



# Kant and Critical Philosophy

Week 8. 7<sup>th</sup> November 2016  
Reason and Morality

# Class recap

- Understand the distinction between phenomena and noumena
- Recognise why reason is compelled to speculate on areas beyond possible experience, and Kant's criticism of this in the Dialectic
- Grasp what Kant means by the 'regulative' function of ideas
- Discuss the problems faced by reason in the Paralogisms and Antinomies, and Kant's solution

# Class aims

- Recap on the arguments about noumena, ideas and freedom which end the CPR
- Understand what Kant means by practical reason
- Grasp why Kant's morality can be called 'Copernican'
- Introduce the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and its key claim that moral agency and freedom are one
- Discuss categorical and hypothetical imperatives
- Understand why Kant's morality comes under 'deontology', and the importance of a good will

# Recap: noumena and phenomena

- Knowledge relies on sense-experience for its content, but the categories are able to reach beyond the senses
- Noumena are 'beings of understanding', given solely to the understanding without sensibility
- As appearances (or phenomena) are nothing in themselves, there must be something within it that corresponds to reality – the thing in itself
- Noumena are a 'boundary concept': we can only know them in a negative sense as non-sensible intuitions (the *negative* definition)
- Yet whilst we cannot know or form concepts of them, we can *think* them of them as things in themselves.
- Kant uses the new faculty of Reason and Ideas to explain how...

## Recap: ideas are regulative

- Rationalist philosophers commit the 'transcendental illusion' when they suppose we can have conceptual knowledge of things in themselves, e.g. God, free will, the immortality of the soul
- Yet the understanding is compelled to make judgements about things beyond possible experience
- This is done by the faculty of reason. It asks *why* of the judgements of the understanding and aims to bring them under unified principles
- Reason infers, moving from given objects to the conditions on which they derive, ultimately arriving at the 'unconditioned'
- The concepts of Reason are called 'Ideas', which consider experience as a whole totality

# Recap: reason and ideas

- Although the object of an idea is conceivable – we can *think* it – we cannot claim to *know* it
- Ideas are not constitutive of knowledge; instead they are *regulative* principles which guide the understanding in systematising its experience and making principled judgements
- Ideas give unity to knowledge, with reason interconnecting our judgements
- It does this by providing rules or imperatives, ‘maxims’ (A666/B694), simplifying and systematising the understanding to arrive at a ‘whole of knowledge’ (A645/B673), a ‘system connected according to necessary laws’, ultimately founded on a single principle

# Recap: Ideas and their errors

Transcendental ideas come under three classes (A334-5/B391-2):

1. ***The Soul*** (rational psychology – unity of the thinking subject)
2. ***The World*** (rational cosmology – unity of all appearances)
3. ***God*** (rational theology – unity of all objects of thought in general)

Dialectical inference asserts the objective reality of these Ideas.

It results in three specific illusions:

1. the *transcendental paralogism* (soul)
2. the *antinomy of pure reason* (world)
3. the *ideal of pure reason* (God). These are explored over the Dialectic.

# Recap: paralogisms and antinomies

- The Paralogisms refute the *cogito*: we cannot know the self directly and in itself: all we can prove is the subject 'I think', not its identity
- The Antinomies refute four instances where empirical concepts are applied to things in themselves: time and space; atoms; free will; God
- In proving that both a positive and negative knowledge claim about them succeed, he demonstrates the limits of the ideas and of pure reason – they can think but cannot know their objects
- Yet whilst free will is inexplicable for critical reason, as an idea it remains indispensable for guiding the understanding
- Because we can conceive of ourselves as doing things guided by principles or reason, we can suppose a separate form of causality to what we observe in nature – an intelligible causality, in which we are morally responsible



