



Kant and Critical Philosophy

Week 9. 14th November 2016
Duties and Imperatives

Class recap

- Noumena, reason and the regulative role of ideas
- Kant's argument for practical reason in the "Canon of Pure Reason"
- A moral Copernicus, restoring attention to the moral subject: not *what is good*, but *what is it for the subject to be good*
- The *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and its key claim that moral agency and freedom are one
- Categorical and hypothetical imperatives
- The overarching importance of a good will

Class aims

- Explore the *Critique of Practical Reason's* arguments for the good will, the categorical imperative and the highest good
- Evaluate Kant's duty-based morality (deontology) in contrast with utilitarianism and virtue-based forms
- Discuss the extent to which Kant is consistently systematic across the first and second *Critiques*

Recap: Three questions for critical philosophy

The three questions of the Canon of Pure Reason (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.
 - Kant feels confident he has answered the first question in the CPR, with his account of speculative reason
 - Last week we turned to Kant's discussion of the ought...

What can I know? Transcendental Idealism

- Time and space are...

... not mind-independent features of reality, but forms of intuition that specifically structure human experience

- This relates to noumena and phenomena, in that...

... the structure necessitates a distinction between objects as they appear to us (phenomena) and as they are in themselves, considered apart from the conditions in which they appear (noumena)

- Knowledge is synthetic, involving...

... *intuitions* (content of particular things, given to us through our sensibility) and *concepts* (general forms, originating in the spontaneous activity of the understanding), brought together by the *schema*

What can I know? Transcendental Idealism

- Thus knowledge is limited to objects in space/time, not things-in-themselves
- A priori knowledge claims of transcendental ideas are always illusory, i.e. of God, the soul or free will, because they are beyond all possible experience...
- But as Kant argued last week, whilst we cannot claim critical knowledge of them, we are able to *think* them, through the ideas produced by our faculty of reason
- Transcendental ideas come under three classes: the soul, world, and God, with their own specific illusions
- Yet whilst we cannot know the ideas transcendently, we can think them, and ideas serve to regulate and unify our understanding

Recap: Kant's argument for freedom

- Remember the argument for 'intelligible causality' last week...?
- 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)

‘the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’



‘the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’

- Take a look at the excerpt from the Conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*...
- In groups of two or three, discuss the following questions:
- *How is Kant able to connect both the ‘starry heavens’ and the ‘moral law’ with the consciousness of his existence?*
- *Why does the moral law raise him above the level of animality and the world of sensibility?*
- *What problems face his conclusions?*

Use the first paragraph and what you recall from the first *Critique* when discussing your thoughts

Kant's argument for freedom

- The task set out in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is inverse to the *Critique of Pure Reason*:
- Whereas the first *Critique* argued that we cannot apply pure reason constitutively in a speculative sense....
- The second *Critique* argues that we can apply practical reason constitutively in morality, against Empiricist/Sceptic objections
- Whilst we cannot understand the pure application of practical reason a priori, this application must be possible since the moral law is given to us in consciousness as 'the sole fact of pure reason' (5:31)
- It is through obedience to the moral law that our freedom consists
- So what exactly is this moral law?

What ought I to do? The moral law

- Human understanding is the source of the general laws of nature that structure all experience, and human reason gives itself the moral law
- Freedom is the condition of the moral law, and the moral law is the condition under which we first become aware of freedom:
‘whereas freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom’ (5:4 fn)
- 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)
- For Kant, the ought should be measured in terms of the *good will*
- Moral actions should not be measured by their consequences, but by the moral duty which the rational agent freely obeyed, in acting well

'Duty! Sublime and mighty name that embraces nothing charming or insinuating but requires submission, and yet does not seek to move the will by threatening anything that would arouse natural aversion or terror in the mind but only holds forth a law that of itself finds entry into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly work against it; what origin is there worthy of you, and where is to be found the root of your noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations, descent from which is the indispensable condition of that worth which human beings alone can give themselves?' (5:86)

Kant's deontology

- Kant's ethics is one based on duty – a *deontology*
- 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
- Whereas pursuit of the laws of nature will cause us happiness, it is by dutifully obeying the moral law within us that human beings become 'worthy' of happiness
- 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
- In acting morally, one acts autonomously or freely: one is the cause of one's own actions

Morality is freedom

- Practical reason is therefore concerned with ‘the determining grounds of the will’ (5:15) – with the freedom of the will in acting as an intelligent causal agent of its own activity, guided by the moral law
- Thus the moral law is universal, but comes from within: we *legislate* for ourselves, and nothing apart from internal reason (including custom or religious belief) compels us to act in obedience to the rule
- We must conceive 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’ (5:6)
- We are only truly free when we choose to obey the moral law given to us by reason
- This is in contrast to desires and inclinations which cause us to act in ways where we are not truly autonomous – *hypothetical imperatives*

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, because his mother told him never to steal.
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.
5. Roger passes and notices the machine. He fills a rucksack with £1000, which he later deposits in the local church's donation box for Syrian refugees.

