**Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals***

Class 3 & 4 on Kant, PHIL 230, Fall 2014

**Moving from the good will to the fundamental principle of morality (the categorical imperative)**

1. To have a good will means to act from the motive of duty, out of respect for the commands of the moral law as necessary obligations, regardless of one’s desires, inclinations (end of previous set of notes)

2. What can we say about the moral law, then, if it’s such as to command this kind of respect? (top of p. 63)

-- “…there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle, that is, I am never to act otherwise than so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law”* (63)

-- this is the first form of the categorical imperative, also given on p. 81: “*Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*”

This is the “universal” law form of the CI.

**What does the universal law form of the CI mean, exactly?**

1. Maxim: the principle or rule you are following when you intend to do an action—that which truly describes your intention and your reason for it, and is formulated as a rule

-- includes: what you intend to do, in what circumstances, and for what reasons

a. e.g., false promising: “When I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know I never can do so” (82)

b. e.g., suicide: “From self-love I adopt it as my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more ill than satisfaction” (81)

2. Categorical imperative form 1: Could you will that this maxim, this rule you’re following, could be a universal law for all rational beings to follow?

a. this means: Can you will this maxim to be a universal law, without inconsistency? Or, when you conceive of willing it as a universal law do you run into some kind of inconsistency?

-- if you run into inconsistency, then it would be irrational, inconsistent of you to will to do this action yourself

-- if you can’t will your maxim to be a universal law w/o inconsistency, then the action is *morally wrong* (and we can often think of the opposite as *morally obligatory* (if it has an opposite)).

-- if you can, the action is *morally permissible*.

b. does not mean: It would produce less happiness as a consequence if everyone followed this rule (that’s more like rule utilitarianism), or that you wouldn’t like the consequences yourself

3. Kant’s examples to illustrate

a. making a false promise: inconsistency described on p. 82, at end of #2

b. suicide on the basis of “self-love”: inconsistency bottom of p. 81

c. helping others: we can conceive of a universal law that said no one should ever help others who need it—such a rule isn’t contradictory in itself (unlike above two cases)

-- but there would be a contradiction in our *will* if we willed this to be a universal law (83)

* There are certain things we must will to have in order to continue existing as rational beings and being able to will anything else at all: rational needs (e.g., basics of survival, but also freedom to be able to set goals and work towards them)
* Willing that no one ever help anyone else means you’re willing that no one ever help you
* In the case of rational needs, this means both (1) willing that you get your rational needs, which means also willing the means to them (sometimes it may be that you need help) and (2) willing that you not get the means to achieve these rational ends and so that you won’t get your rational needs

d. developing talents: there is no contradiction in a universal rule that says everyone should remain idle and not develop talents or skills, or improve upon natural abilities

-- but again, there would be a contradiction in *willing* this to be a universal law (82)

* can’t will that no one ever develop talents or skills, or improve upon their natural abilities, because we necessarily will that we and others develop these
* Insofar as we are rational beings who will various ends/goals, we also have to will that we have the ability to achieve those, and others developing their talents may be necessary to help us achieve our goals
* We may need to have talents developed, in ourselves and others, to meet our rational needs, things we must necessarily will
* We can’t be certain in advance what our goals will necessarily be, or when/how our rational needs will be threatened, so we should develop skills and abilities that could work for various possible goals

4. when we want to do actions we couldn’t will to be universal laws, we are trying to make exceptions of ourselves; but this is inconsistent (and so irrational)

-- we will that not doing the action should be a universal law, but “we assume the liberty of making an *exception* in our own favor …” (83)

-- but there is a contradiction here: “a certain principle should be objectively necessary as a universal law, and yet subjectively should not be universal, but should admit of exceptions” (84)

**TO DISCUSS WITH A COUPLE PEOPLE:**

Are there any concerns you have with this form of the categorical imperative, or how we might use it?

**PERFECT & IMPERFECT DUTIES (**83)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Perfect duties** | **Imperfect duties** |
| For maxims that cannot be *conceived* as universal laws without contradiction   * the opposite of such maxims is always required as duty | For maxims that can be conceived as universal laws but cannot be *willed* to be such without contradiction   * one must not have a maxim of *never* doing these actions * there is leeway for choice in when/how we do them |
| These specify particular kinds of actions that must be done or avoided   * Avoid lying promise to get out of difficulty * Avoid suicide out of self-love/to reduce pain | These specify certain ends/goals that we should have, but the moral law can’t specify exactly which actions must be taken to reach these goals (b/c depends on particular circumstances)   * Sometimes work to develop your talents * Sometimes help others when you can |

**SECOND FORM of the Categorical Imperative**: the form of “humanity”

“So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case at the same time as an end, never as a means only” (88)

**Approaching morality from the perspective of ends/goals:** is there some end or goal that it could be necessary for all rational beings to promote, that has absolute worth?

