

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006  
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Lecture Notes, March 6

I. 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?	There is no difference, no supererogation. One must always think of the whole world. (Peter Singer)	Sometimes aiding others in meeting their ends. Consider the maxim 'never help anyone' It fails - so, not-(never help anyone). I.e. help someone sometime(s).
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

## II. A first criticism of Kant's moral theory

Criticism #1: Kant's morality is rigid and exceptionless.

There may be times when we think that lying and killing are morally acceptable.

Consider the example of Danish fishing boats ferrying Jews away from Nazi-controlled regions.

It's hard to see how we could formulate such maxims without violating the categorical imperative.

In such cases, are we deciding to break the moral law, or do we want our morality to permit these acts?

It's clear that Kant bites the bullet, here.

That is, he dismisses the objection, and maintains his exceptionlessness.

See his, "On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns":

Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise therefrom for him or for any others.. [By telling a lie] I do wrong to duty in general in a most essential point. That is, as far as in me lies, I bring it about that statements (declarations) in general find no credence, and hence also that all rights based on contracts become void and lose their force, and this is a wrong done to mankind in general. (Academy edition 426)

## III. Criticism #2: Even the best intentions may lead to bad consequences.

We can, as Mill says, reasonably predict the consequences of our actions, often.

Falling back on good intentions seems morally irresponsible.

In the case of the inquiring murderer, my duty to tell the truth seems overwhelmed by my duties to family and friends.

These may be about consequences, but I seem to have some control over these.

## IV. Criticism #3: Aren't we responsible for the consequences of our truths?

Kant says we are always responsible for the consequences of a lie.

If something bad happens, then someone else is responsible.

Consider again the inquiring murderer, or Danish fishing boats ferrying Jews to safety.

"Get your own moral house in order," is a tough position, especially when we have reasonable expectations of being able to influence others.

## V. Criticism #4: Different descriptions of the same acts may result in different outcomes of the C.I. test.

How do you describe an act?

Consider the botanist example from Bernard Williams, described in two different ways.

Description 1:

Choose between

a) shooting a man

and

b) not shooting a man.

Description 2:

Choose between

a) saving 19 lives

and

b) aiding a corrupt military.

If we describe the act in the first way, we can not shoot the man.

If we describe it in the second way, it seems that we should shoot the man.

Kant would respond that Description 2 is incorrect, one must focus on one's own moral life.

This presupposes that there is one and only one correct description of the act.

This description should be objective, non-controversial, and morally neutral.

But what's wrong with describing the act as 'saving 19 lives'?

Kant would say that it looks to desires, consequences, and other people.

But so does 'shooting a man'.

How about 'pulling a trigger'?

But that is no good either, for similar reasons.

And there is nothing wrong with pulling a trigger on a paint gun, or a water gun.

How about 'moving my finger while...'

Now we have lost all sense of the action itself, and why it might be wrong.