**Immanuel Kant:** *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)

PHIL 230, Hendricks, Fall 2014

**Preliminary question to discuss with one or more other people:**

Do you think that some form of utilitarianism is viable as a moral theory, or do you think something important is missing from all the utilitarian views we’ve considered?

-- For example, do you think consequentialism adequately describes how we should evaluate moral actions? That what matters morally is the consequences of the actions or of a set of rules?

**1724-1804**, Köningsberg, Prussia

He focused in numerous writings on our capacity for using our own reason to think about, discuss, and come to understand various things, rather than only relying on authorities; and on our ability to guide our own actions autonomously.

-- we see these emphases in this text as well

**Some preliminary comparisons of Kant and Mill**

Both argue for a fundamental principle of morality; Mill’s is the principle of utility

Kant’s fundamental principle of morality: the “categorical imperative” (CI)

a. The CI has several formulations; the first one is: “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (81)

-- what is morally right to do is that which you could will all other rational beings to also do—a basic characteristic of morality is that it’s universally valid

b. This is because we are equal insofar as we are rational beings—in part, this means we are capable of using our reason to determine what we ought to do (morally or otherwise) and to guide our actions thereby

c. If you are trying to do an action that you couldn’t will anyone else in that situation to also do, then you’re making an unreasonable exception for yourself—why should you get to do what you couldn’t will all others to do in the same situation?

Kant’s view is *not* consequentialist, unlike Mill’s

a. what matters morally in our actions are our intention and motive: what we are trying to do, and the reason for it

-- we must be trying to do what we could will to be a universal law, and we must be doing it *because* that is the right thing to do

b. It’s the motive he’s concerned about when he talks about acting *from duty* versus *merely in conformity with duty* (pp. 59-60)—we’ll discuss this later

**I**. **Kant starts in the Preface (not assigned) by saying what morality must be like, if it is to exist at all**

1. It must carry with it strong obligation, “absolute necessity” (Preface p. 51)

-- morality says what *must* be done, even if one’s desires, interests go against it, and even if the consequences of the action are worse than not doing it

-- this is what differentiates moral “oughts” from other “oughts”

2. Two kinds of “oughts”: two ways of saying we ought to do an action (Kant 74; in reading for next time)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Hypothetical imperatives***  (conditional obligations) | ***Categorical imperatives***  (unconditional obligations) |
| Say what ought to be done to achieve some desired end or goal: if you want goal *y*, you should do *x* | Say what ought to be done as obligatory in itself, regardless of ends/goals that we may or may not have |
| These do not necessarily oblige everyone—you only ought to do *x* if you want *y*; if you don’t, the “ought” doesn’t apply to you (79-80) | These oblige everyone: you *must do x*, regardless of your goals, wants, interests, etc. |
| Action good only as means to something else (74) | Action good in itself (74) |
| Imperatives of skill, prudence | Moral imperatives |

**II.** **Moral, categorical “oughts” must be based on reason**

To say something is obligatory for all, must be grounded in something that is valid for all, beyond our particular desires, interests—correct conclusions of reason

This allows for individual autonomy: following moral rules means following our own commands given to ourselves, based on reason; we don’t have to follow the authority of another

-- we can even be free of our own inclinations to some extent, our own instincts and natural desires, and go against these at times by following what reason says is right to do

-- instincts guide us towards happiness; laws of reason guide us towards being morally good (56-57)

Why couldn’t happiness ground categorical imperatives?

If it’s a goal we all have (which Kant says it is (p. 75)), then couldn’t we say everyone is obliged to do what will lead to their own happiness?

We can’t get universal, necessary commands from happiness (p. 78)

-- not everyone will need to do the same things to be happy, so we will be following different commands

-- we can’t be certain what will make us happy, so we can’t have absolute commands, only suggestions, counsels

**III. The only unconditionally good thing**

Can you think of something that is always good, that is good regardless of the circumstances in which it exists, and without anything else needing to be true as a “condition” for this thing to be good?

**A “good will” as unconditionally good** (Kant 55-56)

Good will:

* a disposition to guide our actions according to moral obligations, even against desires, interests
* intending to do what the moral law says, even if it doesn’t work out as planned—it’s not b/c of what it accomplishes that the good will is good (56)
* subordinating desires to moral law: one will only act on desires if doing so conforms to moral law

-- (note that don’t get information on the *content* of the moral law until Kant p. 81 & onward)

Good will means having a disposition to act ***from duty*** (from motive of respect for moral law) not just ***in conformity w/duty*** (from other motives) (Kant 59-60)

\* So the good will involves intention: intending to do what the moral law says

\* and also motive: we have to do what the moral law says because that is our moral duty, out of respect for the moral law

1. Acting from duty: that something is a moral obligation is enough to motivate you to act, even if it goes against your desires and interests

-- not that you’re motivated to act morally only on condition that you also desire such an action or it’s in your interest

-- acting out of pure respect for the moral law as necessary, obligatory (p. 62, footnote 2, on “respect”; see also p. 146-147 on the strength of moral law as motivator)

2. acting merely in conformity with duty: doing what morality requires, but because it is what you desire or what is in your interest; your desires and interests are your main motive

-- such actions have “no true moral worth” (Kant 59)

Good will: disposition to act on desires, inclinations, interests only if these conform to duty; *subordinate desires & inclination to duty*

Evil will: disposition to only act as duty requires if this fulfills your desires, interests, inclinations; *subordinate duty to desires* (Kant 151)

3. examples to illustrate

a. businessman who charges people equally (59)—hard to tell if acting from duty, b/c also in his interest

-- does he have a good will, a disposition to do his duty from the motive of duty? Hard to tell.

b. philanthropy (helping others) (59): again, if one enjoys doing so, hard to tell if acting from duty

-- but if someone does not have a desire to help others, if in fact this gives them pain, but they do it anyway…then we can more easily see that they’re acting from the motive of duty (so long as there isn’t some other motive for why they’re doing it!)

4. Does this mean acting merely in conformity to duty is morally wrong or evil?

**No**—K says these acts are often “proper,” and deserve “praise and encouragement” (59)

-- it may be difficult or impossible to tell if self or others ever act purely from duty alone (Kant 67-68)

-- what is morally wrong is acting against duty; to be morally evil is to have a general rule leading to a disposition that you will usually/always subordinate duty to your own desires

It’s just that actions done from our own desires or inclinations, what we happen to like doing, aren’t esteemed morally, according to Kant.

5. What is required for an action to have true moral worth, to be esteemed morally:

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Book 1, Chpt. 3): “What is essential in the moral worth of actions is that the moral law should directly determine the will. If the determination of the wil occurs in accordance with the moral law but only by means of a feeling of any kind whatsoever, which must be presupposed in order that the law may become a determining ground of the will … it has legality but not morality.”

6. Why? Why does the motive matter so much to the morality of the action?

* Motive indicates what kind of imperative/command you’re following—if you are motivated to act because this action is required by a necessary and universal obligation that you simply must respect, then you’re following the moral law as a categorical imperative
  + you are respecting the moral law *as* a necessary and universal obligation, doing what it says for that reason
  + you should have the disposition to always act from this motive to have a good will—this way you won’t be led astray by your desires, inclinations
* If you’re acting on the motive of what you like, what pleases you, what you desire, then you’re following a command that says do what pleases you, what gets you what you desire, etc.—not following a categorical command
  + If this is your habitual disposition, to act on these kinds of motives, you will not always act according to the moral law
  + You’re not respecting the moral law as a categorical command, a necessary and universal obligation