# Recap: Antinomies

1. The world has a beginning in time and a limit in space

*A: The world has no beginning and is unlimited in space.*

2. All composite substances are made up of indivisible atoms

*A: No such thing as atoms, everything is infinitely divisible.*

3. As well as universal causality there is free will (spontaneity)

*A. No free will, everything is determined by laws of causality.*

4. A necessary being is either part of or cause of the world

*A. No necessary being is either the cause or ground of the world.*

# The task of morality

- The three questions of the Canon (A804-5/B832-3):
  1. What can I know?
  2. What ought I to do?
  3. What may I hope?
- Task: provide a new basis for morality consistent with metaphysics.
- 'I found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' (B xxx)
- *Take a look at the excerpts from the Canon and in groups discuss:*
  - *what does Kant mean by the 'moral law'? (A806/B834)*
  - *What does Kant mean by the 'ideal of the highest good' (A811/B839)*

# Difficulties for Kantian morality

- This will be difficult given that he has restricted a) the reach of ideas to being merely regulative, and b) knowledge to possible experience.
- Morality cannot depend on a knowledge of God, because the *CPR* rules that such noumenal knowledge is impossible
- In Kant's Newtonian universe of space, time and categories, there is seemingly little place for moral truths
- Because we are determined by natural causality, any kind of thought of ourselves acting *teleologically*, with moral purpose, is undermined
- Instead it would seem that the best we can do is construct relativistic moral beliefs out of natural, empirical facts, which are non-normative

# A Copernicus in ethics?

- Previous philosophers erred in attempting to locate morality in transcendental ideas like God, or in empirical accounts of nature
- Kant's solution to morality mirrors that of cognition: he re-locates the problem in the subject
- Our experiences provide us with incentives to act, natural inclinations which we follow in our everyday lives
- Were morality based simply on this, Kant could agree with Hume: *reason is the slave of the passions*
- But reason guides us to pursue ends separate from our natural, day-to-day inclinations (remember his rescue of free will earlier?)

# Introducing Practical Reason

- The “Canon of Pure Reason” begins its rescue: the legitimate use of pure reason concerns practical reason
- *Practical reason* is concerned with how the world *ought to be*
- It is out of ‘practical interest’ (A798/B826) that reason always strives for knowledge of the highest ends of free will, the immortal soul, and God
- Through practical reason we exercise our freedom, determining for ourselves and acting autonomously in pursuit of the highest good
- From experience, we discover we can be motivated not simply by animal or natural desires through more powerful representations
- These are ‘laws of freedom’ as opposed to ‘laws of nature’ (A802/B830)
- These imperatives concern ‘what ought to happen’, and arise from reason

# The importance of *ought*

- Reason observes a universal *moral law* in which we derive duties or maxims that command how to act in certain situations
- *Ought implies can*: since the principles of practical reason ‘command that these actions ought to happen, they must also be able to happen ... the principles of pure reason have objective reality in their practical use, that is, in the moral use’ (A807/B836)
- Through this, Kant introduces the importance of a universal, a priori moral law, derived from the autonomy of a rational being in general. It is *a priori* because we are obligated to follow it, regardless of self-interest or desire
- ‘Do that through which you will become worthy to be happy’ (A809/B837)
- This moral law presents a universal moral world, a ‘unity of ends’, in which rational beings follow universal moral maxims presented by reason (i.e. God and a future life)
- Our freedom consists in freely and actively following the moral law

## *Critique of Practical Reason (1788)*

- Kant's case for morality is brief in the *CPR*, and he returns to it in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and later *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797)
- He now places greater power in human beings to act as moral agents
- To do this, he places priority on the will: good moral judgements stem not from their consequences, but from a good will to do them
- This stems from a person's obedience to the moral law within them
- This kind of moral view is sometimes called *deontology*, where moral choices are not measured by their consequences or effects (*consequentialism*), but by how they adhere to duties, or moral laws
- The deontologist first determines what is right, then acts from that

# Morality is freedom

- For the right action to be possible, I must be free to perform it
- Reason guides us to act morally, through conceiving ourselves as free
- This relies on conceiving ourselves in a twofold 'paradoxical' way: 'to make oneself as subject of freedom a noumenon but at the same time, with regard to nature, a phenomenon in one's own empirical consciousness' (CPrP 5:6)
- The moral agent 'judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown' (5:30)
- An action is free where it is mine – and I am free whenever I act, self-determining my reason...
- If I cannot act with free will e.g. ignorance or coercion, I cannot be held morally responsible
- Thus freedom comes through our obedience to reason, which enables us to act morally



# Who is acting morally?

*A high-street cash machine begins discharging £20 notes at random. Who of the following acts morally and reasonably, according to Kant?*

1. Joanna first passes the machine. She's tempted, but doesn't want to get into any trouble with the police or bank, and hurries off.
2. Steve follows. He has just come from the foodbank and hasn't enough to heat up his flat for his children. He takes £20 but no more.
3. Alan watches Steve take the money. He fills a pocket with £100 and heads into the bookies, calling it a lucky day.
4. Misha gets a text from Alan. She decides that she will not take any money, because stealing is always wrong.

