

Divine commands & ethical requirements

Last time we discussed Kant's Formula of Universal Law, and closed by considering some important contrasts between consequentialist views of the sort we discussed and Kant's ethics:

1. Kant's ethics tells you, in the first instance, what morality forbids you from doing. But it does not tell you what you ought to do in every case; some actions might be morally praiseworthy even though not doing them would not be contrary to the Formula of Universal Law, and hence not morally forbidden. These actions are, therefore, neither morally required nor morally forbidden. For the consequentialist, on the other hand, one must always do what will bring about the best consequences: so (excluding ties) every action is either morally required or morally forbidden.

2. According to the consequentialist, the rightness or wrongness of a particular action depends on which action, in these particular circumstances, would lead to the best outcome. According to Kant, by contrast, the rightness or wrongness of acting from a particular maxim just depends on the *type* of maxim that it is. If making false promises, or lying, is sometimes morally forbidden, then it is always morally forbidden.

This last point -- that the rightness or wrongness of an action just depends on the type of maxim from which one is acting, rather than on the consequences of this particular action -- explains why Kantian ethics yields quite different results about what we ought to do than the sorts of consequentialist views we discussed.

Suppose, for example, that a judge knows that the defendant in a capital case is innocent, but also knows that not finding the defendant guilty and sentencing him to death will result in riots in which many will be killed. What would a consequentialist say about this sort of case? How about the Kantian?

In this sort of case, it might seem that the Kantian gets things right, and the consequentialist gets things wrong. But there are other cases where things might not seem to so clear. Here is one such example:

You're living in Nazi Germany, and hiding a Jewish family in your basement. The authorities come to the door, and ask you whether you are hiding a Jewish family in your house. You know that they will believe you if you tell them that you are not; it is just a random check. What should you do?

What does the Kantian say about this sort of case? How about the consequentialist? What should we say?

Now recall the case of the unauthorized organ transplant, discussed above. What would the Kantian say about this case? Does the maxim from which you were acting lead to a contradiction if universalized?

It may not be obvious. However, in addition to the Formula of Universal Law, Kant gave another formulation of the categorical imperative, which he states as follows:

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.

This is often called the *formula of humanity*. What does this principle say about the case of the unwilling transplant? How about the case of suicide?

How about cases of self-defense?

So we have two different moral rules: the formula of universal law and the formula of humanity.

One puzzling question is how these two principles are related. Kant seems to think that these two formulas are different formulations of the same idea; but it is a bit hard to see how this could be correct. Perhaps the two formulas are equivalent, in the sense that they yield the same result about which actions are right and which wrong; but it is not even clear that this is correct. In any case, there is no requirement that one's ethical theory be based on a single principle.

The choice between consequentialist and Kantian ethics is a difficult one, as there are many examples which are challenging to each sort of view.

Here is a final challenge to the Kantian perspective worth thinking about:

According to the Kantian, what are really good or bad are not the consequences of our actions, but the actions themselves. So consider some bad actions, like acts of lying. Surely I ought to prevent such actions if I can, especially if I have the opportunity to prevent very many of them. But suppose that I can only prevent (say) the telling of 10 lies by myself telling a lie. Should I? Presumably the Kantian will say "no," since telling a lie is morally forbidden. But can this be right? Aren't 10 lies worse than 1?

What should the Kantian say? Is this a genuine problem?

This concludes our discussions of Kant's ethics. So far we have discussed two different answers to the question,

What makes an act morally wrong?

The Kantian answers this question by saying

It violates the categorical imperative.

The consequentialist answers this question by saying

It leads to consequences which are, overall, worse than some other action available to you.

We now turn to our third answer to this question, which is the one given by the *divine command theorist*. The divine command theorist answers this question by saying

It contradicts the commands of God.

Obviously, this is not a view of ethics which someone who does not believe in God is likely to endorse. It is also not a view of ethics which someone who believes that God exists, but does not issue commands, can believe in. But it is a view of ethics to which many believers in a personal God -- including Christians, Jews, and Muslims -- have been attracted. Why would someone belonging to such a religion be attracted to this sort of view of ethical requirements?

(I'll be answering this question largely from the perspective of a believer in Christianity -- see the optional reading on the course web site for some discussion of how this might carry over to believers in other religious traditions.)

