

Kantian Deontology

Kant's Critique of *Classic* Utilitarianism

- Hypothetical “oughts” are pragmatic.
 - For example, “If I want to lose weight then I ought to exercise and eat healthily”.
 - This “ought” requires possessing some desire (to lose weight) and establishing a means (exercising) for achieving that desired goal.
- If the moral action is that which promotes the general welfare, then human dignity is merely a means to that end.
 - Calculating how to treat people in order to bring about some other state of affairs.*

*This is what lead Kant to claim that categorical imperatives cannot have exceptions. He viewed having exceptions to entail utilizing a means-end formulation.

Moral “ought”

- Categorical “oughts” are not pragmatic because they do not follow from a means-end formulation grounded in desires.
 - Categorical imperatives follow from reason and logic alone.
 - Formulation of a rule governing over the action to be undertaken resulting in a self-defeating rule entails the action is unethical and the rule improper.
 - For example, if you desire to pirate video games because you can’t afford to pay for them, the resulting categorical imperative governing that action would be “Stealing is permissible”. As a result all notions of property would be nullified—property ownership would become temporary possession (and video game companies would go out of business). So such a rule would be illogical.

Why intent matters

- “Hero” (movie, a true story)
 - Under Simple Consequentialism (but not Utilitarianism), Bernie acted morally—he maximized well-being.
 - Under Kantian Deontology, he acted unethically (morally prohibited manner).

Proper intention

- What is the proper intention in doing one's duty.
 - You see an elderly woman with a flat tire on the side of the highway. You are capable of stopping to assist with changing the flat. You do so. What is the proper motivation for doing so?
 - To feel good about yourself?
 - Expectation of reward?
 - Because someone commanded you to help her?

Defining the Moral Community

- People are an end-in-themselves (intrinsically valuable) because:
 - the capacity to reason (rationality)
 - autonomy

Rationality

- Rationality conveys intrinsic value because:
 - Necessary for rule formation and abidance
 - Necessary for understanding a rule; that is,
 - what actions fall under the rule
 - when and under what conditions exceptions are permissible (which is “never” for Kant)
 - why the rule is necessary
 - Autonomy (seeking one’s own ends) is dependent upon the capacity to reason (see note).
- Moral judgments must be backed by reasons. Those reasons are binding on everyone, *all the time*.
 - Reasons cannot be relevant to a moral decision only some of the time (like when it is convenient to you, or based in cultural or historical relevance).
 - The reason why slavery is wrong today applies 2,000 years-ago and for all time. (We will examine slavery shortly.)

Value

- Intrinsic value is directly derived from a property of the object itself.
- Extrinsic value is derived from a property of some other object which is placed onto the first object.
 - An instructional book on C++ programming is valuable only to those persons who have the desire or need to learn C++.
- FYI: In Philosophy, knowledge is considered intrinsically valuable; it is not valuable because of what knowledge can do for you, such as getting a job.
- Persons have intrinsic value due to their possession of rationality.
 - Persons are entities for whom something else can have value.
 - Only persons (for Kant only *homo sapiens*) can seek their own ends (autonomy) and be rational (formulate, understand, and abide by rules).
 - A tree does not value the water it absorbs. The book on C++ does not value being read.

Deontology

- For Kant consequences of actions are completely irrelevant for determining the moral status of an action.
- The intent of the action is solely relevant.
 - The proper intent is one whereby a person is motivated by recognizing her duty—actions follow from abiding by rules grounded in logic and reason.
 - Acting ethically means recognizing the (valid) reasons for the rule and thereby acting in accordance to those reasons.
 - Consequentially, violating a categorical imperative means a person not only acted unethically but irrationally as well.

Categorical Imperatives

- Kant formulated three categorical imperatives.
 - We will examine only two of them.*
- He understood them to be logically equivalent.
 - They are not logically equivalent.

* Kant's third version of the categorical imperative relates to his metaphysics (theory of the nature of the universe) specifically his writings on the nature of free will. Current neurological research supports the view that we lack free will. (Christian ethics assumes we possess the libertarian version of free will. See the Introduction to Philosophy section of my website if you are interested in this issue.) Kant's normative system is not hindered by the research as his discussions on autonomy and self-determination are consistent with the neurological research of today.

Kantian Guidelines

- Moral rules must be stated as categorical imperatives not as itemized lists.
- Categorical imperatives must be:
 - Categorical
 - No exceptions to the rule, unconditional
 - Universal
 - Apply to everyone
 - General
 - Not context dependent
 - Do not say how we ought to or ought not to behave specifically
- Examples of common rules that are *not* categorical imperatives:
 - The Decalogue (certain items)*
 - The Bill of Rights (See note)**

* FYI: The framers were wary of including a Bill of Rights not because they did not view those items as civil rights; rather they feared people would interpret the Bill of Rights as a complete and exhaustive list. Their fears, sadly, have come true.

