Lecture Notes, December 20 - December 27: Kant

I. The good will, duty, and inclination

Consider helping a struggling person across the street.
This is a good act.
Consider the same situation, but which ends with an unforeseeable bad consequence.
A previously unseen truck runs over and kills both of you.
The utilitarian, given the bad outcome, must describe your act as a bad act.
But the initiating action is the same action.
How could it be good in one case and bad in the other?

Kant accounts for our intuition that the acts are equally morally worthy.
He says that the only good thing is a good will, a desire to do one's duty, p 582.
Since the will in each case is the same, the moral worth of each action is the same.
For Kant, morality is always independent, or autonomous, of consequences, depending only on our will.
Mill makes morality heteronomous, involving factors outside of us, and over which we have little or no control.
Since morality must not be affected by consequences, it must be purely formal, determined by the agreement of one's maxims with one's duties.
That is what Kant means by, "Duty is the necessity of active from respect for the law" (584).

Our first step toward understanding Kant's moral theory is to clarify his notion of the will, which he calls reason in its practical employment, and how it relates to our inclinations.
We naturally have inclinations, or desires, as do all animals.
Our inclinations will naturally conflict in some cases with our duties.
We might want, for example, something that belongs to some one else.
We might be inclined to take it, but it is our duty not to steal.
Still, refraining from stealing is not praiseworthy.
We can not be said to have a good will merely by refraining from committing a bad act.

Consider saving some one's life with the expectation that there will be a reward.
The moral worth of the action itself is unclear.
If we are doing it for reward, we are pursuing only our self-interest, and acting for the right reason.
To have moral worth, an action must be done from the motive of duty.
To determine if an action is morally worthy, we have to determine the content of our will.
An action can only be seen as morally worthy if we are acting against our inclinations.
Otherwise, we might be acting for the wrong reasons.

There are four ways in which duty and inclination may meet:

1) Acting contrary to duty
E.g. robbing, murdering, lying.
These are obviously not morally valuable.

2) Acting consistently with duty and with inclination
E.g. the shopkeeper charging a fair price.
Here, we do no wrong.
But since the act is in our interest, we can not see the moral value in it.

3) Acting consistently with duty, but not with immediate inclination, though we might have some inclination
E.g. Not picking some one's pocket.
We might be inclined to steal, but we want to avoiding being caught.
So, we act in the right way, but for the wrong reasons.

4) Acting consistently with duty but contrary to inclination.
E.g. returning lost money, volunteering one's time to help others.
Here morality shines.

We may interpret Kant as holding a weak claim that we can see only see moral value in acts done contrary to inclination, though other acts may also have moral worth.
We might see the weak interpretation as charitable to Kant, but Kant is committed to a stronger claim.
The strong claim is that only acting contrary to inclination creates moral worth.
The weak claim is less controversial, but the strong claim is really Kant's position.

In fact, Kant claims that there may never be actions of moral worth.
Even when we think that we are acting purely out of duty, we may be misleading ourselves.
Kant has provided a strict standard for morality.
We will put aside for now questions about whether it is too strict.
The basic intuition to which Kant appeals, that the only good thing is a good will, seems fair enough, and worthy of pursuit.
A good will is the reasoned desire to do one's moral duty.

II. The categorical imperative

The simple answer is that our duty is to obey the categorical imperative.
An imperative is a command.
A categorical imperative admits of no exceptions, a command which is independent of the consequences.
We still need to know precisely what these commands of morality are.
There is one moral law, according to Kant, called the categorical imperative (CI).
There are three versions of the CI.
So there is one rule in three supposedly equivalent forms.
Our selection from Kant discusses the first version, the formula of universal law, p 584.
O'Neill discusses the second version, the formula of the end in itself, p 587.
The third version is called the kingdom of ends, though we will not spend time on it, here.

III. The formula of universal law

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.
O'Neill points out that maxims are generalized versions of one's intentions.
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.
Kant claims that if an action is to be moral, it must be possible to will the universalization of the maxim.
Maxims fail the categorical imperative test (in the formula of universal law) if they lead to contradictions.

As an example of how to use the formula of universal law, consider: Should I plagiarize my philosophy paper?
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 paper writing.

Take, for another example, lying, pp 584-5.
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.

IV. 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.
Consider the case of jumping up and down while remaining motionless.
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.

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.

Kant discusses perfect duties and imperfect duties.
He also considers duties to one's self, and duties to others.
Thus, there are four different kinds of duties: perfect duties to one's self, perfect duties to others, imperfect duties to one's self, and imperfect duties to others.
He provides four illustrations, one for each kind of duty, pp 585-6.

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.
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 example.
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.

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.
Is it 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.

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).
O'Neill distinguishes between duties of justice and duties of beneficence.
We must always comply with our duties of justice, never violating the categorical imperative.
But, we must select situations in which to be beneficent.

V. 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.
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.

VI. The formula of the end in itself.

O'Neill focuses on the second version of the categorical imperative which counsels us never to use humans as a mere means.
Mere means may involve deceit or coercion.
For example, we might involve some one in a plan to which they would not consent.
The formula of the end in itself is based on Kant's claim that all human beings 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.

VII. Comparisons between utilitarianism and Kantian deontology

For the utilitarian, the commands of morality derive from the consequences of our actions.
Kant denies that consequences, material goods, and happiness have anything to do with morality.
Since the commands of morality do not come from the consequences of our actions, they must come from ourselves.

Kant calls the fact that we give the moral law to ourselves autonomy.
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.
Kant calls systems like utilitarianism which are based on hypothetical imperatives heteronomous.
Instead, Kant argues that 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.
This is the point of the obscure paragraphs on p 584.
Note that one is most free when one is following the objective moral law, which constrains you from acting otherwise!

Here is a chart to help you compare utilitarianism and Kantian ethics:

	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

VIII. A few criticisms 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 is 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 is clear that Kant dismisses the objection, and maintains his exceptionlessness.
Kant decries such examples as irrelevant.
Consider the following quote, from "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)

Criticism #2: Some consequentialist considerations do seem morally relevant.

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.
For Kant, we are never responsible for the bad consequences of our truths, even though we are always
responsible for the consequences of a lie.
If something bad happens, then some one 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.

Criticism #3: Different descriptions of the same acts may result in different outcomes of the C.I. test.

How do you describe an act?
Consider the example of Jim, from Bernard Williams, who must choose between shooting one man or
letting twenty men die.
We can describe this example 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.

If we describe the act in the first way, we may 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, since it involves the actions and intentions of other people.
One must focus on one's own moral life.
Kant's response presupposes that there is one and only one correct description of the act.
This description should be objective, non-controversial, and morally neutral.
Here, he relies on Hume's fact/value distinction.
Hume says that there are facts, in the world, and values, which we impose on it.
Facts are objective.
We project our values on to the world of facts.
For Hume, these values are subjective (though he claims universality).
(Hume uses the fact/value distinction for another purpose, to establish subjectivism, but that does not matter here.)
For Kant, values are universal, derived from the rationality that we all share.

The big question here is whether there is a fact/value distinction.
If not, then Kant will have real trouble describing acts in any morally neutral way.
Different descriptions of the same acts will result in different outcomes of the C.I. test.
Kant's theory collapses and has to be abandoned.
But whether there is a fact/value distinction or not is not a settled matter.