

25. DEONTOLOGY

Utilitarianism emphasizes an act's consequences—what comes after it. The deontological approach emphasizes what comes before the act—the basis on which it is performed. The most prominent deontologist is Kant (1722-1804). At the core of Kant's view is a principle known as the Categorical Imperative (CI), which he formulates in not obviously equivalent ways:

1st formulation: Act only in accordance with that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

2nd formulation: 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.

The connection is (something like!) this. What brings value into the world is righteous acts of will, as defined by the 1st Formulation. The authors of these acts are the ultimate ground and precondition of all value. The ground of all value has got to be seen as valuable in itself, not through its relation to other things; rather other things derive from their value from it—from people acting rightly. To treat another person as valuable only in relation to some further end thus gets things exactly backwards.

Kant's two formulations correspond roughly to two deeply held ideas about morality:

You are No Exception Principle: "...in whatever you do, you should act for reasons that could serve as acceptable reasons for everyone." (Sayre-McCord, 5)

and

Respect for Persons Principle: In all action one should respect others as sources of value and never merely as an instrument for one's own purposes. (Sayre-McCord, 7)

Those who do precisely what they object to in others are rightly reviled as hypocrites. You are behaving properly only if you would want others similarly situated to do the same thing. Not making an exception of yourself is the profoundest way of showing respect for others.

Cheating on an exam could be the right thing to do, by utilitarian standards. Likewise removing a pollution control device from your car; or stealing your roommate's mail. What would Kant say? In each case the agent's goals could not be achieved if everyone else acted the same way; so the success of the action depends on making a distinction between what "I myself" do and what others do. But making oneself an exception this way seems wrong. According to Kant it is more than wrong; it amounts to a sort of inconsistency.

Kant thinks that in any intentional action, one is acting on a principle of some kind. Two shopkeepers are both committed to giving correct change. They act, however, on different principles, or "maxims":

Ms. Practical: When I can gain a good reputation by giving correct change, I shall do so.

Mr. Righteous: When I owe someone money, I shall give it to them, so I shall give correct change.

Both maxims have the same form: Whenever I am _____, I shall _____. The generalized form is: Whenever one is _____, he/she shall _____.

Our evaluation of my action, on Kant's view, will depend on the maxim guiding the action.

CI1: My act is morally right iff I willingly would (alternatively: consistently could) lay down the generalized form of the maxim as a universal law.

Some maxims fail the test: Whenever someone doesn't feel like studying, he/she shall copy his/her neighbor's work. If we are all planning to copy off each other, there will be no work to copy!

CI attempts to ground the right/wrong distinction in reason or rationality; bad people are in some sense being unreasonable. Morality is not grounded in God's will, or the moral codes of particular cultures. It's grounded in reason itself, and its demands can be discovered through rational reflection.

Two criticisms of this approach, at least as interpreted by CI1. i) Sometimes one can reformulate the maxim so that the "inconsistency" disappears, e.g.,

Whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, and everyone else is well prepared, and one can do it without being caught, go ahead and copy one's neighbor's work.

ii) Sometimes a maxim fails the test for non-moral reasons. I might decide to withdraw all my money when the price of gold hits \$500. It would be a disaster if everyone did this. But it's not wrong to withdraw money from the bank.

CI2: Right actions are actions guided by the intention to treat persons as ends, not mere means; one shouldn't involve others in schemes to which they would not (rationally?) consent. (Onora O'Neill)

You rely on the cashier when you buy things; you rely on professors to teach you things. But there is consent—we aren't deceived or coerced into serving your needs. Cheating on the final is wrong because you would be using me (or your TA) as a mere means to a good grade: you would be involving us in a scheme that we would not consent to.

Comparison of the Kantian view with utilitarianism. Are these plusses or minuses?

The focus of evaluation is the maxim or principle implicit in the act, not the results. A good action might have bad results and vice versa. Your attempt to save a drowning child might cause his death instead.

Acts cannot be rank-ordered on a one-dimensional rightness scale.

Your obligations are always to particular other people, not to humanity as such. Humanity is not a person, so you can't owe it anything or respect it or benefit it.

The theory works well when information is scarce. Utilitarian calculations require a lot of data in order to make plausible predictions about consequences. But it is usually clear enough when an action would have you using another as a mere means.

Questions

1. Is CI2's construal of what it is to treat someone as a "mere means" adequate? Aren't there cases in which someone would consent, but they are still being exploited? Can people consent to being treated as a mere means?
2. What counts as an "inconsistency," when we say a certain maxim can't be consistently willed in its general form. Is it that I wouldn't want everyone to follow it? Or it's in principle impossible that everyone follow it? What if it's just impossible, or undesirable, under current conditions that everyone follow it?
3. What does the first formulation say about famine relief? When I can enjoy myself through excessive consumption, I shall, even when a far-away minority is starving. Where's the inconsistency? Is it that the maxim as a matter of fact cannot be generalized, even if one could consistently will it? In conditions of scarcity, not everyone can excessively consume. Would a Kantian think it's our moral duty to work towards a more equitable distribution of resources?

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.00 Problems in Philosophy
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.