IMMANUEL KANT’S ETHICAL THEORY
RIGHTS AND DUTIES
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I. IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)
   A. THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: The categorical imperative is the way in which you determine what your duties are, what you should and should not do. It is categorical, because it applies (or is intended to apply) to everyone, without any exceptions, and it is an imperative, since it is a command. So it is a command that applies consistently, to everyone. You might think of the Ten Commandments here, as the kind of thing that he is referring to. 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."\(^1\) Maxim = a description of action in imperative form. E.g., “Help this person in dire need,” “Don’t lie,” “Don’t steal,” “Steal when you feel like it,” “Kill others when you’re frustrated,” are maxims. NOTE: The categorical imperative will make it that you cannot universalize – make it a universal moral law that applies to everyone including you – to kill others when you’re frustrated. So some of these maxims will “pass” this formulation of the categorical imperative, and some will not. We will cover this in more detail as we continue.

2. Second Formulation: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."\(^2\) 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 ourselves, according to Kant: (1) People have practical reason (= ability to think about and choose which actions we would like to do, what goals we have, and so on). (2) People have autonomy (Greek: auto-nomos – law unto ourselves) – 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. We are like unique Ming vases, works of art that must be respected. We always have intrinsic value, we may have instrumental value as well (that is, we may be able to help others and get something

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out of others).

b. **What actions fail Kant's test?** Those actions that treat people solely as a means. E.g., treating a person solely as an instrument to obtain something for yourself. Slave trades, rape, industrialists (e.g., sweatshops), lies to further yourself.

c. **What actions pass Kant's test and are therefore morally permissible?** Actions that will routinely pass the test of universalizability: **treating people as ends in themselves or both as means and as ends.** Treating people only as an end: Treating them with respect, but not necessarily getting any huge benefit from it. EX: not punching students on your way to class. **Treating people both as a means and an end:** EX: My teaching you - I receive money, you receive an understanding about philosophy and maybe a degree, so we’re each treating 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 this, 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).

**B. PERFECT DUTIES V. IMPERFECT DUTIES:**

1. **Perfect Duties:** Duties that require that we do or abstain from certain acts. There are no legitimate exceptions to a perfect duty. Notable perfect duties: Duty to tell the truth, keep our promises, and refrain from committing suicide. It’s intrinsically wrong to do the opposite of these. No matter how beneficial the consequences, these actions are strictly impermissible. We violate perfect duties when we treat someone simply as am means. [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 require us to promote or pursue certain goals (e.g., to be beneficent - help others - where one can, to assure our own happiness, to develop one’s talents, and to improve oneself). Actions due to these duties can never be at the expense of perfect duties. [NOTE: As with playing perfect duties off of one another, one also cannot play imperfect duties with perfect ones: For instance, I can't say I need to lie (break a promise, or commit suicide) in order to benefit someone else, assure my happiness, improve myself, express my talent, etc.]

C. THE GOOD WILL, CONSEQUENCES, AND DUTIES:

1. What is good in itself, for Kant? The only thing that is good in itself is a good will. What is the will? It can be thought of as the 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 because it is one’s 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. Two people can do the same action, but depending on the principle/maxim they acted on, they are not acting ethically (see point 7 below).

4. Reason v. emotion, pleasure, or inclination. We should, according to Kant, value and base our actions on reason and duty, and not on 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: 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 are irrelevant. 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”).

I. Acting from a sense of duty v. acting in accordance with duty: Acting from a sense of duty (GOOD) = to choose an action only or primarily because it is one’s duty. EX: Saving a kid in a canal because he's drowning and it's

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your duty to help others. Acting in accordance with duty (BAD) = when you act in a way that is consistent with your duty, but for the wrong reasons. EX: Saving a kid drowning in a canal because you're running for the Senate.

