

ETHICS AND CULTURE (HUM-103)

KANT'S ETHICS II:
THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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Moral Duty

- ❖ Duties and laws
- ❖ Moral Duties are generated by the moral law
- ❖ What is the moral law?
- ❖ Imperatives: A command to act in accordance with a law
- ❖ Kant's distinction of two kinds of imperatives
 - Hypothetical Imperative- result centered action/decision (probability of doing or being immoral or wrong)
 - Categorical Imperative- duty



Hypothetical Imperatives

- ❖ Hypothetical imperatives contain an “if” clause
- ❖ They tell you what you ought to do under certain conditions
- ❖ They have the form of an “if-then” command
 - “*If you want X, then do Y*” or “*Don’t do Y if you want X*”
- ❖ Hypothetical imperatives appear as a means to an end
 - E.g., You must retain a 3.5 G.P.A. if you want to obtain a scholarship
 - It is a hypothetical command since it only binds you if you want to obtain the scholarship
 - Hypothetical imperative and Qualified good
- ❖ Hypothetical imperatives cannot generate moral duties
 - *Morality is not a means to an end*



Categorical Imperatives

- ❖ Categorical imperatives do not have an “if” clause
 - ❖ They tell you what you ought to *no matter what!*
 - ❖ They are of the form “Do X” or “Don’t do Y”
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- ❖ Categorical imperatives binds you unconditionally
 - ❖ Whether you want something is not at issue
 - ❖ One just ought to obey the command
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- ❖ *Categorical*: The commands are absolute and without qualification
 - ❖ Categorical imperative and ‘good without qualification’
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- ❖ *Only a categorical imperative can represent the moral law*
 - ❖ The moral law admits no exceptions
 - ❖ Binding on all rational creatures regardless of their wants and desires



The Categorical Imperative

- ❖ Moral law must be in the form of a categorical imperative
 - ❖ It must also be universally binding in every case
 - ❖ It must be a law that all rational beings acknowledge as worthy of respect
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- ❖ What is the content of this law?
 - ❖ *Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*
 - ❖ A *maxim* is a personal policy or guideline that describes what one is doing
 - ❖ The categorical imperative relies on maxims, so one must first formulate the maxim that describes one's action
 - ❖ Second, ask what the world would be like if your maxim was a universal law of nature (binding on everyone)
 - ❖ Third, ask if there is a contradiction: If there is a contradiction, then the maxim is immoral



Perfect and Imperfect Duty

❖ The Categorical Imperative:

- (1) Formulate a maxim that describes your action
- (2) Universalize the maxim such that it is now an absolute law for everyone without exception
- (3) Ask if there is a contradiction:
 - (a) If there is a contradiction in that world then the maxim is immoral
 - (b) If there isn't a contradiction, we must then ask if we would want to live in such a world. If we cannot, then the maxim is immoral

❖ Examples – contradictions of lying or stealing as a maxim

❖ These two different ways of arriving at a contradiction give rise to two kinds of duties

- *Perfect Duties – Ones that I must always do*
- *Imperfect Duties – Ones that I may choose how and when to do*



Keeping Promises

Perfect obligation: Suppose I borrow money and promise to repay the money on a certain date even though I know that I cannot do so.

First step: Formulate the maxim

- ❖ *When I need money I will borrow it and promise to repay it even though I know that I cannot do so.*

Second step: Universalize the maxim/intention/will

- ❖ *Imagine that this maxim is now a universal law that all persons must obey*

Third step: Check if there is a contradiction in this imagined scenario

- ❖ *Yes! There is a contradiction!*
- ❖ *In this world everyone knows that no one keeps their promises*
- ❖ *So, there can be no promising*
- ❖ *Which shows that we have a perfect obligation to keep our promises*
- ❖ *Not to do so is irrational*



Charity/Helping Others

Imperfect Obligation: Suppose I am in a position to help other but choose not to do so.