There are a number of different reasons for religious believers to be divine command theorists:

1. Many people teach and discuss ethical questions primarily in a religious context. One might ask: why do they do this? The divine command theorist has an answer: the subject of ethics is partly religious, since when we are talking about moral requirements we are really talking about the will of God.
2. Many think that the idea of moral obligations, considered apart from the will of God, simply makes no sense. What could it mean to say that I *must* (for example) help someone in need in cases in which this is not in my long-term interest? What in the world could give rise to facts of this sort about moral obligations?
3. Many religious believers find it hard to see how *else* they could think of the relationship between morality and the commands of God. The only option seems to be that the moral law is prior to and independent of the will of God; but it is hard to see how this might be so. If God is the source of everything, one wants to ask, how could the moral law be independent of God?

But divine command theory also faces some significant challenges. Perhaps the most important such challenge arises in the Platonic dialogue which we read for class today. The character of Euthyphro endorses divine command theory:

SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Well then, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this ideal, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.

EUTHYPHRO: Well, Socrates, if that is what you want, I certainly can tell you.

SOCRATES: It is precisely what I want.

EUTHYPHRO: Well then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy,
7 and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.

Of course, one important difference between Euthyphro's version of divine command theory and the sort that we are interested in is that his is a polytheistic version of the theory. Some of Socrates' objections to Euthyphro focus on this, such as those which are based disagreements between the various gods.

But Socrates also raises a more fundamental objection to Euthyphro, which is perhaps the most serious challenge to divine command theory.

Euthyphro states his position as follows:

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, I would indeed affirm that holiness is what the gods all love, and its opposite is what the gods all hate, unholy-ness.

Socrates responds by raising a dilemma for this position:

SOCRATES: We shall soon know better about that, my friend. Now think of this. Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?

At first, Euthyphro is confused by the question. Socrates responds to his confusion with a series of examples, one of which uses the example of vision. Given that for any thing x ,

Someone sees x if and only if x is seen.

we can still ask: is x seen because someone sees x , or does someone see x because x is seen? The answer seems clear: it is the first. Something is seen because someone sees it, and not the other way around.

But then we can ask a parallel question about the moral law and what God commands. Let's agree that, for any action x,

God commands us to do x if and only if x is morally right.

Then, as in the case of vision, we can ask: does God command us to do x because x is morally right, or is x morally right because God commands us to do it? It seems that there are two possible answers to this question:

- (1) God commands us to do x because x is morally right.
- (2) x is morally right because God commands us to do x.

Moreover, it seems that (1) and (2) are exclusive: they can't both be correct. Socrates argues for (1):

SOCRATES: Then what are we to say about the holy, Euthyphro? According to your argument, is it not loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, it is for that reason.

SOCRATES: And so it is because it is holy that it is loved; it is not holy because it is loved.

But it looks as though, if Socrates is right about this, divine command theories must be false: if God commands us to do x because it is the right thing to do, it seems that facts about what is right and wrong must be prior to and independent of the commands of God.

To maintain the truth of divine command theory, it seems that one must resist Socrates' argument, and deny his claim that the Gods choose to command things *because* they are morally right. But then one still faces the question posed by Socrates:

Why does God choose to command what he does?

There seems to be no good answer to this question, if we can't say that God chooses his commands based on what is right to do. But this leads to the worry that the commands of God are *arbitrary*: they are based on no reason at all.

A related worry is that this seems to imply that if God had commanded us to murder, cheat, and steal, then murdering, cheating, and stealing would be morally permissible. But surely even if God had commanded us to do these things, they would not be morally permissible!

Is the divine command theorist forced to admit that it could have been the case that murder was morally permissible?

One particularly sharp way to raise this worry is via consideration of some examples in which it seems that God has commanded us to do something morally wrong. Consider, for example, the story of Abraham and Isaac:

“After these things, God tempted Abraham, and said to him: Abraham, Abraham. And he answered: Here I am. He said to him: Take thy only begotten son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and go into the land of vision; and there thou shalt offer him for an holocaust upon one of the mountains which I will show thee.”

One way of thinking about this case (due to Robert Adams) is as one in which Abraham is presented with three conflicting claims:

- (A) If God commands me to do something, it isn't morally wrong for me to do it.
- (B) God commands me to kill my son.
- (C) It is morally wrong for me to kill my son.

Put yourself in Abraham's shoes: since (A)-(C) are mutually inconsistent, you cannot believe all three. Which one should you give up?

It looks like the divine command theorist must suggest that you should give up (C), and endorse the claim that it is morally permissible for you to kill your son. However, this might not be the only option; Kant suggests another way of thinking about the case:

“Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: ‘That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.’ ”

One reading of what Kant is saying here is that it is always more reasonable to give up (B) than to give up (C). What do you think? Can the divine command theorist endorse this reply?