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Kant's deontological ethics

DEONTOLOGY

Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty. We have moral duties to do things which it is right to do and moral duties not to do things which it is wrong to do. Whether something is right or wrong doesn't depend on its consequences. Rather, an action is right or wrong *in itself*.

Most deontological theories recognise two classes of duties. First, there are general duties we have towards anyone. These are mostly prohibitions, e.g. do not lie, do not murder. But some may be positive, e.g. help people in need. Second, there are duties we have because of our particular personal or social relationships. If you have made a promise, you have a duty to keep it. If you are a parent, you have a duty to provide for your children. And so on.

We each have duties regarding our *own* actions. I have a duty to keep *my* promises, but I don't have a duty to make sure promises are kept. Deontology claims that we should each be most concerned with complying with our duties, not attempting to bring about the most good. In fact, all deontologists agree that there are times when we *should not* maximise the good, because doing so would be to violate a duty. Most deontologists also argue that we do not have a duty to maximise the good, only a duty to do *something* for people in need. As this illustrates, many deontologists think our duties are quite limited. While there are a number of things we *may not* do, we are otherwise free to act as we please.

Actions and intentions

Deontology says that certain types of action are right or wrong. How do we distinguish types of action? For example, a person may kill someone else. A conventional description of the action is 'a killing'. But not all 'killings' are the same type of action, morally speaking. If the person *intended* to kill someone, i.e. that is what they wanted to bring about, that is very different than if the killing was accidental or if the person was only intending to defend themselves against an attack.

Actions are the result of choices, and so should be understood in terms of choices. Choices are made for reasons, and with a purpose in mind. These considerations determine what the action performed actually is. So deontology argues that we do not know what type of action an action is unless we know the intention. We should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention.

KANT, *FOUNDATIONS OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*, Ch. 1

To understand Kant's moral philosophy, we need to explain a couple of terms and assumptions. First, Kant believed that, whenever we make a decisions, we act on a *maxim*. Maxims are Kant's version of intentions. They are our personal principles that guide our decisions, e.g. 'to have as much fun as possible', 'to marry only someone I truly love'. All our decisions have some maxim or other behind them. Second, morality is a set of principles that are the same for everyone and that apply to everyone. Third, Kant talks of our ability to make choices and decisions as 'the will'. He assumes that our wills are rational, that is we can make choices on the basis of reasons. We do not act only on instinct. We can act on choice, and we can consider what to choose using reasoning.

In Ch. 1, Kant argues that the fundamental principle of morality is this: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'. Why does he come to this conclusion?

<u>The good will</u>

Kant begins his argument by reflecting on whether anything is morally good 'without qualification'. He argues that only the 'good will' is. Anything else can either be bad or contribute to what is bad. For instance, intelligence and self-control are good – but they can enable someone to do clever or difficult bad things, if that is what they choose. Power can be good, but it depends on what use we put it to. Nor is happiness good without qualification. If someone is made happy by hurting others, their happiness is morally bad. So we evaluate happiness by morality. Having a morally good will is a precondition to *deserving* happiness.

Kant then makes a second claim. What is good about the good will is not what it *achieves*. It doesn't derive its goodness from successfully producing some good result. Rather, it is good 'in itself'. If someone tries their hardest to do what is morally right but they don't succeed, then we should still praise their efforts as morally good.

<u>Duty</u>

What is our conception of the morally good will? We can understand it in terms of the concept of duty. Kant argues that to have a good will is to be motivated by duty. This is best understood by examples. Suppose a shop-keeper sells his goods at a fixed price, giving the correct change, and acting honestly in this way. Of course, this is the morally right thing to do. But this doesn't show that he has a good will, since acting like this is just in his self-interest. So we can act *in accordance* with duty, but without being *motivated by* duty. Kant controversially claims that this applies just as much to doing good things for other people when that is what we want to do and enjoy doing. Doing good things for others is right and should be praised and encouraged, but these actions don't necessarily have moral *worth*. If someone was to do something good for others even when they didn't want to, but just because they believe that it is the morally right thing to do, *that* would show that they have a good will. So to have a good will is to do

one's duty (what is morally right) *because* it is one's duty (because it is morally right).

