Kant: the good will, duty and the Categorical Imperative[1]

'How should one live?' It is not a trivial question, as Socrates says. Perhaps uniquely among animals, we human beings not only act, we also consider how we *should* act. We think that there are better and worse ways of acting, we reflect on our experience of making mistakes, and try to improve things. Much of this, of course, relates to our own self-interest – meeting our needs, successfully achieving our personal goals, and so on. But that is not all. We are social creatures, we live together, and our lives and actions affect the lives and actions of other people. How should we relate to one another, how should we treat one another? We are concerned not only for ourselves, but for other people as well, and how other people treat us is critical to our own happiness. How should each of us live so that each of our lives goes 'best'? What is 'good' in life and how may we go about trying to attain it?

These questions form the basis for moral philosophy. Normative ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that aims to give us general guidance on what is morally right or wrong, what is good or bad. It develops theories about people care about or what makes their lives go well, about how to live and what we should do. In this handout, we discuss one such theory, Kant's deontological theory.

DEONTOLOGY

Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty. We have moral duties to do things which it is right to do and moral duties not to do things which it is wrong to do. Whether something is right or wrong doesn't depend on its consequences. Rather, an action is right or wrong *in itself*.

Most deontological theories recognise two classes of duties. First, there are general duties we have towards anyone. These are mostly prohibitions; e.g. do not lie; do not murder. But some may be positive; e.g. help people in need. Second, there are duties we have because of our particular personal or social relationships. If you have made a promise, you have a duty to keep it. If you are a parent, you have a duty to provide for your children. And so on.

We each have duties regarding our *own* actions. I have a duty to keep *my* promises, but I don't have a duty to make sure promises are kept. Deontology claims that we should each be most concerned with complying with our duties, not attempting to bring about the most good. In fact, all deontologists agree that there are times when we *should not* maximise the good, because doing so would be to violate a duty. Most deontologists also argue that we do not have a duty to maximise the good, only a duty to do *something* for people in need. As this

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illustrates, many deontologists think our duties are quite limited. While there are a number of things we *may not* do, we are otherwise free to act as we please.

Deontology says that certain types of action are right or wrong. We can distinguish types of action, morally speaking, on the basis of the individual's intention. For example, a person may kill someone else. A conventional description of the action is 'a killing'. But not all 'killings' are the same type of action, morally speaking. If the person *intended* to kill someone, i.e. that is what they aimed to bring about, that is very different than if the killing was accidental or if the person was only intending to defend themselves against an attack.

Actions are the result of choices, and so should be understood in terms of choices. Choices are made for reasons, and with a purpose in mind. These considerations determine what the action performed actually is. So deontology argues that we do not know what type of action an action is unless we know the intention. We should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention.

KANT'S ACCOUNT OF THE GOOD WILL AND DUTY

Kant is a deontologist. To understand Kant's moral philosophy, we need to explain a couple of terms and assumptions. First, Kant believed that, whenever we make a decision, we act on a *maxim*. Maxims are Kant's version of intentions. They are our personal principles that guide our decisions; e.g. 'to have as much fun as possible', 'to marry only someone I truly love'. All our decisions have some maxim or other behind them. Second, morality is a set of principles that are the same for everyone and that apply to everyone. Third, Kant talks of our ability to make choices and decisions as 'the will'. He assumes that our wills are rational; that is we can make choices on the basis of reasons. We do not act only on instinct. We can act on choice, and we can consider what to choose using reasoning.

In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that the fundamental principle of morality is this: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'. Why does he come to this conclusion, and what does it mean?

<u>The good will</u>
Kant begins his argument by reflecting on whether anything is morally good 'without qualification'. He argues that only the 'good will' is. Anything else can either be bad or contribute to what is bad. For instance, intelligence and self-control are good – but they can enable someone to do clever or difficult bad things, if that is what they choose. Power can be good, but it depends on what use we put it to. Nor is happiness good without qualification. If someone is made happy by hurting others, their happiness is morally bad. So we evaluate happiness by morality. Having a morally good will is a precondition to *deserving* happiness.

Kant then makes a second claim. What is good about the good will is not what it *achieves*. It doesn't derive its goodness from successfully producing some good result. Rather, it is good 'in itself'. If someone tries their hardest to do what is morally right but they don't succeed, then we should still praise their efforts as morally good.