D. EVALUATION OF KANT’S VIEW:

In Favor Kant’s Ethical Theory:

1. **Rational, consistent, impartial**: Kant’s view emphasizes the importance of rationality, consistency, impartiality, and respect for persons in the way we live our lives. If Kant is correct that moral absolutes cannot be violated, then he prevents any loopholes, self-serving exceptions, and personal biases in the determination of our duties.

2. **Intrinsic worth of a human being**: In virtue of being a human being, you have rights, dignity, and intrinsic moral worth/value. Every human being is like a unique artistic creation, such as a Ming vase.

3. **A moral framework for rights**: In American culture, just to name one country, we are interested in and fond of rights. Kant’s theory helps us to see where we get them. Duties imply rights, and rights imply legitimate expectations. If every human has intrinsic worth (as Kant believes), then every human should have the same rights, other things being equal.

4. **Non-relativistic rights and duties**: These moral rights and duties transcend all societies and all contexts, so Kant’s view doesn’t have the problems of cultural relativism. The relativism/subjectivism kind of objection won't work against Kant's view. No empirical appeal will have any effect on Kant. You need to point out inconsistencies within his system.

5. **Autonomy and ability to choose your moral projects**: It’s a duty to pursue your happiness through the use of reason, as long as you’re not lying, breaking your promises, or committing suicide (or any other duty as determined by the categorical imperative formulations).

6. **What’s the Alternative: Consequences?** Can we ever really know all of the consequences of our actions in advance? Haven’t there been times when you thought you were doing the best thing, based on the anticipated consequences, but the results turned out badly? If Kant is wrong, then you’d have to say that you did an immoral action in those cases.

Against Kant’s Ethical Theory:

1. **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? For example, say that I’m running around campus taking cigarettes from the mouths of students, passing out anti-smoking pamphlets. I’m only trying to help people. It doesn't matter if I get restraining orders against me, beaten up, fired, etc. - I'm supposed to have a good will even if I'm annoying. Does this sound ethical?
2. **How can Kant deal with this hard case? [STRONG]** It's 1939, and you're hiding Jews in a cellar. The Nazi's come to the door and ask you if you're hiding Jews in a cellar. Should you lie to Nazi's? Is this a good objection to Kant?

3. **Two objections from David Hume [STRONG]:**
   a. Hume's first objection: **Reason doesn't discover moral rules.** Instead, morality is feeling, affect, or sentiment.
   b. Hume's second objection: **Reason doesn't motivate moral action.** Suppose Kant is right that reason discovers moral duties. So what? What happens then? We need to have action. Reason is insufficient to motivate us to do our duty, since we need a desire or an inclination to decide to do an action, even if we know that it's the right action. In fact, for Hume, first we need a desire or an inclination to do something, and then we look to reason to fulfill it.

4. **Akrasia (weakness of will or moral conviction) [STRONG]:** You see/know what the right action to do is, you want to do the good action, but you fail to do the good action. You do the bad action instead. Is akrasia possible? If it exists, then reason does not simply force us to do the right thing.

5. **What about non-human animals? [WEAK]** According to Kant, we only have a duty to treat rational moral agents as ends, not animals. What about chimps that have 99.4% of our DNA structure? What about senile people or the comatose? Are these people things as opposed to ends in themselves, as "normal" people are, according to Kant? [This is weak because a Kantian could just say animals can be ends in themselves due to their reason (updating his view), and this does nothing to the way in which we should treat humans.]

6. **Consistency of Categorical Imperative? [WEAK]** Are the formulations consistent? Kant says they are, but how can we be sure? It wouldn't seem like we should lie EVER, but if we use someone else as a means, or allow others to use people solely as a means by NOT lying, isn't this morally objectionable?

7. **Practical Application Problems [WEAK]:** How do we draw the maxim, given that the Categorical Imperative can give us different answers depending on the formulation? For example, I could consistently draw the maxim that "No one should eat raw oysters" if I don't like them, or "Everyone should tie his or her right shoe first", just based on my preference, and these would be morally binding on all moral agents. [This is weak because a Kantian could say that these are not morally binding maxims, and merely personal preferences.]