
Deontological Ethics

Kantian Style

Introduction

- Kant one of the greatest and most important philosophers of all time
 - Hard to overestimate his importance and impact on the modern mind
 - Continuing influence today
 - Major influence on the Enlightenment project—actually coined the term
 - Project:
 - Even further move away from authority of the church and Aristotle on science than renaissance “project”
 - “Think for yourself!”

Kant's Project

- Take a few minutes to look at Kant's *overall project* to give context to his ethical stance

Kant's Version of Deontological Ethics

- Kant's moral philosophy based on a few basic intuitions
 - Insufficiency of consequences in determining what is right
 - Consequence morality: *only* relevant factor in determining rightness of acts is consequences
 - But some means to good ends are not morally justified
 - So consequences aren't all that need to be considered
 - There are basic rights and duties that we sense we must honor, no matter what the consequences

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- ❑ Necessity, absoluteness, and bindingness of morality
 - Sometimes the right thing to do is not what I feel like doing or what seems to maximize my self-interest
 - Sometimes I need to sacrifice those things **for the sake of what is right**
 - ❑ e.g.: couple stays together, but not of feelings of love, but sheer commitment to God and his principles—they work to make it work—have to give a great deal; but it's the right thing to do
 - ❑ Honoring commitment; not what would make them feel good of maximize their individual self-interest

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- In other words, morality not on the same level as my inclinations—what I happen to want to like
- Morality **imposes** itself upon me—it is necessary and absolute
 - Not dependent upon contingent things like my talents or inclinations or career objectives
- Golden Rule: something like (but Kant said it wasn't identical to) the Golden Rule; ask 'what if everyone did that'
 - Note that Kant's maxim doesn't rule out acts done to yourself as would the GR

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- Kant and his ethical project
 - Kant probably a Christian
 - What he proposes ethically is not in that sense radical—i.e., does not advocate immortality, etc.; indeed, hard to find a more strict moralist
 - States that his project is not to come up with a new morality, but to **find a secure basis for the old morality**
 - Common idea of “duty and moral laws”
 - Assumed basic moral ideas of his culture to be correct

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- Raises question: What was Kant's culture like?
 - German pietistic Protestant culture—very similar to 20th century American evangelicalism or fundamentalism
 - Key idea--→ his culture no doubt conceived morality as largely or exclusively a matter of laws
 - Of commands given by God (note: now a big debate whether this is accurate view of biblical ethics—some see that Laws are just one part of the whole)

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- What are the commands?
 - Commands are *action-guiding*—they tell us what to do; and they are *motivating*—they give us a reason to do it
- Thinking of morality in terms of law, commands seem to capture the aspect of morality that involves unconditional obligations
 - Certain things are right or wrong independent of whether I like it or not, or feel like it or not, have particular aims or not
 - Not subjective or relative
- (p. 195) morally valid=absolutely necessary; binding, oughtness
- Kant carries over this basic paradigm, but he “gets rid of the need for a Law giver”

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- Morality is law-like but independent of God or anyone “outside” self; we legislate Laws to ourselves under certain conditions
- Kant exemplifies a deontological view of ethics —their basic intuition: **not what state of affairs or consequences can I bring into effect or attain, but rather what are the principles I must observe and duties I must fulfill no matter what the consequences?**

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- Kant's ethical theory
 - Contrast with teleological theory:

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- Connie the Consequentialist

- Empirical—experience
- Way things are
- Outcomes
- External
- Contingent/accidental
- *a posteriori*

- Kevin the Kantian

- Rational
- Ways things ought to be
- Motives
- Internal
- Necessary
- *a priori*

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- p. 195 (column 1) pure moral philosophy—cleared of empirical (circumstances) and the anthropological (not contingent or grounded on human nature)
 - Absolutely necessary—not dependent on anything
 - *a priori*—given to us as rational beings
 - Big question: can we arrive at moral principles from experience—that is generalizing from things that are (all swans are white)
 - By contrast his method will be transcendental: necessary in the sense it is necessary to make sense of morality

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■ (1) Good will

- 1st sentence (195): only thing good without qualification is good will. Why?
 - Emphasis on **motive**
 - Versus inclinations
 - Talents, gifts, of fortune, H (195-96)—can do right or wrong with them, not necessary elements of morality
 - Makes clear elsewhere target = inclination—difference between shopkeeper who is honest by inclination or from duty –which one has moral value (what do you think?)?

