Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, March 7

I. A first criticism of Kant's moral theory

Criticism #1: Kant's morality is rigid and exceptionless.
There may be times when we think that lying and killing are morally acceptable.
Consider the example of Dutch fishing boats ferrying Jews away from Nazi-controlled regions.
Or the case of the unfortunate botanist, who has to kill one man to free nine others.
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.
That is, he dismisses the objection, and maintains his exceptionlessness.
See his, "On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns".

II. Criticism #2: 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 #3: 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. Criticism #4: 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.