But what *is* morally right? What does a good will will? Here, things get tricky. A good will isn't good because it aims at certain ends, because there are no ends that are good without qualification. We can't, for instance, say that the good will aims at the general happiness, because happiness isn't always morally good. So the good will must, in some way, be good 'in itself', just on the basis of what it is like as a will. What makes a will good is something about the maxims it adopts. However, it can't be *what* the maxims say, i.e. what they aim at. A puzzle …

Another puzzle arises if we consider this in terms of motives. What is it to want to do one's duty because it is one's duty, if we can't say what one's duty is? It can only be the thought of doing one's duty 'as such'. But what is that?

To solve these puzzles, we need to recall Kant's assumptions. Maxims are principles of choice. They are subjective – you have yours, I have mine. What makes them different is what they are about, what they aim at and why. But what they have in common is that they are all principles. Now, morality is a set of principles for everyone. So the concept of duty is the concept of a principle for everyone. So, somehow, the good will is a will that chooses what it does, motivated by the idea of a principle for everyone. This is 'not an expected result', Kant says.

How can this idea serve as a motive or criterion for the good will? Kant rephrases it: to have a good will, I should act only on maxims that I can also will everyone to act on. He later calls this principle the 'Categorical Imperative'. I can adopt this as a maxim, a principle of choice. I choose only to make choices on the basis of maxims that everyone could act on. But this maxim doesn't specify any particular end or goal (such as happiness). It only mentions the idea of a principle for everyone, a universal law.

We need to understand the Categorical Imperative in more detail. But first, an example: suppose I am tempted to make a promise with no intention of keeping it, e.g. I might borrow money (because I want the money) on the promise to pay it back, but I don't intend to pay it back. We can show that this is wrong. Suppose everyone acted on this maxim. Then everyone would know that everyone acts on this maxim. In that situation, making a false promise like this would be impossible. No one would trust my promise, and I can't make a promise unless someone believes it. So I can't will it to be a universal law.

KANT, *FOUNDATIONS OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*, Ch. 2

Hypothetical and categorical imperatives

An 'imperative' is just a command. 'Hypothetical imperatives' are statements about what you ought to do, on the assumption of some desire or goal. They specify a means to an end. So 'if you want to see the show,

you ought to get to the theatre at least 15 minutes early' is a hypothetical imperative. In this example, the assumed desire or goal is explicit: the imperative is presented as a conditional, with the desire described in the antecedent ('you want to see the show'), and the command in the consequent ('get to the theatre at least 15 minutes early'). But hypothetical imperatives can leave the assumed desire or goal implicit, e.g. 'Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day' (if you want to stay healthy).

Why can't I just say 'I want to see the show but refuse to get there early' or 'I want to be healthy but refuse to eat fruit and vegetables'? Why *ought* I to do these things, given what I want? Because these are the means to my end. Kant argues that willing the end *entails* willing the means. It is an analytic truth that someone who wills the end wills the means. To will an end is to will an effect. But the concept of an effect contains the concept of a cause. Hence, to will an effect, you must will the cause. The cause is the means. (It is important here that you don't merely *want* the end, but actually will it.)

Hypothetical imperatives can be avoided by simply giving up the assumed desire or goal. Suppose I don't want to see the show – then I don't need to get to the theatre early. Suppose I don't want to be healthy – then the imperative to get my 'five-a-day' doesn't apply to me. (Of course, it is odd not to want to be healthy, and we may wonder if I really do not want to be healthy – perhaps I do, but I can't be bothered… In this case, I want to be healthy, but I don't will it.) In other words, it is possible to 'opt out' of a hypothetical imperative.

This isn't true of morality, we usually think. Moral duties are not hypothetical. They are what we ought to do, full stop. They are your duty regardless of what you want. They are 'categorical'. Kant has also argued that moral duties aren't a means to some further end, because what makes an action good is that it is willed by the good will. All categorical imperatives – our moral duties – are derived from one, *the* Categorical Imperative: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'.

How are categorical imperatives possible? Why is there something that we ought to do, regardless of what we want? Kant argues that moral duties depend just on our being rational. We need to understand further just what this means.

<u>The two tests</u>

There are two different ways in which we could fail to be able to will our maxim to become a universal law.

1. 'Contradiction in conception': the situation in which everyone acted on that maxim is somehow self-contradictory. We saw an example of this in the case of making a false promise, above. Another example: suppose you want a gift to take to a party, but you can't afford it, so you steal it from the shop. Your maxim is something like: 'To steal something I want if I can't

afford it'. This can only be the right thing to do if everyone could do it. However, if we could all just help ourselves to whatever we wanted, the idea of 'owning' things would disappear. Now, by definition, you can't steal something unless it belongs to someone else. Stealing presupposes that people own things. But people can only own things if they don't all go around helping themselves whenever they want. So it is logically impossible for everyone to steal things. And so stealing (at least stealing just because one wants something) is wrong.