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- So good will = acting against inclinations (p. 198)
- Duty versus immediate inclination versus selfish purpose
- But does it make sense to say it can never be good if done by immediate or good inclination?
- Versus consequences
 - 196—bottom left column: weak will as a result of a ‘niggardly provision of stepmotherly nature’ can still be a shining diamond
 - Rejects consequentialism—why?
 - Leaves out agent
 - What's important is **why** certain actions produced, not **that** they're produced

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- e.g.---life raft—2 people, only fit one; one jumps out versus pushed; in utilitarian view, no moral difference between that and if other pushed him out;
 - 2 actions can have identical consequences, but clearly there can be a moral difference
 - Remember, too, consequences can be a matter of luck
 - Moral action has to do, in Kant's system, not with purpose to be attained, but reason/maxim (2nd proposition of morality—p. 199)
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- (2) Law
 - Remember: basic concept of morality is one of Law
 - In order to be absolute, necessary morality it must have a character of Law—bindingness, oblig., action guiding, motivating

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- ❑ But what kind of Law (Kant asks) can determine the Will (i.e. be action-guiding and motivate) without failure and without regard to the consequences?
- ❑ (For above answer, see to right column of p. 200) Must be universal law: the universal conformity of its action to Law in general. . . .simply conformity to Law in general without assuming any particular Law applicable to certain actions serves the will as principle
- ❑ Law in principle, general, not a particular Law (e.g. love your neighbor, do no harm) these have substantive moral content; Kant is going for purely formal notion, universalizing rationality (gives hint of not making exceptions for self = rational consistency)

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■ (3) Duty

- ❑ 1st proposition of morality is duty
- ❑ P. 203 left column, bottom—nature is law like (Newtonian strain); only rational creatures have a will
- ❑ Only rational agents can choose to act for reasons
- ❑ What is it to act for a reason? Why did you X?
- ❑ Only rational agents can act on the basis of conception of law (versus **just obeying laws** of nature or even particular substantive moral law)
- ❑ Everything operates **according** to laws; rational agents act **from** laws
- ❑ If will perfectly accords with reason, then act according to Law, but not on the basis of commands or imperatives

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- ❑ But if imperfectly, if there is a clash between rational consistency and inclinations, then law turns into commands and right motive turns into duty
- ❑ Commands and duty are what motivate, impel you to act
- ❑ How? Without Law giver?
- ❑ Recognition that **it is rationality that binds you**
- ❑ Duty is psychological motive of respect for Law for those less than perfectly rational—motivates one to deny inclination and obey law
- ❑ Gives Kant's explanation of the bindingness of moral obligations apart from God—bindingness is something he needed to explain apart from God

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- ❑ Psychological motive which defeats inclination;
- ❑ = psychological response of less than totally rational agent of pure respect for moral law → bindingness
- Imperatives
 - ❑ What is an imperative?
 - ❑ Kant speaks of two kinds (p. 203-204)
 - **Hypothetical Imperative**: given certain desires, goals; if desire X, then do Y;
 - Prior necessity of possible action as means **to achieve something desired**
 - Good as means only—instrumental
 - If you want to get to west coast in 3 hours, you **ought** to take a plane; if you want to lose weight you ought to exercise, eat less (prior necessity)

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- **Categorical imperative**: obligation no matter what—objective necessity of **possible action** without regard to further ends; good as end in self (objective necessity); do Y (intrinsic; absolute)
 - 'tell truth' —moral obligation is overriding, binding by its very nature
 - Explains Kant's account of the **unconditional nature** of moral obligations—morality is not just advice;
 - The ten commandments not suggestions; binding
 - What is it that gives moral law that kind of binding power?
 - **Not the content** of the Law (that's contingent, empirical,, but the **form**—that is, **Law in general** which is = to Reason
 - How does this work in practice?

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■ (5) Categorical Imperative

- P. 205—the categorical imperative: **universal** law
 - Maxims = rule or principles of a generic type to which your particular actions corresponds; not need to be verbalized, maybe not conscious (A = token of type of act that can come under a general rule)
 - Every intentional action, action done for reason, is instance of general rule of form: 'whenever x, I shall y' (I now do y because of x)
- P. 199 2nd proposition of morality
 - Fred needs pen for ethics class, doesn't have money on hand, so shoplifts
 - What is Fred's maxim? Whenever I need a pen, but haven't got the money to pay for it, I shall steal it (generalization of action; basic part of rationality)

