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### Lecture Notes: Kant's Ethics

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.

(E.g. a truck, from nowhere, runs you both over.)

The utilitarian, given the bad outcome, must describe this 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: The only good thing is a good will, a desire to do one's duty

Note the contrast between will and inclination.

Will what results from rational deliberation, reason in its practical employment.

Dogs and cats can have inclinations, which are immediate.

Consider saving someone when there's a big reward - is it a good act?

Kant says, the answer is unclear, since we have to determine the content of the will.

To have moral worth, an action must be done from the motive of duty.

How duty and inclination may meet:

There are 4 cases to consider:

1) Acting contrary to duty.

E.g. robbing, murdering, lying.

These are obviously not morally valuable.

2) Acting consistently with duty, but not with immediate inclination, though we might have some inclination.

E.g. Not picking some one's pocket.

Here, we might be inclined to swipe the twenty, but we want to avoid being caught.

So, we act in the right way, but for the wrong reasons.

3) 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't see the moral value in it.

4) Acting consistently with duty but contrary to inclination.

Here morality shines.

E.g. returning lost money.

Weak Kantian claim: We can see only see moral value in acts done contrary to inclination, though other acts may also have moral worth.

Strong Kantian claim: Only acting contrary to inclination creates moral worth.

Kant is committed to the stronger claim, but the weaker one is less controversial.

Still, the question remains: How do we determine what our duties are?

The simple answer: our duty is to obey the categorical imperative.

An imperative is a command.

Hypothetical: If A then do B

Categorical: Do B. (p 20)

Kant argues that moral commands cannot be hypothetical imperatives, because then you would be worrying about the consequences.

But then morality would not be about duty, but self-interest.

Consequences are out of our control.

Where do these commands of morality come from?

If they don't come from the consequences, which are beyond our control, they must come from ourselves.

He implicitly assumes two axioms (statements):

We are free to act.

Morality is possible.

Then, he argues for autonomy:

1) A moral action must be done, independently of your desires.

2) So there must be some reason to do it.

3) The reasons don't come from outside of us.

Therefore, we give the moral law to ourselves, i.e. we are autonomous. (p 25)

Premises 1) and 2) are supposed to be obvious.

Premise 3) relies on the insight that external motivation is a consequentialist notion.

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. (p 17)

Still, we need to know precisely what these commands of morality are.

There is one moral law, according to Kant, but there are three versions of the CI.

So there is one rule in three supposedly equivalent forms.

Version #1: Formula of Universal Law (p 21)

Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law.

As an example of how to use it, consider: Should I cheat on my philosophy test?

1. Determine your maxim, the rule that guides your action

O'Neill says to erase all reference to particulars of time and place in your intentions.

'I will cheat here and now' becomes 'cheating in general'.

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 test-taking.

Contradictions make categorical imperative fail.

Take, for another example, lying.

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 don't want others to lie to us.

So we both want and don't want others to lie to us.

That makes it impossible to will a lie.

Though we can be inclined to lie, due to our base nature.

Here, we are not willing a universal lie, but only that we may be an exception to a universal law of truth-

telling.

There are two types of impossibility: contradiction in the world and contradiction in the will.  
A maxim can fail because it is not possible to have a world in which a maxim is universalized.  
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.

See his four illustrations, pp 21-2.

Version #2 of the Categorical Imperative: The Formula of the End in Itself. (p 23a)

O'Neill stresses this one: never use humans as a mere means.

'Mere means' involve deceit and coercion,

E.g. involving some one in a plan to which they would not consent.

All humans are due respect as rational persons.

All rational beings, equally rational, are equally able to make and break the moral law

All things have either a price (hypothetical imperatives) or dignity (categorical ones).

Persons have dignity - they are the source of value.

Version #3: The Kingdom of Ends (p 23b, c)

"All maxims as proceeding from our own making of law ought to harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature" (not in text)

This is more positive take on the categorical imperative.

It recognizes that we, as the makers of ends and sources of value, have goals and desires.

These ends should mesh with the ends of all other rational beings.

A question: Do all the versions of the categorical imperative really yield the same results?

A Kantian Vocabulary:

Right intentions: intending to obey the categorical imperative

Good will: the desire to do one's moral duty

Moral duty: to obey the categorical imperative

Freedom: the ability to make and obey the categorical imperative

Note that one is most free when one is following the objective moral law, which constrains you from acting otherwise!

Compare with Utilitarianism:

	Utilitarianism	Kantian Ethics
	Action-Guiding, moral theory	Action-Guiding, moral theory
What is the basis for morality?	Consequences	Good Will (§1)

Why should I be moral?	Pain/ Pleasure Favor/ Disapproval	Duty (§4-8): An action must have motive of duty to have moral worth. Not inclination - only some people may have them, but all people can be moral.
From where does that mandate come?	World	Self
How do we evaluate our actions?	Greatest Happiness Principle	Categorical Imperative Test
Justice, or moral acceptability	Creating the greatest happiness for the greatest number	Never breaking the moral law, the CI
Why do persons have value	They can be happy	Bearers of rational life
Beneficence, supererogation	There is no difference, no supererogation. One must always think of the whole world. (Peter Singer)	Sometimes aiding others in meeting their ends. Consider the maxim 'never help anyone' It fails - so, not-(never help anyone). I.e. help someone sometime(s).
Scope and precision	broad scope, imprecise	narrow scope, precise

#### Criticisms of Kant:

Criticism #1: Kant's morality is rigid and exceptionless.

There may be times when we think that lying and killing are morally acceptable.

But it's 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's clear that Kant bites the bullet, here. See his, "On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns".

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 naturalist example from Bernard Williams.

- 1) a) shooting a man vs b) not shooting a man  
2) a) saving 19 lives vs b) aiding a corrupt military

Kant would respond that 2) is an incorrect description, one must focus on one's own moral life.

Kant presupposes that there's one and only one correct description of the act, objective, non-controversial, morally neutral.

But what's wrong with 'saving 19 lives'?

Kant would say that it looks to desires, consequences, other people.

But so does 'shooting a man'.

How about 'pulling a trigger'?

But that's no good either, for similar reasons.  
How about 'moving my finger while...'  
Now we've lost all sense of the action itself.

Hume says there's a fact/value distinction.  
(He uses it for another purpose: subjectivism; but it's the same presumption.)  
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.

Q: Is there a fact/value distinction?  
If not, then Kant will have real trouble describing the acts in any morally neutral way.  
I'm inclined to think that all language is theory laden, so 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.

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 may seem morally irresponsible.

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.

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?)