

Three issues for Kantian deontology¹

(This handout follows the handout ‘Kant: the good will, duty and the Categorical Imperative’. You should read that handout first.)

Kant claims in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* 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’. In this handout, we look at three objections to his deontological theory that result from this claim. (Objections to Kant’s principle itself are discussed in the handout ‘Kant’s Categorical Imperative: two objections’.)

CONFLICTS BETWEEN DUTIES

Kant argues that our moral duties are absolute. A duty is absolute if it permits no exceptions. Nothing can override a moral duty, because it is categorical. All other ends have their worth in relation to the good will. But the good will is motivated by duty.

This causes problems in cases in which it seems that two absolute duties conflict with each other. Should I break a promise or tell a lie? Should I betray a friend to save a life? If I am faced with a situation in which I must do one or the other, then Kant’s theory implies that whatever I do must be wrong.

One response is to say that a real conflict of duties can never occur. If there appears to be a conflict, we have misunderstood what at least one duty requires of us. If duties are absolute, we must formulate our duties very, very carefully to avoid them conflicting. Kant himself thought that some of our duties are very straightforward; e.g. our duty not to lie is simply that - never lie. But you can believe the rest of Kant’s theory and not accept his view that duties are simple like this. For example, you could argue that ‘don’t lie’ isn’t a duty. Our duty could be something like ‘don’t lie unless you have to lie to save a life’. There will always be some maxim you can act on which you will be able to universalise. So it will always be possible to do your duty.

We can object that it is more realistic simply to say that (most) duties are not absolute. For instance, there is a duty not to lie, but it may be permissible to lie in order to save someone’s life. Less important duties can ‘give way’ to more important ones. In cases of conflict, one will give way and no longer be a duty in that situation. This understanding is at odds with Kant’s theory of morality. His whole analysis of duty is that it is categorical. It is difficult to see how his

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 261-3, 265-7

understanding of why morality is rationally required could allow that duties can give way to each other.

THE VIEW THAT CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIONS DETERMINE THEIR MORAL VALUE

Utilitarians object that Kantian deontology is confused about moral value. If it is my duty not to murder, for instance, this must be because there is something bad about murder. But then if murder is bad, surely we should try to ensure that there are as few murders as possible. If I know that unless I kill someone deliberately, many people will die, how can I justify not killing that person? Surely it is only my duty not to kill because death is bad. So I should prevent more deaths, and so in this case, I have a duty to kill, because I would be killing in order to save lives. What makes a will good is that it wills good ends.

Kant's response is that there are no ends that are good without qualification, even happiness. Apart from the 'good will' itself - the will that only acts on universalisable maxims - nothing is unconditionally good. 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. So utilitarianism does not provide the right analysis of the good will.

But the disagreement goes deeper. Utilitarianism understands all practical reasoning - reasoning about what to do - as means-end reasoning: it is rational to do whatever brings about a good end. The utilitarian thinks it is just obvious that if something is good, more of it is better, and we ought to do what is better. Kant disagrees and offers an alternative theory of practical reasoning. Means-end reasoning is appropriate for hypothetical imperatives, but this is not all there is to practical reason. It is also irrational to act in a way that not everyone could act in. If rationality were only about means-end reasoning, then we couldn't say that any ends - such as other people - are obligatory. Morality becomes hypothetical. You only ought to do your duty if you want to be morally good. This treats morality like just another desire or purpose which we may or may not have.

Utilitarians respond that happiness is the only desirable end. But, once again, Kant has argued that happiness is not always good.

THE VALUE OF CERTAIN MOTIVES

Kantian deontology does not require us to be impartial between our friends/family and people we don't know. While we are required to help others, we are not required to be completely impartial or maximise happiness. There is no contradiction in maxims that show partiality to some people. (And there is no contradiction in a maxim which aims to help others but not maximise happiness.) However, can Kant's theory recognise and explain the moral worth of motives involved in relationships of love and friendship?

Kant makes the motive of duty, acting out of duty, doing your duty because it is your duty, the only motive that has moral worth, and says that doing something good for someone else because you want to is morally right, but not morally good. But consider this example from Michael Stocker. Suppose a woman visits a friend in hospital. The friend thanks her. She replies, 'It was nothing, I was just doing my duty'. If her motive really is simply to do what is morally right, then her friend can object. Kant seems to say that we have to want to benefit people because it is our duty to do so, not because we like them. But surely, if I do something nice for you because I like you, that is a morally good action.

This applies as much outside relationships of partiality. I may act to help a stranger, moved by kindness, sympathy and compassion. My action may well be in accordance with duty, but because I am motivated by my feelings and not by a concern to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, Kant would say that my action has no moral worth. My feelings are instrumentally valuable, because they motivate me to act in accordance with duty. But they are not themselves morally valuable. And yet much of the time, we do good things because we feel warmly towards the people we benefit. We can object that putting the motive of duty above feelings as the source of good action is somehow inhuman.

Kant can respond that he is not trying to stop us from being motivated by our feelings. His point is that, when we are choosing what to do, how we feel should not be as important as what it is morally right to do. Our feelings shouldn't decide the matter, our motive to do what is morally right should. But when you do something for a friend, should you think 'I'll do this because he is my friend; and it is morally right to do so'? Consider this example from Bernard Williams. Suppose a man is in a boating accident with both his wife and a stranger. Neither can swim, and he can only rescue one. We might think that he should simply rescue his wife. But if he thinks, 'She's my wife and it is morally permissible that I rescue her', this seems to miss the particular importance that being married has, including its moral importance. The man has 'one thought too many', and we (and his wife!) can object to his way of thinking about what to do. His commitment to his wife means that he should stop at 'She's my wife'.

Perhaps Kant can reply that you don't actually need to have such a thought. His theory, after all, is how we can tell whether something is right or wrong, not how we should actually think all the time. So we can say that to be morally good, you only need to be willing to refuse to help your friend if that involved doing something morally wrong. And likewise for the man and his wife.