

Summary of Lecture Notes on Kantian Ethics

Intention and Moral Worth of Actions

For Kant only the will is unconditionally good -- that is, good without reference to some extrinsic end. Indeed, for Kant a will could have unconditional moral worth simply in virtue of intending to do its duty regardless of whether it was able to act. For Kant, then, the will can be guided either by itself (imperatives of reason or duty) or by inclination or desire (which are extrinsic to the will). Accordingly, in any moral action, we can either be guided by reason/duty or by inclination.

Moral actions are freely chosen or deliberate actions. Hence, they are always purposive or intentional. The intention of an action is that for sake of which an action is willed. Someone gives the intention of an action when he/she answers the question: why did you perform that action.

Moral action:

Intention	Inclination/pleasure (HI)	Duty (CI)
Act from (because of)	Acting because of inclination has no moral worth because they action is done only because of subjective inclinations of pleasure.	Acting from or because of duty (because the action is intrinsically right or wrong) alone has moral worth since this the only way an action can have an objective basis
Act in conformity with	actions are morally indifferent (can be right or wrong). I might tell a lie and it is what I feel like doing	actions are always morally right, but this does not give moral worth

Another way of seeing the contrast between acting from duty/inclination or acting in conformity with duty/inclination is the following:

I did X **and** it's what I felt like doing (and it was my duty) acting in conformity with inclination/duty.

I did X **BECAUSE** it's what I desired or was inclined to do doing **OR** it was my duty)—action from inclination/duty

I acted from duty: I did X because it was my duty – I did X for the sake of itself – I did X because X is intrinsically right.

I. Hypothetical/ Categorical Imperatives:

Hypothetical Imperative commands someone to do X because of some end of consequence. It has the form:

If you are to attain end Y, then do X, or
Do X because of Y

For example, if you want to be respected by your classmates and you want to avoid losing points on an assignment, you shouldn't cheat on the assignment (prudent)

In this case, the reasons for not cheating are made contingent (relative) to certain ends extrinsic to or consequences of the action.. Eventually, we come to attaining happiness as the end for which we are commanded to perform various actions.

For Kant ethical standards can be objective or subjective.

Subjective standards amount to relativism, since they merely express what the individual prefers -- that is, what accords with the desires and inclinations of the individual. If happiness = pleasure or mere satisfaction of desire, then happiness is subjective. Hence, hypothetical imperatives provide only a subjective justification for a moral imperative; that is, they provides no objective justification at all.

Hence, to have binding force on people, moral standards must be objective or universal and rational. So, since any justification of an action in terms of what is extrinsic to the act, provides only a subjective justification; moral actions can be justified only through what is intrinsic to the act.

Moral imperatives then have a categorical form: Thou shalt do X/ not do X.

Such imperative express a duty which holds universally because the action is intrinsically right or wrong. Categorical imperative, then, justify actions in terms of themselves or the very nature of the action.

So we get the following contrasts between the imperatives:

Imperative	
Hypothetical	Categorical
Consequences	No consequences
Extrinsic features	Intrinsic features of action (acts are right/wrong by nature)
Pleasure/subjective	reason/objective

Kinds of actions and moral reasoning:

If actions are intrinsically right or wrong, then it would seem either that taking human life is always right or always wrong. An action cannot be sometimes right and sometimes wrong, because the nature of the action does not change in different situations or because of different consequences.

Yet Kant holds that capital punishment is morally justified.

He can hold this, because instead of considering taking human life simply or without qualification as the genus of an action, one can consider various kinds or species of taking human life: suicide, self-defense, capital punishment, euthanasia, etc.

One must then determine whether or not each kind of action is intrinsically right or wrong. Similarly, some characteristics might not apply to all primates (walking upright) but it might apply to all the members of some species of primate (homo sapiens).

Two Forms of Categorical Imperative:

For Kant, the general forms of the CI are the rule one follows to decide how one should act. There are two versions of the CI:

- 1) Perform only those actions that you can will as universally binding on all people at all times.
- 2) always treat people as ends in themselves and not JUST as means to an end. (moral respect for persons)

Note these two versions of the CI are a rule by which one determines whether a particular moral maxim (tell the truth; take human life) can be view as a duty.