First step: Formulate the maxim

- ❖ *When I am in a position to help others, I am not going to help them*

Second step: Universalize the maxim

- ❖ *Imagine that this maxim is now a universal law that all persons must obey*

Third step: Check if there is a contradiction in this imagined scenario

- ❖ *No! There is no contradiction! One can imagine such a world*
- ❖ *But could a rational person will that such a world become actual*
- ❖ *Kant says No! Because in doing so we will a world where no one helps anyone else. A will that resolved such a world would contradict itself*
- ❖ *Because we know that in many cases we will need help and sympathy*
- ❖ *Kant refers to this as a contradiction in will*
 - ❖ *Which shows that we have an imperfect duty to help others*



Developing your talents and capabilities

Imperfect Obligation: Suppose I have certain natural talents and choose not to develop them through practice, and instead indulge in pleasure and easy life

First step: Formulate the maxim

❖ *When I have natural talents/abilities, I choose to neglect developing them*

Second step: Universalize the maxim

❖ *What would the world be like if this were a universal law everyone must obey?*

Third step: Check if there is a contradiction in this imagined scenario

❖ *No! There is no contradiction! Such a world could exist where everybody is a slacker and chooses not to develop their natural talents or abilities*

❖ *But could a rational person will that such a world become actual*

❖ *Kant says No! Because in doing so we will a world where life becomes purposeless, and wracked with problems and scarcity*

❖ *Because we value our abilities to use our own means to attain our ends*

❖ *This is also an example of a contradiction in will*

❖ *Which shows that we have an imperfect duty to develop our talents*



Injunction against Suicide

Perfect obligation to Self: Suppose someone wants to take their own life when they think their life is so miserable as to be not worth living

First step: Formulate the maxim

❖ *From self-love, I choose to shorten my own life*

Second step: Universalize the maxim

❖ *What would the world be like if this maxim were a universal law of nature?*

Third step: Check if there is a contradiction in this imagined scenario

❖ *Yes! There is a contradiction!*

❖ *Self-love is the principle which is meant to prolong our lives*

❖ *Yet, in this case, self-love is being used to end my life*

❖ *This contradicts the **purpose** of self-love*

❖ *Which shows that we have a perfect duty to preserve our own life*

❖ *According to Kant, there are no circumstances where suicide is permissible*



Four Formulations of Categorical Imperative

- ❖ So far we have looked at one of the way Kant states the categorical imperative
 - There is only *one categorical imperative*
 - Kant states it in four different way
 - They are all supposed to be equivalent
 - Each formulation will produce same conclusion regarding the morality of particular action
- ❖ The Formula of Universal Law: “*Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature*”
- ❖ The Formula of Humanity: “*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end*”
- ❖ The Formula of Autonomy: “*So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal laws through its maxims.*”
- ❖ The Formula of Community: “*So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends*”



The Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

- ❖ We will look at only two of these formulations
 - ❖ The Formula of the Law of Nature
 - ❖ The Formula of the End in Itself
- ❖ *"So act so as to treat humanity, whether in yourself or in others, as an end in itself, and never as means only"*
- ❖ Kant illustrates the second principle with the above four examples: The equivalence of the formulae – they give the same results as the first formula
- ❖ *False Promises*: I use the other person as a means to get money
- ❖ *Suicide*: I use myself as a means to end suffering
- ❖ *Talent*: I use my self/life/rationality purely for enjoyment; not giving myself respect as a rational agent
- ❖ *Charity*: I am not giving others respect as rational agent
- ❖ *Stealing*: I use the other person to get property



Problems

- ❖ Anything that is not regarded as rational has no moral worth and can be treated as means only
 - This is why it is morally permissible in this scheme to use animals as means
 - We have no duty to animals
- ❖ What about infants, the mentally ill, and the senile
- ❖ If they are mentally no different from animals, then we have a problem
- ❖ Some Kantians try to argue that children will be rational, the mentally ill could be rational, and the senile were rational
 - In other words, they are members of the rational species
- ❖ For long, many non-Europeans were considered to be lacking in rationality
 - This has justified widespread appropriation of their lands, extermination of populations, and disregard and disrespect for their persons and rights