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- ❑ Now where does morality come in? Kant appeals to the moral law as providing the standard against which all maxims must be measured. What is it? Called it variously: the moral law, universal law, categorical imperative (give other Handout)
- ❑ General form:
 - Good: act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (principle of universalizability)
 - I will that, for anyone, whenever x, then do y

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- Three more specified forms (meant to come to same thing, rephrased to illuminate how applied in more specific cases):
 - Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature
 - So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, never solely as a means but always also as an end
 - So act as if you were by your maxims, in every case, a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends
- Basic idea: “what if everyone did it?” = universalizing
- How does it work? Plug maxim into this formula and see what comes out:

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- Kant's example (p. 200): I need large sum of money, banker willing to loan it to me, but I know I can't pay it back
- Should I promise to do so?
- Maxim: whenever I need money and can get it by borrowing it (even if I know I can't pay it back), I shall borrow money and falsely promise to pay it back?
- What's the answer? Seems to clearly violate universal law; why so?
 - Institution of borrowing money would break down; can't **consistently** will it?
 - But isn't this just consequentialism? Look how bad things would be if everyone did it?
 - No, consequentialism is: what is moral is that which results in greatest expectable good consequences; this **one action** may have **very low problems**

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- ❑ Remember the **key** to Kant's system is that one can 't consistently (and universally) **will it**: *the key is rational consistency*, volitional consistency
 - See p. 207. can't be thought consistently, can't be willed consistently
- ❑ Imperative: I can't treat myself as exception—regarding willing: in so willing, you have to will it as universally forbidden, **while at the same time** willing self as exception;
- ❑ This is a form of inconsistency, that is, rational inconsistency

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- Kant thinks he can capture all there is to morality through this
 - That is by universalizability and rational consistency
 - “Why be moral?” it is rationally required
 - “Why be rational?” If I give reasons not to—and you’re already stuck;
 - If I refuse, I can’t talk; fact is we’re rational animals
- Kant even **gets human rights** out of this. Treat rational beings not merely as means, but also as ends (2nd formulation of categorical imperative)
 - One of his interpreters says this: “Kant’s formula of the end in Itself is his way of expressing the Christian view that every individual human beings has a unique and infinite value and should be treated as such”

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- So what Kant seeks to capture about the nature of morality is:
 - ❑ Unconditional
 - ❑ Binding
 - ❑ Action guiding and motivating
 - ❑ Has to do with reason—acting for reasons
 - ❑ Rights and dignity of persons emphasized—can't just use people as means in order to get good effects
 - ❑ Does this work? Does his system really deliver all this? Is it a sufficient alternative to consequential morality?

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- Pause here; now to problems in Kant's view of ethics

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■ Problems

- Wilkens points out: doesn't help us with conflicts between universalizable principles
 - He also points out that the Christian perspectives sees reason as fallen
- Kant attempts to make morality a *formal* rather than substantive matter
 - Pure practical reason; this makes it universal—requires no particular beliefs, consequences, gifts, luck, inclinations;
 - He has no substantial moral beliefs; just reason, thought of formally as consistency

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- But formalism **has its problems**: without some **actual ethical content** it, it can both “rule out too much” and at the same time “let too much in”
- What is universalizable is right, what isn't is wrong; so universalizable is equal to morality
 - **Rules too much out**: rules out morally harmless maxims that cannot be consistently applied
 - E.g.: maxim: ‘let's give presents but not receive them’
 - But surely this isn't morally wrong to do

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- The point being that contra Kant, some maxims (or actions) that are **not** universalizable are moral!
- Therefore the principle of universalizability is **not necessary** to morality
- **Rules too much in**
 - Depending on how I understand the categorical imperative
 - As **just a necessary condition** for morality
 - Or as a **necessary and sufficient** condition for morality
 - If necessary and sufficient condition for morality then whatever passes the test is a moral obligation/duty
 - But then this would create absurd duties: 'whenever I get dressed, I shall put my left shoe on first'

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- Can I will that this become universal law? Seems that I could, but surely this is not morally obligatory
- If just necessary condition, **then this (above) objection fails**
 - If x passes the test it is permitted, **not necessarily obligatory—it is only possibly obligatory**
 - Usually do not tell you what you're obligated to do, but what you are forbidden from doing
 - Remember here will look at necessary, not sufficient conditions for what is right (contra Wilkens, 112)
 - Still a PROBLEM: if you take the view that what is **right** connotes **both** what is permissible and what is obligatory; this still seems to miss the point of morality, that is, calling something right, when it is only permissible
 - Remember Kant's conception of morality is of law

