Kant’s ethics

Thursday, April 23, 2009
Quick reminder

Papers are due tomorrow!
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- Königsburg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)
- Enlightenment philosophy
- *Grundlagen der Metaphysik der Sitten*
  Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals
Three kinds of goods

**Goods**

Things with at least some (positive) moral significance or value
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**Talents and temperament**  Ex: Intelligence, courage
Three kinds of goods

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Talents and temperament  Ex: Intelligence, courage
Subjective states and feelings  Ex: Happiness, pleasure
Three kinds of goods

**Goods**

Things with at least some (positive) moral significance or value

**Talents and temperament**  Ex: Intelligence, courage

**Subjective states and feelings**  Ex: Happiness, pleasure

**Choice and reasons for action**

Ex: ⟨Pay your taxes before they’re due to avoid going to jail.⟩

Also called rules, principles, intentions, maxims, and imperatives
Conditional and unconditional goods

**Conditional goods**  Goods whose value depends on something else  
(Kind of like: contingently good)

**Unconditional goods**  Goods whose value *doesn’t* depend on anything else  
(Kind of like: necessarily good)
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**Kant’s question**  
Of the three kinds of goods, which can be unconditionally good?
Kant’s ethics

Quick reminder

About Kant

Goods

Analysis of goods

Anti-consequentialism

Hypothetical and categorical imperatives

Using the CI

Objections

Which goods are unconditionally good?

Talents?

Subjective states?

Reasons for action?
Which goods are unconditionally good?

Talents? No; talents can be put to bad purposes. Ex: an evil genius.

Subjective states?

Reasons for action?
Which goods are unconditionally good?

**Talents?** No; talents can be put to bad purposes. Ex: an evil genius.

**Subjective states?** No; pleasure can come from bad actions. Ex: stealing candy from babies.

**Reasons for action?**
Which goods are unconditionally good?

**Talents?** No; talents can be put to bad purposes. Ex: an evil genius.

**Subjective states?** No; pleasure can come from bad actions. Ex: stealing candy from babies.

**Reasons for action?** This is the only option left, so at least some reasons for action must be unconditionally good.

**Important:** Kant makes several assumptions here!
**Kant’s anti-consequentialism**

**Consequentialist:** The only good things are the consequences of our actions, such as pleasurable feelings.

**Kant:** The consequences are only conditionally good. The only unconditionally good things are our reasons for action.

\[
\text{Reason} \rightarrow \text{Action} \rightarrow \text{Consequences}
\]
Two kinds of reasons for action

**Hypothetical** 〈In circumstances $C$, do action $A$ for the sake of goal $G$.〉

**Categoryl imperative** 〈In circumstances $C$, always do action $A$.〉

〈Pay your taxes before they’re due to avoid getting audited.〉

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Pay your taxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances</td>
<td>Before they’re due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Avoid getting audited</td>
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Important: Only applies if you accept the goal!
Two kinds of reasons for action

Hypothetical 〈In circumstances $C$, do action $A$ for the sake of goal $G$.〉
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Important: Doesn’t depend on whether you accept a goal!
Two kinds of reasons for action

**Hypothetical**

⟨In circumstances \( C \), do action \( A \) for the sake of goal \( G \).⟩

⟨Pay your taxes before they’re due to avoid getting audited.⟩

**Categorical**

⟨In circumstances \( C \), always do action \( A \).⟩

⟨Pay your taxes before they’re due.⟩

**Significance of categorical imperatives**

Only categorical imperatives are not done for the sake of some other goal \( G \).

Hence, only categorical imperatives can be unconditionally good reasons for action.
Kant’s search for unconditional goods

Reasons → Action → Consequences

Talents

Subjective states

Hypothetical imperatives

Categorical imperatives

Unconditional goods!
Are there any real categorical imperatives?

**The categorical imperative**

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
Are there any real categorical imperatives?

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**The categorical imperative (One interpretation)**
Act only according to reasons that all rational beings would freely accept.
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- Relatively easy to state, understand, and remember
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The categorical imperative (One interpretation)

Act only according to reasons that all rational beings would freely accept.

- Relatively easy to state, understand, and remember
- Captures some of the most relevant aspects of Kant’s ethics for us today
- Not clearly related to the categorical imperative as Kant stated it
- Misses some aspects that were important to Kant
Why is this unconditional?

‘TCI’

Act only according to reasons that all rational beings would freely accept.

(1) ‘TCI’ does not depend on any individual rational being’s wants, desires, wishes, religious beliefs, &c.