2. 'Contradiction in will': this is more difficult to understand. The maxim is not self-contradictory, but we cannot rationally will it. Consider a refusal to help other people, ever. It *is* logically possible to universalise the maxim 'not to help others in need'. The world would not be a pleasant place, but this is beside the point. Kant does *not* claim that an action is wrong because we *wouldn't like* the consequences if everyone did it (many philosophers and students have misinterpreted Kant on this point). His test is whether we *can rationally will* that our maxim be a universal law. Kant argues that we *cannot will* that no one ever help anyone else. How so?

1. A will, by definition, wills its ends (goals).
2. As we said above, to truly will the ends, one must will the necessary means.
3. Therefore, we cannot will a situation in which it would be impossible for us to achieve our ends.
4. It is possible that the only available means to our ends, in some situations, involves the help of others.
5. We cannot therefore will that this possibility is denied to us.
6. Therefore, we cannot will a situation in which no one ever helps anyone else. To do so is to cease to will the necessary means to one's ends, which is effectively to cease to will any ends at all. This contradicts the very act of willing.

<u>Morality and reason</u>
Kant argued that it is not just morally wrong to disobey the Categorical Imperative, it is also irrational. As the tests show, disobeying the Categorical Imperative involves a self-contradiction. Through the Categorical Imperative, *reason* both determines what our duties are and gives us the means to discover them. Furthermore, we intuitively think that morality applies to *all and only* rational beings, not just human beings. In Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Arthur Dent protests to the Vogons, aliens who are going to destroy the Earth, that what they are doing is immoral. But morality doesn't apply to beings that can't make rational choices, such as dogs and cats (pets misbehave, they don't act *morally wrongly*).

With this link, we can explain the nature of morality in terms of the nature of reason. Morality is universal, the same for everyone; so is reason, says Kant. Morality and rationality are categorical; the demands to be rational and moral don't stop applying to you even if you don't care about them. Neither morality nor rationality depend on what we want.

THE SECOND FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant gives a second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, known as the Formula of Humanity: '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'. Why does he say this, and what does it mean?

Let us return to the idea of the good will. Only the good will is good without qualification. Another way of saying this is that it is the only thing of unconditional value. Everything else that is valuable depends, in some way, on the good will. For instance, intelligence is valuable for all sorts of purposes. In other words, it is valuable as a means to an end. Its value, then, depends on the value of its end. What gives its end value? We do, says Kant. Something is only an end if it is adopted by a will. It is our adopting something as an end that gives it value. Because I have desires and purposes, various things in the world are valuable *to me*.

So far, value is subjective. However, this does not apply to other people (or rational beings generally). Your value is not simply your value *to me* as a means in relation to some purpose or desire I have. It is not even your value to you (you might have very low self-esteem, and wrongly underestimate your value). We have 'intrinsic worth', which Kant identifies as 'dignity'. What gives us this dignity is our rational will. The will has unconditional value *as the thing which gives value to everything else*. So in the second formulation above, by 'humanity', Kant means our ability to rationally determine which ends to adopt and pursue.

Kant says that because people are ends in themselves, we must always treat them as such, and never 'simply' as a means. Note that he does not say we cannot use people as a means, but that we can't use them only as a means. We rely on other people in many ways as means to achieve our own ends, e.g. people serving me in a shop are a means to getting what I want to buy. What is important, says Kant, is that I also respect them as an end.

To treat someone simply as a means, and not also as an end, is to treat the person in a way that undermines their power of making a rational choice themselves. It means, first, that we should appeal to other people's reason in discussing with them what to do, rather than manipulate them in ways that they are unaware of. Coercing someone, lying to them, stealing from them, all involve not allowing them to make an informed choice. If they are involved in our action in any way, they need to be able to agree (or refuse) to adopt our end as their own.

Second, treating someone as an end also means leaving them free to pursue the ends that they adopt. The value of what people choose to do lies in their ability to choose it, not just in what they have chosen. So we should refrain from harming or hindering them. This is to respect their rationality. Third, someone's being an end in themselves means that they are an end for others. We should adopt their ends as our own. What this means is that we

should help them pursue their ends, just as we pursue our own ends. In other words, the second formulation requires that we help other people. This should be one of our ends in life.