

VI Kant & deontological thinking

Contemporary utilitarians tend not to be linked to any particular thinker. But deontological views are often identified with Kant's view. It's not surprising that deontological views need to be made concrete in some way: you don't get any content if you just say that what one ought to do is to follow the rules, unless you say what the rules are. Still it is surprising from a couple of angles: (i) there are other deontological views than Kant's (e.g. *The Old Testament*; Ross); (ii) there is debate as to whether Kant's view really is deontological, or whether, like utilitarianism, it is aimed at some outcome: though in this case the good aimed for is the good of humanity, rather than maximizing some consequence.

There is another way in which Kant's approach is distinctive; and this is independent from the deontological conclusion, although for Kant the two are intimately connected. An aim of the *Groundwork* is to provide a rational foundation for ethics. Not instrumentally rational; intrinsically rational. (In the common terminology: Kant is a *rationalist*.) The big contrast is with people who think that moral motivation stems from an original desire (or a commitment, or somesuch) to do the right thing. Obvious examples here *sentimentalist* thinkers like Hume and Smith. For Kant, immoral action is irrational: it involves a *mistake*. For Hume immoral action is not irrational; it is simply bad. This is sometimes discussed under the heading of internal and external reasons: internal reasons are those that stem from one's own desires, widely construed; external are those that don't. The Humean picture can then be seen as the idea that all reasons are internal. But there is another sense of 'internal' that is widely used in the literature: an internalist picture of ethical judgements is one on which, once you make the judgement, you are motivated to perform it. In that sense, it is Kant who embraces internalism (at least so long as one is rational); Hume looks like an externalist, since in addition one needs the sympathetic motivation. (Things get complicated here, since one might think that the sympathetic motivation is needed for making the judgments; that would take one back to internalism. Expressivists provide an extreme form of this: the (apparent) judgment jsut is the expression of the sympathy.)

There is a third idea, which is closely tied to Kant's 'A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes' (4.394). That just sounds like a rejection of consequentialism. But what Kant puts in its place is not just a deontological approach. It's not just about what the criterion for deciding what the right thing to do is. It's about the conditions under which acts have moral value. A good will leads the person who has it to act from duty. A good action is done not merely *in conformity with* duty (e.g. as might happen when it is done from immediate inclination or self-interest), but *from* duty. A person acting in this way has an *autonomous* will, rather than a *heteronomous* will. Acts done from other motives have no value. Does the motive of duty need to be at the front of one's mind? The hospital visitor; William's 'one thought too many'. Perhaps it could even be that one acts well while acting contrary to one's explicit view of what is right. Huck Finn and Jim. Is Kant's conception rather counterfactual: what would you do if other actions were right? (does that even make?); what would you do if you no longer had the other motivations?

The Categorical Imperative

The contrast is with hypothetical imperatives, i.e. conditional imperatives. Moral requirements don't seem to be the only categorical imperatives. Phillipa Foot gives the example of rules of etiquette. So what is special about the moral ones?

For Kant they have a particular status, stemming from a particular derivation. *The Categorical Imperative* (capitalized) is often used as the name for Kant's particular formulation.

Different formulations of the CI in the *Groundwork*

Formula of the universal law

“But what kind of law can that be, the representation of which must determine the will, even without regard for the effect expected from it, in order for the will to be called good absolutely and without limitation? Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of action as with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, *I ought never to act except in such a way that could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*” (4.402)

Two things here, corresponding roughly to the idea of Kant as deontologist, and Kant as rationalist: (i) the particular form that the rules must take; (ii) the idea that the rules come from a rational basis.

Taking the second first, two ideas: that rationality gives you the CI; that the rational application of the CI gives you the way of deciding what to do.

On the first of these: the powerful but somewhat elusive idea that it is built into the very idea of law that it be universal; so, once we have eliminated all desires (all heterogeneous impulses) all that is left is the idea of conforming to law itself, i.e. to the universalizing.

Now looking at the particular content of the CI:

“Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (4.421)

You are not just asking if everyone could behave that way. You need first to find the *maxim* on which you are acting, and then see if that is universalizable. The form of a maxim (‘the subjective principle of volition’) is something like: I will perform action F (in circumstances C) in order to achieve end E. A universal law here is a universal law of nature, one that is bound to hold.

Four cases:

The would-be suicide;

The false promiser;

The comfortable idler who doesn't develop his skills;

The smug individual who thinks he needs no help and so will give none.

Is it coherent? Contradiction in conception. Contradictory; or somehow self-defeating. This holds for the first two. Compare theft.

Is it possible to will it? Contradiction in willing. (Schopenhauer's charge: this is just egoism)

The idea of imperfect duties: things it is better to do than not to do, but are not absolutely required; but that we are perhaps required do a certain number of. These loom large in some of Kant's other writings, but are being alluded to here.

Formula of Humanity

"So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." (4.429) An end for everyone since an end in itself.

Formula of Autonomy

"the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law." (4.432) We have now moved from the person obeying the law, to that of the legislator.

Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

"act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends" (4.439). Not clear that this is meant as a separate formulation; Kant talks as if there were just three formulations.

Are these formulations equivalent? Kant says surprisingly little on the question. At the least, he must think that they are coextensive. Is there a deeper connection? Kant says yes: each 'unites the other two in it.' 4.436

Stressing the Formula of Humanity makes it more plausible that Kant has a teleological account: the good of Humanity is what makes actions that respect it right.

Other grounds for thinking deontologically

Go back to rule utilitarianism: the idea there is commonly that we need rules because we are otherwise unable to do the calculations.

But the general thought that rules are needed to get us to perform well given our actual natures and actual circumstances can have a much wider application. Whatever you think that grounds of ethics are, you might think that we are vulnerable to temptation; and rules might help us get around them.

Temptation: Mischel and the marshmallow experiments; judgement shift; Gollwitzer.

How to get round this? Don't think about what to do in the moment of temptation. Compare the role of the Geneva Conventions.

Perhaps moral rules have this kind of status for us.