The distinction between acting in accordance with duty and acting out of duty

What is our conception of the morally good will? We can understand it in terms of the concept of duty. Kant argues that to have a good will is to be motivated by duty. This is best understood through an example. Suppose a shopkeeper sells his goods at a fixed price, giving the correct change, and acting honestly in this way. Of course, this is the morally right thing to do, he shouldn't cheat people. But it doesn't show that he has a good will, since acting like this is just in his self-interest. If all he cares about is keeping his customers, and that is the only reason he is honest, then even though he does the right thing, he does it because it will benefit his business, not because it is the right thing to do. Such a person, we may suspect, would quite happily start acting dishonestly, cheating his customers, if it benefited his business to do so.

The shopkeeper is acting *in accordance* with duty – he does the right thing. To act in accordance with duty is simply to do what is morally right, whatever one's motive for doing so. But the shopkeeper isn't *motivated by* duty, i.e. he doesn't act *from* or *out of* duty. To act out of duty is to do what is morally right because it is morally right. To have a good will is to act out of duty, to be motivated by the fact that doing this action is your duty.

Kant controversially claims that this distinction applies not only in cases where the action benefits ourselves, but when it benefits other people to. Suppose you help or please someone else just because that is what you want to do and enjoy doing, e.g. because you like them. Kant says that this is right and should be praised and encouraged (it is in accordance with duty), but your actions don't necessarily have moral *worth*, because you are helping them just because you want to, and not because it is morally right to do so (you are not acting out of duty). Could you act on both your desire to help and because it is right to help? Yes, that's possible. But because you want to help someone else, it is *unclear* whether you are acting out of duty or not. By contrast, if someone were to help someone else even when they didn't want to, but just because they believe that it is the morally right thing to do, *that* would show that they have a good will.

The good will again

So to have a good will is to do one's duty (what is morally right) *because* it is one's duty (because it is morally right). But what *is* morally right? What does a good will will? Here, things get tricky. A good will isn't good because it aims at certain ends, because there are no ends that are good without qualification. We can't, for instance, say that the good will aims at the general happiness, because happiness isn't always morally good. So the good will must, in some way, be good 'in itself', just on the basis of what it is like as a will. What makes a will good is something about the maxims it adopts. However, it can't be *what* the maxims say; i.e. what they aim at. A puzzle …

Another puzzle arises if we consider this in terms of motives. What is it to want to do one's duty because it is one's duty, if we can't say what one's duty is? It can only be the thought of doing one's duty 'as such', i.e. to think of it as 'one's duty' rather than, say, to help others or not to steal. But what does this thought amount to?

To solve these puzzles, we need to recall Kant's assumptions. Maxims are principles of choice. They are subjective – you have yours, I have mine. What makes them different is what they are about, what they aim at and why. But what they have in common is that they are all principles. Now, morality is a set of principles for everyone. So the concept of duty is the concept of a principle for everyone. So, somehow, the good will is a will that chooses what it does, motivated by the idea of a principle for everyone. This is 'not an expected result', Kant says.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant has arrived at the principle, 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'. He later calls this principle the 'Categorical Imperative'. How can this idea serve as a motive or criterion for the good will? Kant rephrases it: to have a good will, I should act only on maxims that I can also will everyone to act on. I can adopt this principle itself as a maxim, a principle of choice. I choose only to make choices on the basis of maxims that everyone could act on. But this maxim doesn't specify any particular end or goal (such as happiness). It only mentions the idea of a principle for everyone, a universal law.

We discuss the Categorical Imperative in more detail in the handout 'Kant's Categorical Imperative'. We end here with an example of its application: suppose I am tempted to make a promise with no intention of keeping it; e.g. I might borrow money (because I want the money) on the promise to pay it back, but I don't intend to pay it back. We can show that this is wrong. Suppose everyone acted on this maxim. Then everyone would know that everyone acts on this maxim. In that situation, making a false promise like this would be impossible. No one would trust my promise, and I can't make a promise unless someone believes it. So I can't will my maxim to be universal. And this shows that I have a moral duty not to make false promises.