Weekly Forum Digest for Lectures 11 and 12 (lecture release date was April 16th)

An action's moral worth vs. Knowledge of an action's moral worth

Kant holds that an action has moral worth only if it is performed out of a motive of duty. Several students have raised different versions of the following worry: if one is naturally inclined to act morally -- because, for example, doing so makes one happy -- does this preclude one from acting from a motive of duty?

It is worth considering three different individuals:

(1) Individual A acts in accordance with the moral law because it makes her happy.
(2) Individual B acts in accordance with the moral law because it is her duty, and she finds these actions quite pleasant.
(3) Individual C acts in accordance with the moral law because it is her duty, and she finds these actions quite irritating.

According to Kant, A's action lacks moral worth.

The harder question is whether B's action has moral worth. According to Kant's criteria, that to have moral worth an action must be done for the sake of duty, the answer is yes. The fact that she finds the action pleasant is not her reason for doing it. If, counterfactually, she found the action unpleasant, she would still perform it out of a motive of duty.

The difficulty raised by a natural inclination to perform good deeds is that it makes it difficult to *know* whether one is acting out of a motive of duty. Since we do not have access to the counterfactual (would B *still* perform the action if she found it unpleasant), it is hard to know whether she is acting out of a motive of duty or mere inclination. Kant focuses on individuals like C in his fourth example not because C's action has *greater worth* than individual B, but rather because it is easier to see that it has moral worth.

What about mistakes?

What if a person sincerely attempts to determine one's duty and act in accordance with the moral law, but she forms a mistaken view about the moral law -- how should we judge this person?

This is a difficult question. Given Kant's belief that a good will is the only good thing

without qualification, we might posit that the mistaken person's actions have moral worth. In the *Groundwork*, Kant does not consider this case. Why not? One possible answer is that he thought the content of the morality was clear -- as he says elsewhere, even children can grasp the content of the moral law -- so that a sincere moral agent could never go wrong. This, however, as I am sure we have all experienced, does not seem plausible, so we may be lead to question whether Kant would accept that the morally mistaken possess moral worth.

Act and Motive Evaluation

In the shopkeeper case, make sure that you are clear that Kant does think that the shopkeeper who doesn't cheat his customers out of self-interest is actually doing the right act. He is just doing the right act for the wrong reason (or from the wrong motive). Not cheating the customers is the right act because it is required by the Categorical Imperative. But actions consistent with the Categorical Imperative only have moral worth if they are actually motivated by the Categorical Imperative.

Universal Law Formulation (Formula of Universal Law)

"But what sort of law can that be, the conception of which must determine the will, even without paying any regard to the effect from it, in order that this will may be called good absolutely and without qualification? As I have deprived the will of every impulse which could arise to it from obedience to any law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle, i.e. **I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law**."

(I. Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, First Section, paragraph 17, posted under readings for lecture 11)

WHAT IS A MAXIM?

One way to think about a maxim of an action is as the principle that underlies it or the reason why I am doing it.

The general form of a maxim: I will perform an action A in circumstances C in order to make it the case that D.

The maxim of the action of making a false promise: I will perform the action of making a promise that I have no intention to keep (i.e., a false promise) (A) in circumstances where I am in real need of money and I know that I will never be able to pay it back (C) in order to make it the case that I have money (D).

HOW DO I UNIVERSALIZE THE MAXIM OF THE ACTION OF MAKING A FALSE PROMISE?

The basic idea is to imagine a world in which everyone **must/cannot help but** act on the maxim (i.e., a world in which the maxim is a law; at some point in the *Groundwork*, Kant calls it a law of nature).

Universalized maxim: Everybody must/cannot help but perform the action of making a promise that they have no intention to keep (i.e., a false promise) in circumstances where they are in real need of money and they know that they will never be able to pay it back in order to make it the case that they have money.

Problem

In a world in which this universalized maxim is a universal law, nobody would lend money to a person based on the fact that the person who asks for money promises to pay it back. It is impossible to imagine a world where a) the maxim of the action of making a false promise is a universal law and b) an individual could rationally act on the maxim of making a false promise. This is what Kant means when he says that the maxim would undermine itself as soon as it became a universal law. So, according to Kant, on pain of irrationality, you must keep your promises.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE SUCH A WORLD?

It means that trying to imagine the world where (a) and (b) hold is just like trying to imagine a squared circle: it is impossible. The point is a logical one.

Formula of Humanity as End

Be very careful to note that this prohibits someone from treating others as a **mere** means rather than as a means. If you are deriving any benefit from reading this material, you are using us as a means to help you understand Kant. However, it doesn't follow that you are using us as a *mere* means as assigning us with an instrumental value is consistent with also assigning us with intrinsic value. It is the denial of the latter which reduces us to a mere means.

This generates a puzzle about which kinds of instrumental usage of human beings counts as treating them as a mere means. Kant thinks that using someone as a prostitute or a mercenary is to treat him or her as a mere means, but he didn't seem to be opposed to wage labor (although he lived before the industrial revolution really got under way). Does capitalist wage labor treat people as mere means? How about people who work in Wallmart? How radical is Kant when you apply his ideas consistently?

The Lobster example and heteronomy

On page 110 of his book (an excerpt provided as part of Lecture 11's reading), Professor Sandel provides an example of a heteronomous, as opposed to autonomous, determination. Through a long causal chain, a college student reveals that her motivation for late-night studying is to satisfy her desire for lobster. Do not be distracted by the complexity of the causal chain – it is meant only to point out that the motivations for our actions may, at times, be difficult to discern. What's relevant to the autonomy/heteronomy distinction is not the length of the chain, but rather the end that animates the action. Here, the college student acts heteronomously because her end—to satisfy her desire for lobster—is not chosen by her, but rather given to her by nature. In other words, she did not choose to have an appetite for lobster. By contrast, we act autonomously when we act according to a law we give ourselves and for the sake of acting according to it.