# Kant's morality: 3 key concepts

- The categorical imperative
- The good will
- The highest good

# Hypothetical imperatives

- ‘If you want this, do that...’
- Hypothetical imperatives are conditional, non-objective motives that compel us to act, usually to satisfy a desire or inclination
- Because they are determined by desires and external causes, hypothetical imperatives do not result in freedom.
- Indeed, we give up our true freedom in letting ourselves be determined by them
- Kant instead wants to consider what is objective, universalisable, and which relate to moral ends themselves, rather than conditions

# The categorical imperative

- The moral law is universal and a priori, bounding all rational agents. Kant calls this the *categorical imperative*, true in all circumstances
- It comes in three forms:
  1. Moral rules must be universalisable:  
*Do as you would (will others) be done by...*
  2. Moral rules must respect human beings  
*Never treat others as a means to an end...*
  3. Act as though you were the legislator of moral laws  
*Be an example to others...*

# CI 1. Moral rules must be universalisable

- What if everyone in all times and in all places were to act the same as me?
- CI: Always act in such a way that you could will your action to become a universal moral law for all others
- The test for a moral maxim is whether you are willing for it to be applied to everyone else – if not, it is not a valid moral rule
- E.g. *It is OK for me to tell the occasional lie if it gets me out of trouble*

*How do you think Kant will respond?*

- Kant rejects this: one should never tell lies or break promises if one is not willing to allow others to do the same to you, which a rational being would not accept, for then the value of honesty and promises would collapse

## CI 2. Moral rules must respect human beings

- To have values as a rational being, we must respect the existence of other rational beings too
- All human beings should be treated as free and equal members of a shared moral community
- People should be treated as worthwhile, as ends in themselves, rather than as means for one to get one's own way
- It is therefore not acceptable to use, deceive, injure or coerce others, regardless of the 'greater good' it might apparently serve

*Over to you: what do you think the strengths and weaknesses are of Kant's moral approach so far?*

## 2. The good will

- The only good reason for doing the right thing is because it is the right thing to do
- When we act according to our duty, then we have acted rightly
- ‘It is impossible to conceive anything in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without limitation, save only a good will.’  
From *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- For Kant, what counts is the will or motivation in an action, not its consequences, seen or unforeseen

### 3. The Highest Good

- Practical reason produces an idea of the world in terms of ought, an ideal world
- The sum of all moral duties is to pursue the highest good, whose achievement also necessitates a belief in the immortality of the soul and God
- These postulates of pure practical reason, and without them we wouldn't be able to believe
- The highest good indicates the end to which all moral reasoning proceeds – a 'special point of reference for the unification of all ends'



### 3. The Highest Good

- We require God to believe in the highest good and the interconnection between virtue and happiness
- God 'contains the ground of this connection, namely the exact correspondence of happiness with morality' (5:125)
- 'virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the highest good of a possible world' (5:110)
- The highest good is the achievement of an 'ethical community', self-determined by reason

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# Reading for next week

- Next week we turn to some more specific arguments of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.
- We will focus on an excerpt from the final four pages, including its famous conclusion
- The text is up on the VLE: Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 127-130
- To familiarise yourself with the arguments of the work, there are a number of good summaries of Kant's ethics e.g. the Introduction to the second *Critique* by Andrews Reath, or the *Cambridge Companion* (see the VLE)
- From the Critique itself, I recommend reading the Preface, Introduction, and Theorems III and IV from Book I, "The Analytic of Pure Reason" (pp. 3-13, 24-37) – though you are welcome to read further