

PHI 212: CONTEMPORARY MORAL ISSUES
LECTURE NOTES

LECTURE 3: IMMANUEL KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

I. IMMANUEL KANT

A. **Kant's Life:** Lived from 1724-1804. (More bio in class.)

B. **The Categorical Imperative:** There are two formulations (for *our* purposes - there are actually six in his whole book, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*):

1. **First Formulation:** "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." **Maxim** = a description of action in imperative form. E.g., "Help this person in dire need" or "Lie to avoid hurting one's feelings."
2. **Second Formulation:** "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." Some explanation of the second formulation:
 - a. **People (rational beings) are ends in themselves;** non-rational beings (non-human animals) and anything else (chairs, dirt) are things. There are three reasons why we are ends in themselves: (1) People have practical reason (= ability to define context, know the means to your end). (2) People have **Autonomy** (*auto-nomos*) - we create laws for ourselves - we determine our ends through practical reason. Autonomy is roughly equivalent to free will. (3) We human beings have intrinsic value, not mere instrumental value. That is, we always have intrinsic value, we *may* have instrumental value as well.
 - b. **What actions are morally impermissible? Treating people *simply* as a means,** which is (1) treating a person solely as a thing, or an instrument and (2) obtaining something valuable for yourself or others. EXs: Slavery, rape, "sweatshops," and suicide. Treating people in this way is not unlike treating people as tools/things. According to Kant, these actions are morally impermissible.
 - c. **What actions are morally permissible?**
 - **Treating people only as an end:** (1) Treating people with respect and (2) not obtaining anything of value from them. EX: not littering so others can enjoy the Grand Canyon. And
 - **Treating people both as means and as an end** (1) Treating someone with respect and (2) obtaining something of value from them. EX: My teaching you--I receive money and you are learning from me: you receive an understanding about philosophy and maybe a degree, so we're each treating each other as a means; **but**, we are treating each other with respect while doing this, so we're also treating each other as an end.
 - d. **Respect for Rational Beings:** Every person, by virtue of his/her humanity (i.e., rational nature) has an inherent dignity. From this, we need to respect ourselves and others too. If we all did that, we'd have what Kant calls a Kingdom of Ends.
3. **Comparison of Categorical Imperative v. Golden Rule:** Suppose the **Golden Rule** = Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Golden Rule is more permissible/lenient than Kant's categorical imperative because the Golden Rule relativizes its principle to passions, inclinations, etc. In other words, Kant's theory goes above and beyond

the Golden Rule, so you should not think of them as being equivalent (though his view is certainly related to it).

C. **Perfect duties v. Imperfect duties:**

1. **Perfect Duties:** Duties that require that we do or abstain from certain acts, and have no legitimate exceptions. Notable perfect duties: *Not to kill an innocent person, lie, break promises, and/or committing suicide.* No matter how beneficial the consequences, the action is strictly impermissible. [NOTES: (1) You can't play these duties off of one another - you can't promise to lie, promise to commit suicide, or say you'll commit suicide and then say you can't lie, so you need to carry it out! All of these would be contrary to reason, just as using your will to destroy your will is self-contradictory. (2) It's not breaking a promise to not have any way of fulfilling a promise: For instance, I promise my son to play football this weekend, but I break my leg between now and then. I am physically unable to fulfill the promise, so I'm not morally wrong to not play football. The only way in which it WOULD be immoral for me to not play football with the broken leg, is if I intentionally broke my leg in order to not fulfill the promise! Why is this Kantian? Because one of his famous phrases is "Ought implies can" - you can't morally require something of someone that he or she cannot mentally, physically, or logically do. For instance, I can't say that a two year old should read more Kant, or that my Mom should become a square circle, or that my Dad should fly to the moon under his own power.]
2. **Imperfect Duties:** Duties that have exceptions (e.g., *to help others where one can, assure our own happiness, develop one's talents, and/or improve oneself*). [NOTE: As with playing perfect duties off of one another, one also cannot play imperfect duties off of perfect duties: EX: I cannot say I need to lie (or break a promise, or commit suicide) in order to benefit someone else, assure my happiness, improve myself, and/or express my talent!]

D. **More on Kant's Ethical Theory:**

1. **What is good in itself, for Kant?** The only thing that is good in itself is a good will. Will = faculty in one's mind for choosing a course of action.
2. **How does a good will choose?** A good will chooses an act for good reason(s) and duty.
3. **The good will, motives, and intentions.** Having a good will is roughly equivalent to having good intentions. Your behavior and other externalities are worthless without a good will.
4. **Reason v. emotion, pleasure, or inclination.** We should, according to Kant, value and base our actions on reason, *not* emotion, pleasure, or inclination.
5. **Getting pleasure from doing an action** before, during or after that is fine, but pleasure cannot be the main part of your motivation for doing the action. Paradigmatic Kantian situation: If you get no pleasure, you have no desire to help others, but you help others anyway from a sense of duty, you've acted morally, according to Kant.
6. **Consequences, schmonsequences!** Kant thinks consequences are irrelevant to determining what is moral or not ("A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes ... it is good through its willing alone - that is, good in itself").
7. **Acting with a sense of (or from) duty v. acting in accordance (or in conformity) with duty:** Acting with a sense of duty (GOOD) = choosing an action *only or primarily because* it is one's duty. EX: Saving a child in a canal because he's drowning and it's your duty to help others. Acting in accordance with duty (BAD) = acting in a way that is consistent with your duty, but for self-interested reasons. EX: Saving a child drowning in a canal because you're running for the Senate.

E. Evaluation of Kant's view:

In favor:

1. **Rational, consistent, and impartial.**
2. **Respects the intrinsic worth of a human being.**
3. **A moral framework for rights.**
4. **Non-relativistic rights and duties.**
5. **Autonomy and ability to choose your moral projects.**
6. **Alternative: Consequences?**

Against:

1. **Hard cases [STRONG]:** (i) The Nazi Case. (ii) The terminally ill suicide case.
2. **Two objections from David Hume [STRONG]:**
 - a. **Reason does not discover moral rules.**
 - b. **Reason does not motivate moral action.**
3. **Akrasia (weakness of will or moral conviction) [STRONG].**
4. **Is the good will always good without qualification? [STRONG]** Can't I be a do-gooder who always tries to do my duty but creates misery instead?
5. **What about non-human animals and/or non-rational animals? [WEAK]**