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- But we need to talk about a related problem to Kant's program—that is, **the problem of relevant description**
 - This objection or concern would say that his criterion still doesn't necessarily exclude what we know are immoral actions
 - First a moral trivial consideration→Note: given any action, **one can give a description of action such that only one action is included so it avoids a universalizability application**

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- (a) Making a promise when one cannot keep it (very general)
- (b) Making a promise when one needs money and cannot keep promise (more precise, but still could be filled out—when going to college, etc. or to save someone from being evicted from home; more filled, more specific could make it less obviously wrong)
- (c) Making a promise when one needs money and cannot keep promise, when it is a Thursday, and there isn't an 'r' in the month, and there are eighteen letters in one's name and one is red-haired, has a birth mark on left side of arm, etc.

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- As a matter of rational consistency one **can** adopt such a maxim (c) and avoid Kant's conclusion—not treating self as exception to universal law
- But there is a more serious issue here: what **is** relevant description
 - Consider Action A: act of putting Jews in shower, gassing, burning (complex act or ordered series of acts)
 - How do you characterize the acts morally?

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- Is this action 'murdering Jews'
- Or is the action 'exterminating parasites' or 'assisting evolution'
- Hitler had a very different description than most others, but the question is not just whether one can universalize one's maxim (though it may be a fruitful question to ask) but **whether it's the right maxim**
- Asking the question of whether it's the right maxim **requires a moral judgment prior** to the universalizing
 - Thus, universalizing can't be sufficient condition for morality
- Also, for what it is worth, how one sees the situation, what one takes to be relevant, especially morally relevant things like a person's moral character is important—so again universalizability doesn't seem to do the trick

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- Also, some moral cases seem to be not matters of rational consistency alone
 - Seem to be cases of volitional consistency, not simply rational consistency
 - e.g.: take Kant's example of helping others. If I don't, I have to be able to will that no one help me when times comes
 - But this doesn't seem to have a logical inconsistency—it seems to be a matter of whether I like those consequences
 - Maybe a selfish or rugged individualist and may have no trouble willing such—s/he doesn't care about helping or being helped—seems perfectly rational consistent

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- ❑ But caring whether one is contributing, even just in principle, to the world is a substantial moral matter; Kant's morality can't get going without this **at the outset**
- ❑ The act is wrong or morally inferior—but Kant can't give us the reason why through universalizing the maxim; the problem is selfishness
- ❑ Therefore universalizability is **not sufficient** for morality—you **can** universalize wrong things; therefore it is false that it is a necessary and sufficient condition of morality—(it may be necessary, but certainly not sufficient)
- ❑ In some cases Kant seems to appeal to “nature” (in the suicide example) as supplying some content to the purely formal rule—like natural law: there is a right order to nature, certain things apparently intended by the way things are made—this **would give content**, but at the expense of **a purely formal** system

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- Does Kant give us human dignity, altruism caring for and respect for others? Can it be pulled out of consistency alone?
- Respect for persons: argument seems to be (p.209)
 - (a) one necessarily regards oneself as a rational being, therefore as an end (dignity)—rationality is highest good; not means to anything else
 - (b) therefore every rational being is justified in recognizing self as end (consistency)
 - (c) therefore it is an objective valid principle that everyone should be treated as end (impartiality)

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- But (c) seems to fail
 - If we grant that (b) follows from (a) as a matter of rational consistency, it doesn't underwrite (c)
 - I may treat myself as an end and recognize that everyone else has same reason for treating themselves as ends, **but I'm not by rational consistency required to treat them as they would treat themselves**—rational consistency does not require rational impartiality—a world of self-respecting egoists (treat self as end, but not others) is not an irrational concept
 - A Christian might still think Kant's on to something, but his rule needs **substantive moral bite**; historically this bite comes from the doctrine of the *imago Dei*

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- Finally, many have objective to Kantian morality because it seems to leave something very important out of one's moral choices—what about the consequences
 - Aren't we supposed to be making the world a better place?
 - Not just: don't use neighbor as means, but: 'love neighbor as self' ?
 - Where is the active, giving, benevolent side of ethics come in?
 - Kant's system could breed cold legalism

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- Summary (sort of)
 - Consequential morality breeds all engine (motivation), but no brakes
 - Deontological (Kantian) morality breeds all brakes (what I should not do), but no engine

■ Papers?