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

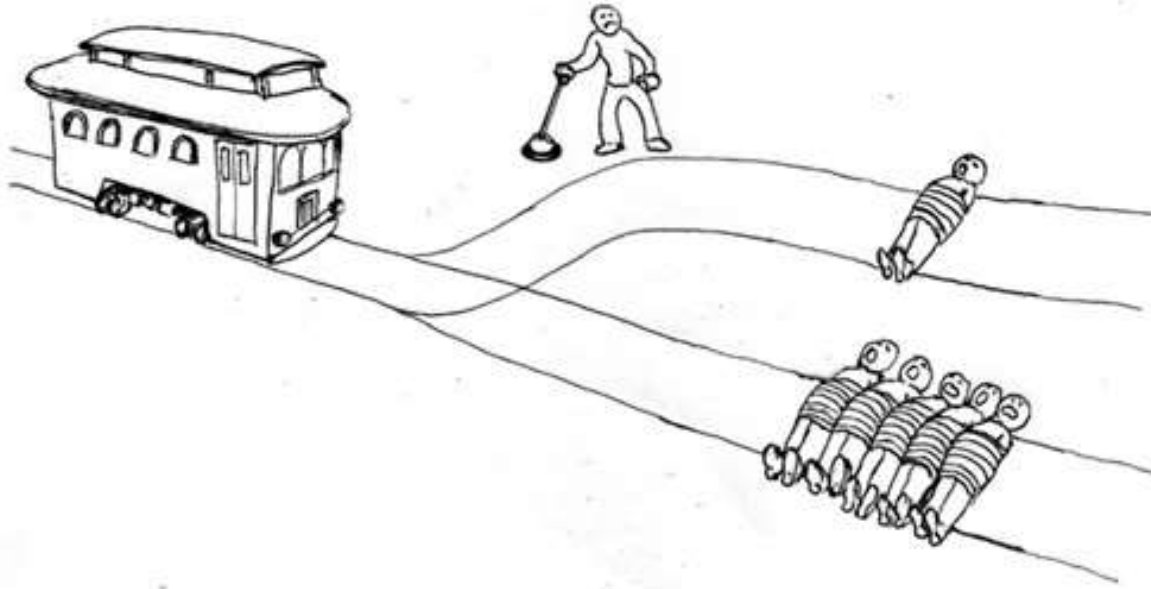
- We require God to believe in the highest good and the interconnection between virtue and happiness
- God 'contains the ground of this connection, namely the exact correspondence of happiness with morality' (5:125)
- 'virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, 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

Kant's deontological ethics

- Deontologists judge the action itself to be right or wrong, based on universal moral laws. People should be treated as ends, not means
 - Consequentialists, by contrast, evaluate it based on the result – does it result in happiness or some kind of 'good'? Then even the motivation, cause or nature of the action may not matter...
 - Discuss how Kant might respond to animal testing in the following two scenarios...
1. Lab A injects 10,000 mice with Ebola, in order to test a new vaccine...
 2. Lab B injects 10,000 mice with DermaLift, a cosmetic product which may delay the physical effects of ageing...

Animal testing – verdict in

- Whilst Kant recognises animal pain, we do not owe them any moral duty, because they are merely ‘things’.
- They lack self-consciousness and so serve as a means to an end for human beings
- Yet Kant commends kindness towards animals, because it enables us to cultivate kindness towards our fellow humans



You are walking through the countryside when you notice that a runaway trolley is heading down a track towards five captives who have been tied to the track, are unable to move and will all die if the trolley continues on its current course. The only way to save the five captives is to pull a lever by the side of the track which moves the trolley onto a different course where there is a single captive who is tied up, unable to move and who will die if the trolley runs over them.

In groups, discuss: What would Kant do? And what would you do?

Trolley problem: other options

- A deontological view would commit us to killing five people to save one. By participating in the action one becomes responsible for killing a person, whereas no action involves no active responsibility.
- A utilitarian would instead weigh up the consequences. Guided by the principle of the greatest happiness, they would likely choose to kill one person to save the other five.
- One version of the trolley problem includes throwing a fat person onto the line in the expectation it will stop the train...
- A virtue ethicist like Aristotle might switch the track to save five, but may not push the person onto the line, as this may not even work, and could result in six deaths...
- In reality moral dilemmas are far more complex, indecisive and composite than this

Round-up: Is morality freedom?

- 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, I cannot be held morally responsible
e.g. a 2 year old's ignorance that eating sweets in the shop is stealing, or a person tortured into giving up secrets
- Thus freedom comes through our obedience to reason, which enables us to act morally
- 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)

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Reading for next week

- Next week we turn to the *Critique of Pure Judgement*
- We will focus on the arguments in §1-§9, and §29-§38, regarding beauty and the sublime
- In class we will discuss an excerpt from §32-§33
- Recommended translation:
Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- Recommended secondary reading: “Kant’s Aesthetics and Teleology”, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics>, section 2.