

Immanuel Kant's Deontology

Absolutism

- The system Kant offers here is an absolutist one. This means that there will be *one right answer* to any ethical question.
- By providing his ethical system he will give us the tools to determine whether various scenarios are ethical even if he doesn't discuss them specifically.

Deontology

- From the Greek
 - *deon* – duty
 - *logos* – argument
- “Deontology” is thus a duty-based approach to ethics. If we want to know what is good and what is bad we must attend to our duty.

What is our duty?

- To answer this question we must first determine what makes an action good. That is, what feature must any action have in order for it to be classified as being ethical?
- For Kant there is only one intrinsically good thing: the good will.

The good will

- For Kant, in order for an action to qualify as being an ethical one it must be done simply because you recognize your duty and act on it *because it's your duty* and for no other reason.
- This means that if we have (let's say) a duty to tell the truth, then for the action of truth-telling to be ethical it has to be because we recognize that we have to duty and act on it out of obligation.

So what grounds our duties?

- Perhaps our duties are grounded in **consequences**. Maybe an action is ethical if it's done with the intent on maximizing beneficial consequences.
- There's a problem here, however. Does anyone ever actually *know* what the consequences of their actions will be?

Consequences?

- To have knowledge of the consequences of one's actions is to have knowledge of the future. Is this possible?
- We base many decisions we make on what we think the consequences will be, and while some consequences are more likely than others, it would seem that we can never be *certain* of what those consequences are.

Consequences? cont

- Moreover, is an action made right simply because it brought about good consequences?
 - If I shove an elderly woman out of the way of an oncoming bus, would you not change your praising of my action if you found out that I didn't notice the bus and just wanted to shove the lady? Here it would seem that our intentions are what matter.

Consequences? cont

- For Kant, we can't get consistency from trying to identify our duty with consequences because we never know what the consequences will be and an action isn't made right simply because it brings about favorable consequences.
- Watch [this video](#). Do you find that your moral assessment changes as you learn more?
- We cannot base our ethical evaluations on what the consequences are – we have to attend to *why* the action is done. The important thing becomes discerning what “whys” are important.

The emotions?

- Perhaps our emotional reactions are the source of our moral duty? That is, whatever we feel to be good is good, and whatever we feel to be bad is bad.
- But there's an immediate problem here: people have variable emotional reactions to the same event – how could we ever determine what the “appropriate” emotional reaction was? We cannot ground our moral duties in emotions.

So where do we ground them?

- For Kant the only possible source for our duties rests in our capacity for rationality.
- Rationality (reason) is shared by all and it produces the same results because the rules of reason (think about critical thinking, argumentation, and logic) from earlier) never change

Reason

- “But people come to different conclusions all the time. Obviously the conclusions of reason *aren't* always the same.” This is only the case due to a misuse of reason. If it is properly exercised the conclusions would not change because the laws of logic don't change.
- Think of it like this – if I gave each of you a prefabricated bookshelf from Walmart and asked you to build it they most likely wouldn't all look the same even if the parts and instructions were identical.

Reason

- Why? Because *your ability or willingness to use the instructions varies*.
- Reason is like those instructions – it tells you how to think, argue, and come to conclusions. But some of us get it wrong sometimes. That's not a fault with reason; that is a fault with us.

Reason and Duty

- So our duties will be grounded in reason, and in order to act ethically it will mean that we act in accordance with our rationally derived duties. *Those are the only intentions that count.*
- Reason is also what gives us our *autonomy*: our ability to self-govern.
- But *how* do we use reason to discover our duties?

Imperatives

- Any command of reason to act is an *imperative*. Reason guides our actions by two different kinds of imperatives:
- Hypothetical Imperatives; and
- Categorical Imperatives.

Hypothetical Imperatives

- These are nonmoral rules of prudence. They are commands of reason based on subjective desires.
- The form of a hypothetical imperative is essential:
 - If I want x then I must do y

Hypothetical Imperatives

- “If I want x then I must do y ”
- So say it is “if I want to lose weight then I must exercise”
- Notice two things:
 1. Not everyone wants x (to lose weight)
 2. Not everyone who wants x must do y (exercise)
 - They could eat less, eat healthier, etc. Maybe some must absolutely avoid exercising due to heart conditions.

Hypothetical imperatives bind only those who happen to want x , and even for that group what they must do to get that x varies. So we get no consistency there.