(2) Hence, ‘TCI’ does not depend on any other goods. (2)

(3) Hence, ‘TCI’ is an unconditional good. (3, def’n unconditional goods)

(4) Only categorical imperatives are unconditional goods. (shown earlier)

(5) Hence, ‘TCI’ is a categorical imperative. (3,4)
So what are we supposed to do?

Act only according to reasons that all rational beings would freely accept.

- The categorical imperative doesn’t tell us directly how to act.
- Instead, it gives us a test for our reasons and actions.
- If a reason doesn’t pass the test, then we can’t morally act that way. (At least, for that reason.) That reason is morally impermissible, or wrong. But if a reason does pass, the action is morally permissible, or right.
- Alternative formulations of the categorical imperative serve as equivalent ways to run the test. Different formulations are easier to apply in different situations.
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Applying the categorical imperative

Hypothetical imperative
‘proposed reason’
R = \langle A, C, G \rangle

Categorical imperative

R passes
A permissible in C

R fails
A impermissible in C (for R)
Act on that maxim which can at the same time have for its object itself as a universal law of nature.

Test of universalizability

Suppose everyone always acted according to the reason you’re considering, as though we were caused to act that way by a law of nature. Would society be stable, or would it inevitably fall apart? If it would cause society to inevitably fall apart, then it’s not an acceptable reason.
Example: Suicide

A man feels sick of life as a result of a series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair, but he is still so far in possession of his reason as to ask himself whether taking his own life may not be contrary to his duty to himself.

What’s the reason?
If everyone did that?
Would society inevitably fall apart?
Morally permissible?
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What’s the reason? ⟨In order to avoid pain, kill yourself whenever you believe there will be more pain than pleasure in your future.⟩

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If everyone did that? We’d all kill ourselves as soon as we got a little too pessimistic.

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Would society inevitably fall apart? Yes.

Morally permissible? No; the reason doesn’t pass the test of universalizability.
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.

Test of humanity

Consider everyone who would be affected by your action. Would they all freely accept your reason for taking that action? If no, then you would simply be using them for your own goals, not treating them as valuable in themselves, and the reason is unacceptable. If yes, then you are respecting them as valuable in themselves, and the reason is acceptable.
Example: False promises

Another finds himself driven to borrowing money because of need. He well knows that he will not be able to pay it back; but sees too that he will get no loan unless he gives a firm promise to pay it back within a fixed time.

Who’s affected?
What’s the reason?
Acceptable to everyone?
Morally permissible?
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Who’s affected? The man, his family, the lender, &c.
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Who’s affected? The man, his family, the lender, &c.

What’s the reason? 〈Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done.〉

Acceptable to everyone?

Morally permissible?
Example: False promises

Who’s affected? The man, his family, the lender, &c.

What’s the reason? Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done.

Acceptable to everyone? No; the lender would not freely accept it.

For the man whom I seek to use for my own purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree with my way of behaving to him, and so cannot himself share the end of the action.

Morally permissible?
Example: False promises

Who’s affected? The man, his family, the lender, &c.

What’s the reason? (Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know that this will never be done.)

Acceptable to everyone? No; the lender would not freely accept it.

Morally permissible? No; the reason doesn’t pass the test of humanity.
If your wife (husband, boyfriend, &c.) is drowning, you should try to save her because she’s your wife, and not because everyone would accept the maxim to save your wife.

Kant forbids us from acting on close emotional ties, and requires us to act only on impersonal, rational rules.
Starting to reply to Williams: Marcia Baron

- Suppose your husband (wife, &c.) was scared and shocked, but there was someone else who was in much more danger, and you knew this.
- In this case, you should tend to the stranger first.
Most of the time, saving your husband automatically seems like the right thing to do. But sometimes it won’t be, and you need a way to decide which to do on which occasions.

The categorical imperative gives you a way to do this.

Important question: Do you have to actually use the categorical imperative every time you act?
Non-human animals and humans with certain kinds of disabilities cannot accept reasons, either for their actions or ours. Does this mean we’re not required to treat them with respect?
The categorical imperative is empty

(1) Standards for acceptable reasons vary widely from culture to culture.

(2) Hence, there will be very few reasons that all rational beings can all accept. (1)

(3) Hence, very few reasons will pass the test of the categorical imperative. (2, def'n CI)

(4) These very few reasons will be not enough to guide our actions on many occasions.

(5) Hence, on many occasions, the categorical imperative cannot guide our actions. (3,4)

(6) A proposed system of ethics is sufficient only if it can guide our actions on at least many occasions.

(7) Hence, the categorical imperative cannot be a sufficient system of ethics. (5,6)