

In stark contrast to consequentialist theories, Kant's moral theory does not view the consequences of your actions as being morally relevant. The only thing that matters are your intentions (i.e. your reasons for acting as you did). His view is part of a family of moral theories called *deontic theories*. The term 'deontic' has to do with what duties you have to yourself and to others. When you are motivated by a duty, your will is made good. In fact, being so motivated is the only thing that makes your will good. Given that duties are rational, and being rational is always good, such a claim makes a good bit of sense if Kant is correct. Kant viewed morality as just one part of what it means to be rational. Hence, to act morally is to act rationally, and to act immorally is to act irrationally.

Other ways of being motivated will not always produce the correct action. If you, for example, are motivated by sympathy for someone, and therefore offer them a meal, you may be acting correctly. Your will, however, is *improperly* motivated. We all know that emotion can motivate us to do immoral things, and so emotion is not a consistently good guide for how to act (even though it was in this case). This is one reason why Kant rejects Utilitarianism: focusing on happiness is a poor basis for action. Rationality, according to Kant, will never lead us astray.

When we act we form, according to Kant, something called a *maxim*. Maxims can be understood as 'the rules that you live by'. When you open the door for a stranger you are acting on a maxim (perhaps 'hold the door when others are entering') When you sneeze, on the contrary, you do not act because of a maxim. Your body did something, but you, as a rational agent, did not act.

There are two types of maxims that Kant is interested in: hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. Imperatives can be understood as a command. Hypothetical imperatives can be understood, then, as a kind of command which *includes* something about your desires, wants, etc. "If you want coffee, then go to the coffee shop" is such an example. If you do not want coffee, however, then you needn't obey that maxim. Categorical imperatives, on the contrary, *exclude* anything about your desires, wants, etc. Additionally, Kant claimed that they are based on rationality. "Do not lie" is an example of a categorical imperative because the command applies whether or not you desire to lie, and as we'll see below, do not fail Kant's two tests..

Kant claimed that morality cannot be dependent on what people desire because some people have bad desires. Hence, morality is not about hypothetical imperatives; it is about categorical imperatives. Granting this, he further sought to establish that the foundation for morality was rationality. We are rational creatures and if obeying morality is to make any sense at all, it must make rational sense. Not every categorical imperative, however, can be a moral rule. After all, 'do not lie' and 'do lie' are contradictions. So, Kant offers a method by which to establish which categorical imperatives are the correct ones to obey.

Contradiction in Conception and Contradiction in Will

Given that being rational is core to Kant's understanding of morality, it follows that the way that we assess potential moral rules is by their rationality. For any categorical imperative, we must apply two tests. If the imperative fails one or both tests, then it is no longer a potential moral duty. For both tests, we first universalize our imperative by imagining a world where every rational agent consciously obeys the imperative. We must do this as Kant thought that rational rules apply to every rational creature. Given that we are all rational, the rules must apply to us all. If an alien species exists that is rational, or even if God exists, then these rules apply to them as well. Once we have so imagined, we can apply each test:

- **Contradiction in Conception:** The first test requires that we assess whether or not the imperative is impossible to follow. If it is, then there is some kind of conceptual problem with the maxim, and it must be discarded. For example, if we universalize the maxim 'when you need money, borrow it by lying that you'll pay it back'. If everyone followed this maxim, no one would ever lend money. The maxim cannot be obeyed if everyone obeys it.
- **Contradiction in Will:** The second test requires a kind of contradiction in your ability to achieve your goals. For example, universalize the maxim 'do not help anyone in need'. We all will find ourselves in need of help in achieving a certain goal at least once in our life. If everyone obeyed this maxim, however, then I would be requiring that everyone follow a rule which undermines my ability to achieve my goal. This, for Kant, is irrational. Hence, the maxim is a bad one because it contradicts my will.

As an example of a maxim that passes both tests, let's adopt the maxim 'do not lie'. Once we universalize the maxim, it is clear that universalizing does not make it impossible to follow the maxim (so no contradiction in conception), and there is no inability to achieve my ends (so no contradiction in will). Hence, 'do not lie' is a rule of morality, and, therefore, a rule of rationality. Such rules must always be followed because breaking such rules entails that you are being irrational and defeating your own purposes.

Problem

There are a number of problems that our book introduces. While they were interesting to discuss in lecture, you will not need to know them for the exam. The objection that you need to be aware of was the one I discussed called 'the etiquette objection'. The objection works in the following way. Take any obviously non-moral social rule (we'll use 'place forks to the left of the plate'). Such a rule is not the result of being rational, but rather just a common cultural practice. Breaking this rule is not to act irrationally or immorally. Given that the rule seems categorical, however, it follows that not all categorical imperatives are based on rationality. This directly contradicts the description of what distinguishes the categorical from the hypothetical (see above). This poses a serious problem for Kant because if his system allows (at least some) social rules to be treated the same as rules of morality, then morality is not fully rational. Kant owes us an explanation of which categorical imperatives are rooted in reason and why.