Categorical Imperatives

- Categorical Imperatives, on the other hand, are *absolutely binding moral rules*. We find our rationally-derived duties through the categorical imperative, which is an exercise of perfect reason, according to Kant.
- There are actually multiple versions of the Categorical Imperative; Kant says that all the version are essentially the same thing, and the always lead to the same conclusions. Here we're going to look at two.

Categorical Imperative

- 1) "Act such that the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature."
 - If we can do this without a contradiction then the action is ethical
 - If it has a contradiction then it is unethical.
- But let's unpack it a bit

Categorical Imperative

- "Act such that the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature."
- Maxim: the nature or purpose of the action
- Universal law of nature: something that applies to everyone always (ex. Gravity).
- Because rationality is the same for everyone, whenever you do anything you are implicitly saying that *any* rational creature should do that action. The test is then to see whether an action can be willed a universal law (something that all *must* do) without a contradiction.

Categorical Imperative

- Let's take stealing as an example.
- Maxim: Taking what belongs to another and making it yours against their will.
- Can this be willed a universal law without a contradiction?

Categorical Imperative

- If you take what does not belong to you and make it yours against that person's will, then you are implicitly saying (since you are rational) that this is an action fit for adoption by *all* other rational beings. So what's the problem? Well if you steal a pencil then, since that action has just been nominated to be a universal law, *everyone* now has the unavoidable obligation to take that pencil.

Categorical Imperative

- The problem isn't that this would make comfortable living more difficult.
- The problem is that is it no longer possible to steal. Since everyone now has equal claim to the pencil, no one truly owns it; and since no one truly owns it, no one can steal it. Stealing is impossible, and therein lies the contradiction.
- The universalization of the maxim has destroyed the very conditions necessary for that action to even take place. This, and this alone makes it unethical.

Unethical

- Again, an action is not unethical because it makes the world a less comfortable place; that would be focusing on the consequences, and for Kant the consequences *do not matter*.
- An action is ethical if you recognize that it is your duty (by considering it through the Categorical Imperative) and follow through with it *simply because it's your duty*.
 - If you do it because it makes you happy, it doesn't count as an ethical action.

Exceptions?

- For Kant, the dictates of the categorical imperative are absolute. Just as reason itself doesn't change, neither do the duties that it produces.
- In other words, stealing is always – without exception – unethical, regardless of why you were stealing.

Categorical Imperative #2

- “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means, but always at the same time an end.”
- It is clear what it is to treat someone as a means: to use them for our own desires. More specifically, it is to attempt to override their ability to self-govern (be autonomous).

Categorical Imperative #2

- To treat someone as an end is then to respect their ability to self-govern; to not attempt to override their autonomy.
- Notice, however, that Kant says we cannot treat someone *merely* as a means.
- This is important because we cannot avoid using each other as means; it is only when we fail to simultaneously treat them as ends that we act unethically.

Means and Ends

- Right now we are using one another as means. You are using me for class credit and knowledge, and I am using you for money (I don't do this for free).
- But as long as this occurs while we respect one another's autonomy, we are not behaving unethically.

Means and Ends

- In other words, if you lie to me to get the desired grade, then you are attempting to override my ability to self-govern; you are attempting to interfere with my ability to make a free choice, since a free choice requires me having the necessary information. When this occurs you act unethically.
- It is **not** unethical to lie simply because it may not turn out well or someone could get hurt; it is unethical to lie because it fails to treat the other person as an end.

Categorical Imperatives

- The first and second versions both permit and forbid the same things. Try to think of why stealing would be identified as unethical by the second version and why lying would be made unethical by the first.

Absolute

- To see the extent of the application of Kant's system, consider this:
- John is running from Mike because Mike has an axe and wants to kill John, and John runs to Sara's house for safety, and Sara lets John in (see Kant's discussion of charity). When Mike comes to the door and asks Sara if she knows where John is (and let's pretend that a simple "yes" or "no" will not suffice) what should Sara do?

Absolute

- The only option that Sara has in this example, if she is going to behave ethically, is to tell Mike the truth about where John is.
- Our intuitions say that this is incorrect, but Kant would respond by saying that our intuitions were simply wrong. It is *never* permissible to lie. Sara must tell the truth because she recognizes her rationally-grounded duty to do so. Lying would fail to treat Mike as an end. We don't know what Mike will do and we have no right to override the autonomy of another person since it is our autonomy that makes the good will valuable. We are able to *choose* to follow our duty, and it falls on each individual to make this choice – if they don't then *they* behave unethically.