



Lecture 12: Kant's Duty Ethics



A moral based on reason and duty

Kant argues that rationality is normative. This means that what you should do can be decided based on reason alone. Kant's ethics is based on duty and it is often referred to as *Deontological Ethics* or *Duty Ethics*. Because of our rational capacity, we have a duty, to others and to ourselves, to act in morally good ways.

Duty ethics contrasts with consequentialist ethics and utilitarianism, which focus on the outcomes of our actions. It also contrasts with virtue ethics, which focuses on developing our own moral character.

Freedom and autonomy

In the free will debate, many philosophers see freedom as a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Kant is a libertarian and argues that all humans have the freedom to choose our own action. We are agents and we have free will. If we didn't have this type of freedom, we could not be moral agents.

Kant asks what it means to choose freely. When are our actions truly free? A free act, for Kant, is an act that is truly a result of your own decision. But then it cannot be a decision that is only made on the basis of pain or pleasure, as in Hume. If so, we would be no better than physical things, that give in to external laws of nature.

Although our bodies are physiological, and therefore subject to laws of nature, our minds are rational. It is our rationality - which is not subject to laws of nature - that truly enables us to act freely. How does it do so?

Kant argues that humans, in virtue of our rational capacity, have autonomy. *AUTO* means 'self' and *NOMOS* means 'law'. To have autonomy means that we are able to generate our own laws, but only *moral* laws. We then have the freedom to follow these moral laws that we decided based on rational principles.

A truly free act is for Kant an act that follows from the laws generated by us, through our rational capacities.

The categorical imperative

Kant's moral laws have the form of *imperatives*. An imperative is an order: Do x! Don't do y!

Moral laws for Kant are also categorical, as opposed to hypothetical. Hume's moral theory is that we use reason to decide how to best reach our goals. This implies hypotheticals: If you want y, then you should do x. There are no **ifs** in Kant's moral laws. They apply unconditionally, universally and allow no exceptions. Don't lie! Don't steal!

Kant has several formulations of the categorical imperative that complement each other. We shall look at two of them.

The Universalisation Principle

Act only according to maxims that you can also want to become a universal law! (Maxim = general principle of action)

The categorical imperative is primarily a logical principle, not a principle of morals. One should use this principle to check the logical validity of one's maxim. Logically, some maxims will be inconsistent (hence irrational) to want as universal laws.

I want to lie to save a friend from being hurt. Can I want this to be a universal law? If everybody lied, then nobody would believe information from anyone else. But if nobody believes what you say, the concept of truth would disappear. And if truth don't exist, lies would no longer exist. This is self-contradictory, so my reasoning reveals that lying is irrational.

Can I want to steal to save my child from starving? By same reasoning, I cannot. If everyone was allowed to steal, there would be no meaningful concept of property, thus not of stealing either. Again, there is a contradiction. Same reasoning can be used for infidelity and marriage.

The Humanity Principle and objectification of persons

Act so that you treat humanity, yourself or others, always as an end and never only as a means!

According to Kant, all humans have intrinsic values and should be treated accordingly. One can never justify using another person for achieving a greater good.

What does it mean to use someone as purely a means to an end? We clearly use each other as means all the time. I go to the dentist to fix my teeth and to the restaurant to be served and fed. But they should serve me out of their own free will, and I should treat them as having intrinsic value, which is independent of the job they perform. Not as 'just a servant'.

Today, this is often called "objectification" because it consists in reducing someone to an object. Slavery is a form of objectification, where people are treated as a property. And pornography has been criticised for treating women as tools or objects for men's sexual purposes.

Martha Nussbaum gives seven ways that persons can be objectified (see figure on next page). The worst type is instrumentality; treating a person as a tool. But unlike many other philosophers, she argues that objectification is not always bad. Depending on the overall context, objectification can be positive or negative. In a context of equality, respect and consent, objectification can be pleasurable.

Criticism and advantages of duty ethics

Duty ethics has been criticised for being absolute, inflexible and ignoring all moral nuances. In posing absolute rules, we are insensitive to extreme situations or contexts. Why should it not be morally acceptable to steal if one is starving, even if, under normal circumstances, one should not steal?

Another criticism is that duty ethics is insensitive to outcomes. One could then end up acting in ways that made the world a worse rather than a better place.

An advantage of duty ethics is that it is "user-friendly". Unlike virtue ethics, it gives us universal rules and certainty in moral decisions. We don't need to worry about unpredictable or unintended outcomes, but only about the principles according to which we act and our own good will.

Duty ethics also takes into account our good will and motives. If we have good intentions, our action is morally good, even if the outcome was not the best. Also, duty ethics does not allow us to make exceptions for ourselves or for our friends.

Duty ethics is about *our own* moral obligations, *set by us*.

Discussion

- What are the two formulations of the categorical imperative?
 - What does it mean that Kant’s ethics is categorical?
 - What does it mean that it is imperative?
 - In what way is Kant’s ethics a rationalist theory?
 - Do you agree with Kant’s moral theory? Why/why not?
 - Do you think we have free will, and what do you think free will should be?
- How would Kant and virtue ethicists disagree on what is morally right or wrong? For instance, what does Aristotle say about absolute moral principle? What does Kant say?*

DUTY ETHICS - highlights

- Moral principles are absolute and universal
- No contextual considerations
- Morality is a rational choice
- Consequences are irrelevant
- An action is good if done for the right reasons
- All humans have intrinsic value



Kant famously said that we should always tell the truth, no matter the consequences. Even if an axe killer shows up in your house, asking where his next victim is hiding. Tweet by [@EthicsInBricks](#)

KANT’S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

- UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE
 - A person should act that the principle of one’s act could become a universal law of human action in a world in which one would hope to live.
 - A person should treat other people as having intrinsic value, and not merely as a means to achieve one’s end.



Image from: <https://schoolworkhelper.net/kants-categorical-imperative-summary-analysis/>

Martha Nussbaum

“**Martha Nussbaum** (1947-present) is one of the world's most influential living moral philosophers. She has published on a wide range of topics, from tragedy and vulnerability, to religious tolerance, feminism and the role of the emotions in political life. Nussbaum’s work combines rigorous philosophy with insights from literature, history and law.” The Ethics Centre, 2017

<https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-martha-nussbaum/>



NUSSBAUM: 7 WAYS TO OBJECTIFY PERSONS

1. *instrumentality*: the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes;
2. *denial of autonomy*: the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;
3. *inertness*: the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;
4. *fungibility*: the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects;
5. *violability*: the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity;
6. *ownership*: the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold);
7. *denial of subjectivity*: the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

How much freedom, or autonomy, does she have to make a rational, moral choice? From *Sophies choice*, with Meryl Streep.