** FYI: In Judaism, Mosaic law only applies to the Israelites, not to Gentiles. Ergo, Mosaic Law including the Decalogue does not meet Kant's criteria. The New Testament is ambiguous on this matter as well as whether or not the "old law" is currently binding. However, contemporary Christians rely upon the "old law" when it is convenient for justifying their desires.

First Categorical Imperative

- *Act on that maxim (rule) you would simultaneously be willing to establish as a universal law.*
 - The idea is that you cannot intend for a maxim to apply to only certain individuals or groups; the rule must be universal (apply to everyone).
 - The reason for the maxim applies to everyone (falling under the maxim).
 - A rule about banking, for example, may not apply to plumbers.
 - The rule must be as general as possible.
 - For example, “Do not overcharge for services.”
 - This rule would apply to both bankers and plumbers, anyone in the retail and service industries.
 - There are no exceptions to the rule.

Problems with first categorical imperative

- David Hume's criticism of Kant's first formulation:
 - Kant's criteria does not distinguish moral rules from pragmatic or otherwise non-moral rules.
 - There must be some feature which makes a rule a normative maxim.
 - A person can will almost anything as a moral rule.
 - Hitler probably would have been just fine to have "Exterminate all Jews" as a categorical imperative. (Not an example by Hume)

Second Categorical Imperative

- *Treat all persons always as an ends and never as a means **only**.*
- The “*only*” is very important as without it the meaning and the logical implications of the maxim change significantly.
 - We treat people as a means on a daily basis. Asking your neighbor to tend to your pets while on vacation is using them as a means. Without the “*only*” doing so would be unethical.

Lying

- “Do not bear false witness”
- Lying is morally prohibited because it violates both versions of the categorical imperative.
 - 1. Lying is self-defeating as any attempt to acquire information could not be trusted and thereby no one would be able to attempt to acquire information.
 - 2. When a person seeks information the means to seek her own ends is in part transferred to the person giving the information. Lying, therefore, nullifies a person’s means to seek her own ends and simultaneously entails that she is now seeking someone else’s ends.
 - For example, if a person commits perjury in court, the jury then lacks the means to make an accurate judgment of the truth and is now ruling according to the goals of the perjured witness.

Slavery

- “Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can will them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.” Leviticus 25:44 – 46
- Slavery violates both categorical imperatives:
 - If we convert the Leviticus maxim into a categorical imperative the result would be that anyone could be a slave as well as a slave owner. Ergo, the maxim is self-defeating.
 - Obviously slaves are denied intrinsic value; they are not perceived as entities of equal worth with their owners.
 - (The Leviticus maxim is a result of in-group/out-group reasoning whereby the perceived out-group is denied intrinsic value based upon notions of race or culture.)
 - Slaves are treated as a means and denied their own ends (autonomy). The slaves’ ends are to fulfill the ends of their owner.
 - The slave owner’s interests are established as more important than the slave’s interests.

Reciprocity

- Treat people in kind:
 - Treating someone in kind is consistent with treating him in accordance with how he has already decided how others ought to be treated.
 - We are allowing him to decide how others ought to be treated (preserving his autonomy) and acting in accordance with his decision (applying his decision back to himself).

Innovations

- Kant was not the first to state but was the first to heavily stress that a person can act unethically towards herself.
 - For example, a prostitute acts unethically towards herself because she is using herself as a means only.
- Kant is historically important because he stressed a reliance upon reason and logic in ethical decision-making.
 - Ethics in Kant's time was either grounded in religion or appealed to some subjectivist ethics—such as egoism.
 - (Utilitarianism was also new to the scene but Simple Consequentialism had been around for many an age.)
- When a person acts unethically she simultaneously acts illogically.

Misc. Points

- Buried in Kant's normative system is the Principle of Impartiality.
- Rawls' equality in opportunity presupposes Kantian ideals in that failure to promote equality in opportunity often results in treating persons as a means only.

Problems

- For Kant all actions are either morally prohibited or morally required;
 - there are no morally permissible or impermissible actions.
- Lying to the Nazis:
 - *Inglorious Basterds*
- Kant's solution:
 - Not responsible for the actions of the SS soldiers; you must (morally required) uphold your moral duty in telling the truth; what others do with that information is not your responsibility.

Applying Kant to Pornography

- Playboy model Tiffany