

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W

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Russell Marcus

Class 28 -Kantian Ethics



The Good Will

- “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will” (Kant 536a).
- Morality is always independent of consequences, or **autonomous**.
 - “A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes - because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone -that is, good in itself” (Kant 537a).
- Mill makes morality **heteronomous**, involving factors outside of us, and over which we have little or no control.
- Since morality is unaffected by consequences, it must be purely formal, determined by the agreement of one’s maxims with one’s duties.

Hypothetical Imperatives

- We call Kant's theory deontological, or duty-based, precisely because it says that morality is a system of categorical, abstract, perfectly general rules.
- Utilitarianism understands morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives.
- Moral commands cannot be hypothetical imperatives, according to Kant, because then you can not predict or control consequences.
 - NC1. Consequences are out of our control.
 - NC2. Morality is within our control.
 - NCC. So, morality can not be based on consequences.
- We have no real control over our happiness.
 - “Now it is impossible for the most intelligent, and at the same time most powerful, but nevertheless finite, being to form here a determinate concept of what he really wills. Is it riches that he wants? How much anxiety, envy, and pestering might he not bring in this way on his own head! Is it knowledge and insight? This might perhaps merely give him an eye so sharp that it would make evils at present hidden from him and yet unavoidable seem all the more frightful, or would add a load of still further needs to the desires which already give him trouble enough. Is it long life? Who will guarantee that it would not be a long misery? Is it at least health? How often has infirmity of body kept a man from excesses into which perfect health would have let him fall!...” (Kant 541a-b).

Autonomy

we give the moral law to ourselves

- We are free to act.
- Morality is possible.
 - A1. A moral action must be done, independently of your desires.
 - A2. So there must be some reason to do it.
 - A3. The reasons do not come from outside of us.
 - AC. Therefore, we give the moral law to ourselves, i.e. we are autonomous.
- Our moral freedom consists in the irrelevance of external factors to our morality.
- Note that one is most free when one is following the objective moral law, which constrains you from acting otherwise!

Inclinations and Morality



- We have inclinations, or desires, as do all animals.
 - E.g. to take what does not belong to us
- Refraining from stealing is not in itself praiseworthy.
- We can not be said to have a good will merely by refraining from committing a bad act.
- We might be acting in accordance with our duty for merely selfish reasons.
 - E.g. saving Donald Trump from drowning
- An action can only be seen as morally worthy if we are acting against our inclinations.
- “To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations...” (Kant 537b-538a).

Duty and Inclination



- DI1. Acting contrary to duty
 - robbing, murdering, and lying
- DI2. Acting consistently with duty and with inclination
 - the shopkeeper charging a fair price
 - “Thus people are served *honestly*; but this is not nearly enough to justify us in believing that the shopkeeper has acted in this way from duty or from principles of fair dealing; his interests required him to do so. We cannot assume him to have in addition an immediate inclination towards his customers, leading him, as it were out of love, to give no man preference over another in the matter of price. Thus the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but solely from purposes of self-interest” (Kant 537b).
- DI3. Acting consistently with duty, but not with immediate inclination, though we might have some inclination
 - Refraining from stealing for fear of punishment
- DI4. Acting consistently with duty but contrary to inclination

Categorical Imperatives

- Commands of morality must be categorical, independent of particular facts of a situation.
 - ▶ “There is an imperative which, without being based on, and conditioned by, any further purpose to be attained by a certain line of conduct, enjoins this conduct immediately. This imperative is categorical. IT is concerned, not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form and with the principle from which it follows; and what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may. This imperative may be called the imperative of morality” (Kant 540b).
- Three versions of the single moral law
 - ▶ CI1. The formula of universal law
 - ▶ CI2. The formula of the end in itself
 - ▶ CI3. The formula of the kingdom of ends

The Formula of Universal Law

“Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 542b).

- Maxims are generalized versions of one’s intentions.
- If an action is to be moral, it must be possible to will the universalization of the maxim which guides the act.
 - ▶ abstracting from the particular act (which might be done from self-interested motives) and from the particular agent of the act.
 - ▶ Whenever I am in situation x, I shall do action y.
 - ▶ Whenever anyone is in situation x, he/she shall do action y.

Applying the Formula of Universal Law

Should I plagiarize my philosophy paper?

- Step 1. Determine your maxim, the rule that guides your action
- Step 2. Consider the situation if everyone did the same, if the maxim were to be universalized.
- Step 3. Observe that it would be impossible to will this situation because it would eradicate the notion of paper writing. No one would assign papers since they would not be the kinds of exercises intended.
- Result. Plagiarizing my philosophy paper would be contrary to duty.
 - ▶ This result does not depend on our not liking a world of plagiarized papers.
 - That would make morality heteronomous.
 - ▶ Plagiarized papers are no papers at all, in the relevant sense.

Kant on Lying

- 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.
- In such cases, we do not will a universal lie.
- We only want (and can not rationally will) that we may be an exception to a universal law of truth-telling.

Contradictions

- There are two types of contradictions which can cause a maxim to fail.
 - C1. Contradiction in the world
 - C2. Contradiction in the will
- For C1, a maxim can fail because it is not possible to have a world in which a maxim is universalized.
 - Jumping up and down while remaining motionless
- For C2, a maxim can fail because, though such a world is possible, it is not possible to will this world without contradiction.
- Consequentialist considerations of whether we would like to live in such a world are irrelevant.
- Not the Golden Rule

The Formula of the End in Itself

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.

- Deceit or coercion
- All persons are due respect as rational beings.
 - All rational beings are equally able to make and break the moral law.
 - Note the criterion for personhood
- “The will is therefore not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also *making the law* for itself and precisely on this account as first of all subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author” (Kant 546b).
- Price and dignity
 - Things with price have value only conditionally, or hypothetically.
 - Persons have dignity, which is unconditional, or categorical, value.

The Kingdom of Ends

- “I understand by a *“kingdom”* a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws” (Kant 547b).
- A positive way of viewing the moral law
- “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*: if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity” (Kant 548a).
- Our ends should mesh with the ends of all other rational beings.

Four Examples

- Contradictions in the World
 1. Suicide
 2. False promising in order to borrow money
- Contradictions in the Will
 3. The slacker
 4. Neglecting those in need

	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.
Scope	Broad	Narrow
Precision of the theory	Imprecise	Precise

Concerns About Kantian Deontology

- Sometimes, consequences are in our control.
- There are times when we think that lying and killing are morally acceptable.
 - Danish fishing boats ferrying Jews away from Nazi-controlled regions
- The inquiring murderer
 - “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.”(Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns,” Academy edition 426).
- My duty to tell the truth seems overwhelmed by my duties to family and friends.
- “Get your own moral house in order,” is a tough position, especially when we have reasonable expectations of being able to influence others.



Kant and the Fact/Value Distinction

- Different descriptions of the same acts may result in different outcomes of the categorical imperative test.
- Bernard Williams and the unfortunate biologist
 - Description 1:
 - a. shooting a man
 - b. not shooting a man
 - Description 2:
 - a'. saving 19 lives
 - b'. aiding a corrupt military

