

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes. October 6

Continuing our discussion of criticisms of Kant's ethics...

I. Criticism #2: 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's no good either, for similar reasons.

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

How about 'moving my finger while...'

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

Hume says that there are facts, in the world, and values, which we impose on it.

We call this the 'fact/value distinction'.

He uses it for another purpose, to establish subjectivism, but that doesn't matter.

Facts are objective, values are subjective.

We project our values on to the world of facts.

For Hume, these values are subjective (though he claims universality).

For Kant, they are universal, derived from rationality that we all have.

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.
Even if there is a fact/value distinction, we may not be able to put it into words.
If there's no fact/value distinction, and different descriptions of the same acts do result in different outcomes of the C.I. test, then Kant's theory collapses and has to be abandoned.
But this is not a settled matter.

II. Criticism #3: 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.

III. Criticism #4: 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 some one else is responsible.
Consider again the inquiring murderer, or Dutch 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.

IV. What's the right moral theory?

We've looked at two distinct moral theories, now.
Both have advantages, and problems.
What do you do when you're confused about which theory is right?

You might think that the right theory is somehow a blend of the two theories.
But this begs an important question: When do you adhere to one theory and when to the other?
Then, you need another theory to help you decide.
If you merely rely on intuitions to decide when to choose one theory and when the other, then the theories aren't doing the work they are supposed to do.

Here are some questions which may help you decide:
What would the political views of utilitarians be like? Kantians?
Which would be a better society, one filled with utilitarians or one filled with Kantians?
Is either theory plausible as a guide to behavior? (I.e. Could one adhere to it?)

Our next moral theory is quite different, as it is not an action-guiding theory, but a character-building theory.