Deontology: Duty-Based Ethics

IMMANUEL KANT
KANT’S OBJECTIONS TO UTILITARIANISM:

1. Utilitarianism takes no account of integrity - the accidental act or one done with evil intent if promoting good ends is the good act!

2. Utilitarians hold the moral agent responsible for outcomes that are neither foreseeable nor controllable.
Kant's Starting Point:

"Our existence has a different and far nobler end, for which and not for happiness, reason is properly intended, and which must, therefore, be regarded as the supreme condition to which the private ends of man must, for the most part, be postponed."
KANT: MORALITY BASED ON REASON ALONE

Kant’s Argument:

1) There is a purpose for the existence of things - that is the world is ordered and has ultimate principles.

2) Happiness is for the lesser creatures not gifted with rationality.

3) Because we are rational we are capable of something beyond mere happiness.

4) That ability to be rational allows us to discern right from wrong apart from considerations of pleasure or happiness.

C) Morality lies in the domain of rationality not happiness and we as rational creatures are designed to be capable of discovering principle guidelines for moral behavior.
Intentions count and the only intention that counts is “the good will.”

“...even if, by some especially unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of step-motherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in the power to accomplish its purpose; if with the greatest effort it should yet achieve nothing, and only the good will should remain...yet would it, like a jewel, still shine by its own light as something which has full value in itself.”

Kant: Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785.
What is the Good Will?

- It is *not* just any good intentions – for example, it is not the utilitarian intention to have the best outcome from one’s actions.

- It *is* the will to do one’s duty without contradiction of reason – regardless of outcome!
KANT: THE GOOD WILL

The good will has three distinguishing features:

- The good will is the indispensable condition for the value of other kinds of goods.
- The good will is the only kind of thing that is unconditionally good.
- The value of a good will is incomparably higher than the value of any other kind of thing whether in isolation or aggregate.
KANT: THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

2 Articulations:

- act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.
- act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature.
KANT: THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Two tests for the morally praiseworthy action:

- ask yourself if it is ok for anyone else to act in the same way (morally permissible)

- ask yourself if it would be a good rule so that everyone else must act in the same way (morally imperative) Can you conceive of a world in which everyone acts thusly?
KANT: THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

A few important points:

- The categorical imperative is not predicated on a conditioned outcome as with a hypothetical imperative – “if you want x do y”

- Universalizing the categorical imperative asks not about probable benefits or costs in a consequentialist calculus – as with Mill or Bentham but with the idea of logical contradictions as a consequence – see example of the lying promise to repay a loan – it represents a contradiction of one’s own intentions to obtain a loan.

- Universalizing one’s actions does not require everyone else to agree with you or to obey your will – it does not affect your duty even if no one else acts morally. In this way, Kant is emphasizing the importance of autonomy as well as integrity.
“So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other in every case as an end withal, never as means only.”
KANT: RESPECT FOR PERSONS

Who is a Person?

- Persons include “man and any rational being”
- Beings who can act only in accordance to their natural inclinations and wants are not persons.
- Rational persons have a freedom of will
- Persons are ends in themselves – they have interests and projects (their own goals) that are important to them by virtue of their rational nature – their value is intrinsic
- Children, though not fully rational are still potential persons so though we may make decisions for them, we cannot use them as tools or objects, nor can we dispose of them or fail to provide sufficient care for them.
Oliver North justifying his lying to Congress about trading arms for hostages during the Iran Contra Hearings: “Sometimes one must choose between lies and lives.”

Kant’s Response: NO!
KANT: WHY CAN’T WE EVER LIE?

Two Reasons:

1. Lying is a contradiction of the categorical imperative: it cannot be universalized as it would render the very act of communicating, wanting to be understood and believed, meaningless.

2. Lying is a contradiction of the practical imperative: it is inconsistent with treating persons with respect; it is a form of manipulation.
One of the first major challenges to Kant's reasoning came from the Swiss philosopher Benjamin Constant (see picture), who asserted that since truth telling must be universal, according to Kant's theories, one must (if asked) tell a known murderer the location of his prey.
“...For instance, if you have by a lie hindered a man who is even now planning a murder, you are legally responsible for all the consequences. But if you have strictly adhered to the truth, public justice can find no fault with you, be the unforeseen consequence what it may. It is possible that whilst you have honestly answered Yes to the murderer’s question, whether his intended victim is in the house, the latter may have gone out unobserved, and so not have come in the way of the murderer, and the deed therefore have not been done; whereas, if you lied and said he was not in the house, and he had really gone out (though unknown to you) so that the murderer met him as he went, and executed his purpose on him, then you might with justice be accused as the cause of his death. For, if you had spoken the truth as well as you knew it, perhaps the murderer while seeking for his enemy in the house might have been caught by neighbors coming up and the deed been prevented. Whoever then tells a lie, however good his intentions may be, must answer for the consequences of it, even before the civil tribunal, and must pay the penalty for them, however unforeseen they may have been; because truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract, the laws of which would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the least exception to them were admitted.”

Kant: On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives
Kant argues that morality must be derived from “pure practical reason.”

Kant also argues that it is more important to be morally worthy of being happy than to be merely happy.

But happiness does play a role in morality:

“...To secure one’s own happiness is a duty, at least indirectly; for discontent with one’s condition, under a pressure of many anxieties and amidst unsatisfied wants, might easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty.”

Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1898
Kant states that the... concept of every rational will as a will that must regard itself as enacting laws binding all rational wills is closely connected to another concept, that of a “systematic union of different rational beings under common laws”, or a “Kingdom of Ends”.

KANT’S KINGDOM OF ENDS:
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The formulation of the CI states that we must “act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends” (4:439). It combines the others in that:

- it requires that we conform our actions to the maxims of a legislator of laws
- that this lawgiver lays down universal laws, binding all rational wills including our own, and
- that those laws are of ‘a merely possible kingdom’ each of whose members equally possesses this status as legislator of universal laws, and hence must be treated always as an end in itself.

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leads one to suppose that one must act even if consequences are monstrous. - i.e. consequences have no reference to the moral worth of an act.

duties could conflict – e.g. prisoner of war not lying vs. not permitting the murder of his troop. For Kant they are both moral commands and yet it is impossible to do both - no way to resolve the conflict.

Temptations to write loopholes in for ourselves – “those persons whose name is Claudia and has grey hair may do x...”

Difficulty of having clear criteria for what counts as rationality

Kant allows no exceptions – even when it might be rational to do so