“All objects of the inclinations have only a conditional worth; for if the inclinations and the needs founded on them did not exist, then their object would be without any value” (87)

Is there any end or goal that has unconditional, absolute worth?

Kant: Yes, rational nature (and the beings in which it exists) is such an end:

* “every rational being exists as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end” (87).

Why should we think rational nature has absolute worth?

*Some possible things Kant might mean; the text is open to multiple interpretations*

* rational nature is the source of ends being “good” at all
  + to think of an end or goal as “good” in any sense (moral or prudential) we must be able to reflect on it and consider reasons we have for doing it, and whether we should do it
    - so our rational nature is what allows us to think of any ends as good at all
    - if so, then we have to think of our *capacity* to consider things as good (or bad) at all as itself good—even, perhaps, unconditionally good
  + all other ends are good on the condition that we choose them; *the ability to make these choices* is itself what makes this condition possible, and thus, perhaps, is unconditionally good
* Perhaps it’s that because we are rational beings who can and do conceive of ends and work towards them, we naturally have to see this capacity as an unconditionally good thing—it is what is required to be the sorts of beings we are
  + “The capacity to set oneself an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality)” (163, not assigned)
* Kant also argues that our rationality is what allows us to be autonomous—self-guiding, being able to command the moral law for ourselves (not having to get these commands from someone else) (93-94)
  + And this autonomy leads to a “dignity” of rational beings:
    - “…although the conception of duty implies subjection to the law, we yet ascribe a certain *dignity* and sublimity to the person who fulfills all his duties. There is not … any sublimity in him, so far as he is *subject* to the moral law; but inasmuch as in regard to that very law he is likewise a *legislator*, and on that account alone subject to it, he has sublimity” (97).
    - “… the dignity of humanity consists just in this capacity of being universally legislative, though with the condition that it is itself subject to this same legislation” (97-98)

**What does it mean to treat people as ends in themselves and never merely as means to ends?** (this is what the CI, form of humanity, requires)

Come up with specific examples of what it could mean to:

1. Treat people as means to your ends

2. Treat people *merely* as means to your ends

Type your answers on this document, if you can: <http://is.gd/PHIL230Oct28>

**Treating people as ends in themselves:**

Treat self and others as autonomous, rational beings capable of freely setting and working towards ends

* may use them as means to ends, but never *merely* as means:
* must be at least *possible* for them to consent to the act and adopt its end (Korsgaard, 331-334—reading for Thursday)
* if it is impossible for them to consent, then you’re treating them merely as means to ends
* examples of treating others merely as means to ends: deception and coercion
* “We are also forbidden to take attitudes towards [a rational agent] which involve regarding her as not in control of herself, … as not using her reason” (Korsgaard 335)
* we should treat them as if they are using their reason as well as they can, even if we think they are mistaken
* Kant: “It is … a duty of virtue not to take malicious pleasure in exposing the faults of others…, but rather to throw the veil of benevolence over their faults, not merely by softening our judgments but also by keeping these judgments to ourselves; for examples of respect that we give others can arouse their striving to deserve it” (*Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 466)

**Kant’s four examples, discussed with CI 2 (88-89)**

1. false promise: deception as way of treating others merely as means to your ends

2. suicide for sake of eliminating pain: using self (as a rational being of absolute, unconditional worth) as a mere means for the sake of a conditional good, elimination of pain

3. helping others: must not only avoid treating others as mere means to your ends, but respect them as ends in themselves by sometimes helping to further their own ends

4. cultivating own talents: must not only avoid treating self as mere means to conditionally valuable ends, but respect self as a rational being by doing what is necessary to ensure one can continue to act as a rational being in the future

* to continue to be a rational being one has to be able to set and work to achieve goals, and need to cultivate talents to do this

**Relationship between first and second forms of CI?**

1. formula of universal law: only act on maxims you could will to be universal laws

2. formula of humanity: only act in such a way that you treat rational beings as ends in themselves, never merely as means to ends

*How might these two be saying similar things?*