Foundations of Morality

Kant – *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*
Ethics

• What is right and wrong?

• How do we know whether something is right or wrong?

• What is it that makes something right or wrong?
Ethics

• What makes something right or wrong?
• Different answers:
  – God decides what is right and wrong (divine ethics).
  – What is right is what one’s society decides is right. (cultural relativism).
  – Something is right if it produces pleasure (hedonism).
  – Right and wrong are universal principles of rational human conduct. (Kant)
Ethics

• Methodology:
• In science, we propose general laws that will yield predictions for observable phenomena. A theory is confirmed insofar as it accounts for the data.
• In ethics, we propose general laws that “predict” whether an action is right or wrong. A theory is confirmed insofar as it agrees with our basic ethical judgments.
Ethics

• Methodology:
• In science, we test hypotheses by performing controlled experiments.
• We cannot perform genuine “experiments” (ethical dilemmas) in ethics. So what are the data?
• Roughly speaking... our ethical judgments or intuitions.
Kantian Ethics

- Consequentialism vs. anti-consequentialism: When we judge someone’s actions, do we care more about their intentions or the outcome of the act?
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• Kant: Right and wrong are universal principles of rational human conduct.
• How do we know what is right or wrong?
• Kant: We use our rational faculty.
• Rightness is action that is done in accordance with one’s duty.
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• Rightness consists in actions done for the right reasons – from a sense of duty.
• Moral actions are valuable in themselves, and cannot be sacrificed to obtain some material object.
• Doing the “right thing” for the wrong reason does not result in a good moral deed.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• What is an imperative?
• An imperative is a command.
  – *Shut the door!*
  – *If you want to do well, you should study hard.*
  – *If you’re the head of a company, you should be fair to your employees.*
• Imperatives tell you what you *must do.*
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

- Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives
- A hypothetical is a statement that begins with an *if*...
- A hypothetical imperative is a command that begins with an *if*... It tells you what you must do *if* you want to achieve some end or *if* you are in a certain position or role.
- It does not apply to all people and circumstances, but is *restricted* in application.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

- Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives

- Hypothetical Imperatives:
  - If you want some soda, you should go to the store.
  - If you want to be a doctor, you should study medicine.
  - If you want to steal something, you should make sure you don’t get caught.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives
• Categorical statements are ones that apply to everything. A categorical imperative is a command that applies to everyone at all times.
• Following a categorical imperative is good in itself, not for the sake of something else.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• Hypothetical vs. Categorical Imperatives
• Categorical imperatives:
  – Treat all human beings with respect.
  – Do not tell lies.
  – Do not take another person’s life.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

“If the action is good only as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; but if it is thought of as good in itself, and hence as necessary in a will which of itself conforms to reason as the principle of this will, the imperative is categorical.”
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• The Categorical Imperative:
  “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

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• In other words: only act in such a way that you could will that your act be something that everyone does.

• Do not act as though you are an exception to universal moral standards.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• An action can violate the Categorical Imperative in two ways:
  – Willing that the act be a universal law results in a contradiction or incoherence in the act itself.
  – Willing that the act be a universal law results in contradiction with the will.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• What are the grounds of our laws of practice?
• We need to find something that is valuable *in itself*. 
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• What are the grounds of our laws of practice?
• We need to find something that is valuable *in itself*.
• Kant: Rational beings (human beings) are ends in themselves (inherently valuable). They are not to be used as means to an end.
• Difference between “things” and “persons.”
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

• Human beings are *ends in themselves*, and so provide the grounds for other things to have value. Humans must always be treated as ends, and not as means.

• Why? Reason dictates that rational beings are inherently valuable.
Kant’s Categorical Imperative

- Kant’s “practical imperative”: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”
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• Compare: the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Kantian Ethics

• Applying the Categorical Imperative:
  • (1) Come up with a *maxim* governing your action.
  • (2) Imagine that the maxim were a universal law of human conduct.
  • (3) If this results in a contradiction, the act is unethical.
  • (4) If there is not a contradiction, but you would not desire a world in which the maxim is a universal law, the act is unethical.
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• Suicide:
• Is it morally wrong to take one’s own life?
Kantian Ethics

• Suicide:
• How does suicide conflict with the Categorical Imperative?
Kantian Ethics

• Suicide:
• How does suicide conflict with the Categorical Imperative?
• Humans are ends in themselves – one cannot use a human life as an end to obtain pleasure.
• Suicide involves taking a human life in order to avoid pain.
• This uses human life as means to an end, and violates the essential goodness of human life.
Kantian Ethics

• Lying (false promises):
  How does lying violate the Categorical Imperative?
Kantian Ethics

• Lying (false promises): How does lying violate the Categorical Imperative?

• One cannot will that everyone lie. For if everyone lied, then lies would not be taken seriously, and so would not achieve their purpose. This results in a contradiction.
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• Is it *always* wrong to lie?
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• Idleness:
  Is it wrong for someone with great natural talents to choose a life of pleasure and idleness rather than developing those talents to achieve greater ends?
Kantian Ethics

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  Is it wrong for someone with great natural talents to choose a life of pleasure and idleness rather than developing those talents to achieve greater ends?

• Human life is an end in itself, and so it is right to always seek to enhance it.

• One must not simply refrain from conflicting with human beings as ends; one must further that end.
Kantian Ethics

• Egotism:
  Are we obligated to help people in need if we have the means to do so?
Kantian Ethics

• Egotism: Are we obligated to help people in need if we have the means to do so?

• Treating all human beings as ends in themselves requires me to value all human life equally – not my own over other people’s.

• “For the ends of any person, who is an end in himself, must as far as possible also be my end, if that conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect on me.”
Kantian Ethics

• Is Kant’s view plausible?
• Can it really be applied?
• Are there any problems with it?