obey the categorical imperative.

Freedom: the 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!

XI. 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 (pp 57-58): An action must have motive of duty to have moral worth. Not inclination - only some people may have them, but all people can be moral.
What, generally, determines if an action is good or bad?	Consequences in the world	One's own Good Will (p 57)
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?		
Why do persons have value?		
Compare the theories in terms of scope and precision.		