

A Categorical Imperative



An Introduction to Deontological Ethics

Better Consequences, Better Action?

- ❖ More specifically, the better the consequences the better the action *from a moral point of view*?
- ❖ Compare:
 - ❖ A billionaire who gives, as an act of charity, \$10K to a soup kitchen to help feed the poor. (In terms of how much it affects the billionaire, let us suppose this is the equivalent of a student giving a penny to charity.)
 - ❖ A minimum wage worker who cannot afford to donate money donates ten hours per week to help feed the poor, staffing the same kitchen supported by the billionaire.
- ❖ Let us stipulate that the \$10K does more good than the donated time, though of course that certainly also does good.
- ❖ Which is the better action from a moral point of view? Which person's actions is more morally admirable?

The Unqualified Good

- ❖ An unqualified good must be such that it is always and in every instance good; it cannot be such that it is good in some of its instances and not good in others.
 - ❖ Pleasure?
 - ❖ No, obviously not.
 - ❖ Intelligence?
 - ❖ No, it can be put to diabolical purposes.
 - ❖ Health?
 - ❖ No, a healthy person might use her health to exploit an unhealthy person in any number of ways.
 - ❖ Happiness?
 - ❖ Not obviously no, but a twisted person might use her own happiness to demean other, less happy people; she might, for instance, make them more miserable than they already are by pointing out their comparatively pathetic condition.

The Good Will

- ❖ Kant: 'A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes—because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone—that is, [it is] good in itself.' (*IPCC*, 528)
- ❖ Generally speaking, although one can make mistakes, willing the good can never be bad—for then it cannot be an instance of willing the good.

What makes a good will good?

- ❖ Basically, a good will is good when and only when it wills from a sense of duty or obligation (*Pflicht*).
 - ❖ When one acts out of inclination, one does not act from a sense of duty or obligation.
 - ❖ Most of us, in most instances, are inclined to follow the comfortable road of pursuing our self-interest.
 - ❖ Duty often redirects our attention elsewhere.
- ❖ What, then, are my duties? What am I *obliged* to do?

A Key Distinction

- ❖ Two types of obligations or imperatives:
 - ❖ Hypothetical
 - ❖ Imposed as a condition of attaining some further end (e.g. if I want to be healthy, I must exercise) or by an external authority (if I want to avoid jail, I must pay my taxes).
 - ❖ So O is a hypothetically necessary *iff* O is imposed as an external condition of the attainment (or avoidance) of some state of affairs.
 - ❖ Categorical
 - ❖ Simply obligatory—not conditioned on any further anything.
 - ❖ So O is a categorically necessary *iff* O (i) O is necessary; and (ii) O is not hypothetically necessary.

Not Even God

- ❖ Even on the assumption of God's existence and complete and magisterial authority, the force of a categorical imperative could not derive from God's will.
 1. If we are subject to a moral requirement MR due to the authority of God, then we are subject to MR only if we are antecedently obliged to be obedient to God.
 2. We cannot be antecedently obliged to be obedient to God unless we are already subject to God's authority.
 3. Yet, we cannot be subject to God's authority because we are obliged to be obedient to God *and* be obliged to be obedient to God because we are subject to God's authority.
 4. Hence, we cannot be subject to MR due to the authority of God.
- Same again *a fortiori* for any authority with less authority than the authority of God.
- In sum, any moral obligation based on an appeal to authority would be hypothetical rather than categorical.

The Source of Duty

- ❖ Any moral duty or obligation must, then, be categorical as opposed to hypothetical.
- ❖ It follows, then, that any moral duty or obligation that I have must carry its own source of duty or obligation: *any* external source would render it hypothetical.

What then is my duty?

- ❖ Two formulations of the categorical imperative:
 - ❖ The Formula of a Universal Law
 - ❖ ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ (*IPCC*, 533)
 - ❖ The Formula of Humanity
 - ❖ ‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.’ (*IPCC*, 536)

The Formula of a Universal Law I

- ❖ Note, as a preliminary, that this is not the so-called golden rule.
- ❖ The clearest case: the formulation of a universal maxim is implicated in a contradiction.
 - ❖ I will to borrow money without repaying it: yet to *borrow* money just means that I receive it intending to repay it.
 - ❖ It would be plainly irrational to will at once to borrow money and not to borrow it.
- ❖ A less clear but perhaps still compelling case: the formulation of a universal maxim is pragmatically self-undermining.
 - ❖ I will to tell you a lie in order to deceive you (perhaps to gain some advantage over you); yet to will that everyone lies always in order to deceive renders lying useless, since if everyone always lies, no-one will be deceived.
 - ❖ This seems irrational from the standpoint of practical rationality.

The Formula of a Universal Law II

- ❖ Sometimes UL seems to get things just right: a judge might knowingly sentence an innocent person to death, simply because the consequences of not doing so would be horrific.
 - ❖ This seems wrong and so rightly forbidden the the maxim of the universal law.
- ❖ Other times UL is not so obviously right: a known violent criminal asks me with evident murderous intent whether I know where his intended victim is hiding, and I do.
 - ❖ It would be odd if my good will forbad me from lying.

The Formula of Humanity I

- ❖ Here the crucial point is that I am permitted to treat others as having instrumental value, but never *only* to so treat them.
- ❖ I can treat my dentist as a means to my dental health, but only if I also treat her a person with the intrinsic value of a rational, free agent.
- ❖ This formula, then, seems rooted in our natures of rational agents.

The Formula of Humanity II

- ❖ Yet FH too has some right and some (seemingly) wrong results:
 - ❖ Right: if asked to snatch a passer-by for the sake of transplanting her healthy organs into three otherwise terminal patients, I would be treating her, objectionably, as a means only. This would plainly be a violation of her rights—as reflected in the Formula of Humanity.
 - ❖ Wrong: if I could lie to a madman with his finger on the red button of death, flattering and mollifying him so that he refrains from pressing the button, then should I not do so?
 - ❖ Would this be an instance of using him as a means only?