Normative Ethics

Lecture 2

Kantian ethics
The plan for today...

1. Permissible harm
2. Kantian absolutism
3. Hypothetical imperatives
4. The categorical imperative
5. Merely as a means
§4. 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 \textit{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...
If I push the fat man in front of the tram, then the harm results merely from a means to the greater good...

If I divert the tram on to the branch line, then the harm is the result of its being so diverted...

...but this is just the non-causal flip side of the greater good...
Suppose a tactical bomber drops a bomb on a munitions factory...

Suppose that dropping the bomb kills a hundred civilians...

Suppose that the destruction of the factory is the greater good...

Now suppose the civilians are killed by flying pieces of the bomb...
In that case the harm was caused by a means to the greater good...

Now suppose instead that the civilians were killed by *flying pieces of the factory*...

In that case the harm was caused by the non-causal flipside of the greater good...

So the harm counts less strongly against the moral permissibility of the action...
§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...

i.e. some prima facie duties take absolute
Suppose a man runs into your house and hides in the loft in order to escape from his would-be murderer...

Suppose the would-be murderer knocks on the door and demands to know where his enemy is...
‘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)
P1  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.

P2  It is not morally obligatory to tell the would-be murderer where his enemy is.

C   It is not always morally obligatory to tell the truth.
If you tell the would-be murderer that his enemy is in your loft, and he then kills his enemy, you are not to blame...

...but if you try to deceive the would-be murderer into thinking that his enemy is hiding next door...

...and unbeknownst to you his enemy has left your loft and gone to hide next door...

...then if the would-be murderer kills his enemy, you are in fact to blame...!
§3. Hypothetical imperatives
What is an imperative...?

It is a statement of the form:

‘...you ought to $\phi$...’

When is an imperative hypothetical...?

When there is an implicit condition:

‘...you ought to $\phi$ if you want to achieve $X$...’
You ought to do plenty of practice if you want to be a professional violinist.

Is it true of everyone that they ought to do plenty of practice...?

Not everyone wants to be a professional violinist...

It is true of everyone who wants to be a professional violinist that they ought to do plenty of practice.
You ought to do plenty of exercise if you want to achieve your own happiness.

Every human being wants to achieve their own happiness.

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

Is it true of everyone 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*...’

P1 You ought to tell the truth.

C It is true of everyone that they ought to tell the truth.
Kant thinks that the *moral law* is a *categorical imperative*...

So he doesn’t think the moral law can tell us that we ought to do things *on the condition that we have some particular goal*...

We could be required of us regardless of the particular goals we have...?
§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)

Our duties not to perform these actions are narrow duties...
‘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)

Our duties not to perform these actions are wide duties...
What Kant is not saying...

An action of a given type is morally wrong if and only if...

...a general rule permitting actions of this type would decrease the total quantity of *happiness*...
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)

Kant doesn’t think we can even think this maxim as a universal law.
‘...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)
Is there a possible world in which everybody breaks their promises when it suits them...?

If everybody breaks their promises when it suits them then nobody can make a promise...

But nobody can break a promise if nobody can make a promise...
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 break my promises if it is in my interest to do so.

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

C   It is not morally permissible to act on the maxim: I will kill a person 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)

Again, Kant doesn’t think we can even *think* this maxim as a universal law...
‘...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)

Necessarily self-love motivates us to preserve our own lives...

So it is impossible for self-love to motivate us to end our own lives...
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...

There is a contradiction in the will when the universalization of a maxim would frustrate our achievement of these goals...
Maxim 3...

‘...neglecting [our] natural gifts...’ (Groundwork, p.74)

‘...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...

‘...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)

‘...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)
There are some problem cases...

What about the maxim... *I will buy clothes but never sell them*...?

If nobody is selling clothes then nobody can buy clothes...
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.
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 work for the abolition of slavery.

C It is not morally permissible to act on the maxim: I will work for the abolition of slavery.
Next week...

Virtue ethics