Normative Ethics

Lecture 6
Kantian ethics

§1. Permissible harm

*Weak non-consequentialism*…

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is *at least partly* determined by something other than the quantity of good that it produces compared to other actions open to the agent.

*Strong non-consequentialism*…

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is *wholly* determined by something other than the quantity of good that it produces compared to other actions open to the agent.

*The Weak Principle of Permissible Harm*…

The fact that an action harms a person counts more strongly against an action if the harm results merely from a means to the greater good than if it results from the greater good/from the non-causal flipside of the greater good…

*The Strong Principle of Permissible Harm*…

The fact that an action harms a person counts *decisively* against an action if the harm results merely from a means to the greater good as opposed to resulting from the greater good/from the non-causal flipside of the greater good…

Thomas Hurka’s tactical bomber case…

§2. Kantian absolutism

*Absolutist non-consequentialism*…

Some of the things that count towards an action’s being morally obligatory other than the quantity of good that it produces count *decisively*…
“Truthfulness in statements that one cannot avoid is a human being’s duty to everyone… however great the disadvantage to him or to another that may result from it.”

*(Supposed Right to Lie, p.612)*

If it is always morally obligatory to tell the truth then it is morally obligatory to tell the would-be murderer where his enemy is.

It is not morally obligatory to tell the would-be murderer where his enemy is.

It is not always morally obligatory to tell the truth.

§3. Hypothetical imperatives

What is an imperative…?

It is a statement of the form: ‘…you ought to φ…’

When is an imperative hypothetical…?

When there is an implicit condition: ‘…you ought to φ if you want to achieve X…’

It is true of everyone who wants to be a professional violinist that they ought to do plenty of practice…

It is true of every human being that they ought to do plenty of exercise…

When is an imperative categorical…?

When there is no implicit condition: ‘…you ought to φ regardless of what you want to achieve…’

It is true of every rational being that they ought to tell the truth…

Kant thinks that the moral law is a categorical imperative…

§4. The categorical imperative

‘There is… only a single categorical imperative and it is this… *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*.’

*(Groundwork, p.73)*

Under what conditions can I will that the maxim of my maxim become a universal law…?
Some actions are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature... far less could one will that it should become such."

*(Groundwork, p.75)*

In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found... but it is still impossible to will that their maxim be raised to the universality of a law of nature because such a will would contradict itself.'

*(Groundwork, p.75)*

Maxim 1...

"...when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know this will never happen" *(Groundwork, p.74)*

"...the universality of a law that everyone, when he believes himself to be in need, could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it... would make the promise and the end one might have in itself impossible... since no one would believe what was promised him but would laugh at all such expressions as vain pretenses.'

*(Groundwork, p.74)*

It is morally permissible to act on a given maxim only if there is a possible world in which everybody acts on this maxim.

There is no possible world in which everybody acts on the maxim: I will break my promises if it is in my interest to do so.

It is not morally permissible to act on the maxim: I will break my promises if it is in my interest to do so.

Maxim 2...

"From self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness.'

*(Groundwork, p.74)*

"...a nature whose law it would be to destroy life itself by means of the same feeling whose destination is to impel toward the furtherance of life would contradict itself...’

*(Groundwork, p.74)*
Kant thinks that there are certain goals that we are rationally required to set ourselves… namely our own moral perfection and the happiness of others… not our own happiness or the moral perfection of others…

Maxim 3…

T9 ‘…neglecting [our] natural gifts…’

(Groundwork, p.74)

T10 ‘…as a rational being [one] necessarily wills that all the capacities in him be developed… since they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.’

(Groundwork, p.75)

Maxim 4…

T11 ‘…let each be as happy… as he can make himself… I do not care to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in need.’

(Groundwork, p.75)

T12 ‘…a will that decided this would conflict with itself, since many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself of all the assistance he wishes for himself.’

(Groundwork, p.75)

P1 It is morally permissible to act on a given maxim only if there is a possible world in which everybody acts on this maxim.

P2 There is no possible world in which everybody acts on the maxim: I will buy clothes but never sell them.

C It is not morally permissible to act on the maxim: I will buy clothes but never sell them.

§5. Merely as a means

T13 ‘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.’

(Groundwork, p.80)

When do we use humanity merely as a means…?
T14 ‘…he whom I want to to use for my purposes by [a false] promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him, and so contain the end of this action.’

*(Groundwork, p.80)*

What circumstances undermine the possibility of agreement…?

If I *coerce* you into giving me ten pounds, then it cannot be true that you have agreed to give me ten pounds…

If I *deceive* you giving me ten pounds, then it cannot be true that you have agreed to give me ten pounds…

P1 It is never morally permissible to treat a person in a particular way if they couldn’t possibly agree to your treating them in this way.

P2 People couldn’t possibly agree to being coerced or deceived.

C It is never morally permissible to coerce or deceive a person.

T15 ‘According to the Formula of Humanity, coercion and deception are the most fundamental forms of wrongdoing to others – the roots of all evil.’

*(Christine Korsgaard, *Right to Lie*, p.333)*

T16 ‘…if we coerce or deceive others, their dissent, and so their genuine consent, is in principle ruled out.’

*(Onora O’Neill, *Between Consenting Adults*, p.59)*

**References**