

Introduction to Philosophy

Tutorial 6, Week 8

Kant's ethics—Sample solutions to the tutorial worksheet

1. Kant distinguishes the idea of a categorical imperative from that of a hypothetical imperative. What is the difference between the two?

A **categorical imperative** is one to which any rational agent is subject regardless of their desires or goals—ie, if there is categorical imperative that agent A performs action ϕ , then A *ought* to ϕ , whether or not ϕ -ing promotes achievement of one of A's goals or satisfaction of one of A's desires. By contrast, an agent is subject to a **hypothetical imperative** only if they have some relevant desire or goal, and hypothetical imperatives take the form: 'If A wants to achieve some goal G, *then* A ought ϕ '. For example, 'If you want to pass the course, then you ought to attend lectures'.

2. If I ought to perform some action, ϕ , as a result of a categorical imperative, then I ought to ϕ whether or not doing so promotes achievement of one of my goals, or satisfaction of one of my desires. It seems that moral oughts have this feature, but is it *only* moral oughts that have it? Try to give two other examples of oughts that are plausibly *not* dependent on our desires.

Prudential oughts: It could be argued, though it is not uncontroversial, that we have duties to our own long-term well-being—eg to keep reasonably healthy and to plan for the future—that are not reducible either to moral oughts or to hypothetical oughts that are dependent on our desires (if we have them) that our long-term interests be served.

Epistemic oughts: It seems plausible to say that I ought to believe that, for example, the Earth is (roughly) round, and that the reason I ought believe this is something like that it is rational to believe it is *true*, based on the evidence available rather than any desires I might have. Of course, I may (and do) want my beliefs to be true, but even if I did not, then it would still be the case I *ought* to believe what the evidence makes it rational to believe. It does not seem plausible that such epistemic oughts are moral oughts.

3. One way in which Kant formulates the Categorical Imperative is as follows: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." Consider the example Rachels calls "The Case of the Inquiring Murderer." A man asks where my friend has gone, and I know that this man will kill my friend if he finds her. So I lie to the man about my friend's whereabouts. Kant suggests that in this case I must be acting according to the maxim "It is permissible to lie." Is this correct? Try to give three examples of other maxims in accordance with which I could be acting.

- (1) Never lie unless it is likely to save an innocent life.
- (2) Never lie unless it is to a murderer.
- (3) Always lie to men.

4. Rachels explains that Kant did not believe that animals have moral worth, because animals are not rational.

- What connection might there be between whether a being is rational and whether their *actions* have moral worth?

If a being does not have the fairly well-developed reasoning skills that enable them to understand the likely consequences of their actions, and decide on the basis of this understanding whether or not to perform them, then it seems at best futile to hold them *accountable* for their actions. For example, we generally would not think a dog or a very young child was accountable for their actions, and it seems to follow reasonably naturally from this that we should not therefore count their actions as morally bad (or morally good)—that is that we should not see their actions as having moral worth.

- Is there a connection between whether a being can perform actions that have moral worth and whether that being *itself* has moral worth?

Whether or not an action has moral worth (ie is morally good or bad) seems to depend at least partly on

whether the agent involved can appropriately be held accountable for their actions, but it does not appear to follow that only such agents have moral worth, in the sense that we are only required to take such agents into consideration when we are deciding what we ought to do.

5. **In addition to the formulation of the Categorical Imperative given above, Kant gives at least two more:**
- **“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.”**
 - **“Act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends”**

He claims that the formulations are *equivalent*. What *could* he mean by this? Try to give three possibilities.

- (1) They all mean the same thing (though they do not appear to, so Kant probably did not mean this)
- (2) They *imply* one another (this does not seem obviously true either, though Kant sometimes speaks as though all are implied by some overarching Categorical Imperative that cannot be formulated)
- (3) They all recommend exactly the same courses of action in equivalent circumstances.

6. **It is possibly what is sometimes called the “Humanity formulation” of the Categorical 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”—that most brings out the contrast between Kant’s ethics and consequentialism.**

- **The consequences of actions might figure in deciding what is morally right even according to Kant—how might this be so?**

When deciding whether to will that a maxim become a universal law, a rational agent will consider the *consequences* of making that maxim a universal law.

- **Despite this, Kant’s ethics are definitely not consequentialist. Try to explain why this is so.**

Kant is not an **act utilitarian**—act utilitarians believe we should decide in each particular instance what course of action would maximize utility in that situation. His view looks more like **rule utilitarianism**, which says that we should act in accordance with those rules which, if universally applied, would maximize utility. Even if, however, the recommendations of rule utilitarianism and of the Categorical Imperative agreed in all circumstances—and it doesn’t seem necessary that they should—there would still be a distinction between a rule utilitarian and a Kantian. This could possibly be expressed as follows: for a rule utilitarian, what *makes* a rule good is that it would tend to produce the greatest utility, whereas for a Kantian, what *makes* a maxim good is that it can be willed (by someone with a ‘good will’) to be a universal law.

7. **Possibly one of the biggest problems with the idea that moral rules are absolute is that they can conflict. Try to give a couple of examples in which different moral obligations can require different actions.**

- (1) One example can be constructed from the ‘Case of the Inquiring Murderer’. If ‘always tell the truth’ and ‘never facilitate the murder of an innocent person’ are both absolute moral obligations, then if a murderer asks you for the whereabouts of someone with the intention of going on to kill them then (assuming that staying silent is not an option) the two obligations conflict.
- (2) Another possible candidate for a universal law is ‘always keep your promises’, and another is ‘always act so as to prevent a death in your vicinity when it is easy for you to do so’ (the latter seems a pretty lame moral principle—something stronger would appear to be defensible). If you are in a restaurant and have promised to meet a friend at 9pm, and need to leave instantly in order to get to the meeting place on time, then it is a consequence of the maxim that you ought always keep your promises that you ought to leave instantly. If, however, a fellow customer at the restaurant goes into respiratory arrest, and you are trained in first aid and can help them, then the second principle implies you ought to put your first aid training to use.
- (3) The *same* moral principle can cause conflict as well. Take ‘always keep your promises’. If, again, you have promised one friend that you would meet them at 9pm but had forgotten that appointment and also promised to meet another friend at 9pm in an entirely different place, then there is no way you can keep both promises. Of course, you probably ought not have made the second promise, but these things do happen, and once they do then we have to deal with the consequences.