

Kantian Deontology

- I. *Kant's Rejection of Axiology*: Kant argues that there is nothing that is unconditionally good (not pleasure, happiness, or anything else) except a good will. An “ill-gotten” pleasure is not good. The pleasure of a bad person is not good.
 - A. *The Good Will*: The good will is one that acts for the sake of (not just in conformance with) moral duty.
 - B. *Priority of Right*: This puts the concept of moral duty prior to and independent of any concept of goodness. Hence, Kant is not an axiologist.
- II. *Kant's Theory of Right (Obligation)*:
 - A. Crucial terminology:
 1. *Maxim*: A maxim is a subjective principle of action. It is a “rule” on which we are acting when we act voluntarily.
 2. *Objective Principle*: a principle on which every rational agent would necessarily act if reason had full control of her actions.
 - a) *Note*: A principle may be both subjective and objective. If you in fact act on a principle that every rational agent would necessarily act on if reason had full control of her actions, then your maxim (subjective principle) is also an objective principle of action.
 3. *Imperatives*: Imperatives are sentences that guide action—for example, “Do *x*” or “Don’t do *x*”.
 - a) *Hypothetical Imperatives*: Hypothetical imperatives are of the form, “If you want *y*, do *x*”, or, “If you want *y*, don’t do *x*”. Their applicability to you depends on whether you have the aim stated in the antecedent (the “if” clause) of the conditional sentence.
 - b) *Categorical Imperatives*: A categorical imperative prescribes action without condition.
 - B. **THE** Categorical Imperative (CI):
 1. Kant believed that all moral imperatives were categorical. However there is only one *supreme* categorical imperative of morality. He refers to this as *the* categorical imperative (CI). He formulates the categorical imperative in four different ways. We will only consider the universalizability formulation.
 2. *Universalizability*:
 - a) *Statement of the Universal Law of Nature formulation of the Categorical Imperative*: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.”
 - (1) The test of universalizability requires us to act on maxims that we could will everyone to act on. It does not say that a maxim is an objective principle of action if, and only if, one could will that it be a universal law.
 - (a) We follow many maxims that we could will to be universal, but we could also will contrary maxims to be universal.
 - (b) The CI is a test of moral permissibility. An action is permissible if its maxim passes the test. Actions are obligatory if their *non-performance* is *impermissible*.
 - b) *The Rational Basis of the CI*:
 - (1) Kant believed that the CI was a requirement of rationality—that failure to adhere to it was irrational, a kind of inconsistency.
 - (a) Example: “I, Mudd” from *Star Trek (The Old Fogies)*.
 - (2) It is a formal (logical) requirement on action that you act only in ways that you can accept *in principle*.
 - c) Two Ways to Fail the CI:

- (1) *Contradictions of the Will*: Contradictions of the will arise when one can imagine everyone acting on the maxim of one's action but one cannot rationally *will* that this be the case.
 - (a) Example: Not helping others in need.
- (2) *Formal Contradictions*: Formal contradictions occur when it is impossible even to imagine one's maxim being a universal law.
 - (a) Example: The lying promise. Kant believes that one cannot even imagine everyone acting on the maxim, "break a promise whenever it is convenient to do so". For, if everyone did whatever was convenient regardless of what they had said they would do, there would be no practice of promising and promise-keeping. Nothing people could say would count as making a promise. It is the essence of the institution of promising that promising *binds* one to do what one has said (even if doing so turns out to be inconvenient).

III. Criticisms of Kant's Theory:

- A. *Closet Utilitarianism*: Some have claimed that Kant's theory seems to be nothing more than utilitarianism in disguise (Mill, *Selected Works*, p. 246). This charge is based on several claims.
 1. The inadequacy of formal contradictions to do any work in the theory.
 - a) Many permissible maxims seem to fail the test. For example, the maxim, "Be the first person to run the mile in under three minutes", cannot be a universal law of nature.
 - b) Whether the universalization of an action involves a formal contradiction seems to turn on how we describe the action. While it may not be possible to universalize the maxim, "Break a promise whenever it is convenient to do so", one can universalize (without *formal* contradiction) the maxim, "Do whatever is convenient even if you have said 'I promise to' do otherwise and others are, as a result of this, counting on you to do otherwise".
 2. Contradictions of the will are just appeals to bad consequences.
 - a) *Kantian Replies*:
 - (1) Kant appeals to *hypothetical* consequences. The consequentialist appeals to *actual* consequences.
 - (2) Kant does not appeal to the painfulness of the consequences or their moral badness but to their not being rationally willable.
- B. *Problem of determining the maxim of an action*: It is difficult to determine how specific the maxim on one's action is. If it is stated very specifically, then it will be easy to universalize maxims that seem to allow wrong actions. If it is stated very generally, some actions that are actually permissible will come out to be disallowed.
 1. Example of the problem of excessive specificity: Hubin's theft.
 2. Example of the problem of excessive generality: Permissible theft.
- C. *Problem of the rational will*: Kant needs a theory of the rational will or his theory will allow too much. This objection is based on the assumption that formal contradictions don't have any moral relevance. If so, then everything rests on what people can rationally will. Kant needs to show us that there are *some* coherent states of affairs that people cannot rationally will.
 1. Example #1: The problem of the judge. This case suggests that acting only on maxims that one could universalize is not a rational requirement.
 2. Example #2: The Rugged Individualist.
 3. Example #3: The Fanatic Nazi.