Kant's ethics

THE BASICS

Immanuel Kant argued that moral principles could be derived from practical reason alone. We only need to understand what it is to make a decision in order to discover what decisions we should make. To understand his claim, we need to put some premises in place.

First, Kant believed that, whenever we make a decisions, we act on a maxim. Maxims are Kant's version of intentions. They are our personal principles that guide our decisions, e.g. 'to have as much fun as possible', 'to marry only someone I truly love'. All our decisions have some maxim or other behind them.

Second, morality is a set of 'laws' – rules, principles – that are the same for everyone and that apply to everyone. If this is true, it must be possible that everyone could act morally (even if it is very unlikely that they will).

From this, Kant devises a test for working out whether acting on a particular maxim is right or wrong. The test, the 'Categorical Imperative', is 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*). (An 'imperative' is just a command. The moral command is categorical because we can't take it or leave it, as we choose.) If I act on a maxim that it is impossible for everyone to act on, I must be acting immorally – because it is always possible for everyone to act morally. For example, suppose you want a gift to take to a party, but you can't afford it, so you steal it from the shop. Your maxim is something like: 'To steal something I want if I can't afford it'. This can only be the right thing to do if everyone could do it.

THE TWO TESTS

There are two different ways in which we could fail to be able to will our maxim to become universal. The first, which Kant calls a 'contradiction in conception', is if the situation in which everyone acted on that maxim is somehow self-contradictory. If we could all just help ourselves to whatever we wanted, the idea of 'owning' things would disappear. But, by definition, you can't steal something unless it belongs to someone else. Stealing presupposes that people own things. But people can only own things if they don't all go around helping themselves whenever they want. So it is logically impossible for everyone to steal things. And so stealing (at least just because one wants something) is wrong.

The second way our maxim can fail is a 'contradiction in will'. Kant's example relates to helping others. It is logically possible to universalize the maxim 'not to help others in need'. The world would not be a pleasant place, but this is not what Kant focuses on. Kant does not claim that an action is wrong because we wouldn't like the consequences if everyone did it. His test is whether we could will for our personal maxim to be a universal law, not whether we'd like the results.

Kant argues that we cannot will that no one ever help anyone else. First, a will, by definition, wills its ends (goals). Second, to truly will the ends, one must will the necessary means. And so, third, we cannot will a situation in which it would be impossible for us to achieve our ends. It is possible that the only available means to our ends, in some situations, involves the help of others. We cannot therefore will that this possibility is denied to us. So we cannot will a situation in which no one ever helps anyone else. To do so is to cease to will the necessary means to one's ends, which is effectively to cease to will any ends at all. This contradicts the very act of willing.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE IS BASED ON REASON

Kant argued that it is not just morally wrong to disobey the Categorical Imperative, it is also irrational. It must be possible for all rational animals to choose to behave rationally. So deciding to behave in a way that it is impossible for everyone to follow is irrational. As the tests show, disobeying the Categorical Imperative involves a self-contradiction. Through the Categorical Imperative, reason both determines what our duties are and gives us the means to discover them.

By why should morality be about behaving rationally? Morality is supposed to guide our actions, which it can only do if it motivates us. Kant argues that there are, ultimately, only two sources of motivation: happiness and reason. But happiness can't be the basis of morality, for two reasons.

First, what makes people happy differs from person to person. If morality was about happiness, then different people would be motivated to act in different ways. But morality is the same for everyone. A utilitarian would object that morality can be the same for everyone and be about happiness if morality is about creating the greatest happiness. Kant would respond that everyone else's happiness does not necessarily motivate me, only my own happiness does. And, in fact, utilitarians usually appeal to reason here themselves, saying that caring about other people's happiness is rational or reasonable.

Second, happiness is not always morally good. If someone is made happy by hurting others, this is no reason to say that it is morally good to hurt others. In fact, their happiness is morally bad. So we evaluate happiness by morality. That means the standard of morality must be independent of happiness.

Since morality can't be based on happiness, then it must be based on reason. This is confirmed by the characteristics that morality and rationality share. Morality is universal, the same for everyone; so is reason, says Kant. Morality and rationality are categorical; the demands to be rational and moral don't stop applying to you even if you don't care about them. Neither morality nor rationality depend on what we want. Finally, we intuitively think that morality applies to all and only rational beings, not just human beings. In Douglas Adams' *The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, Arthur Dent protests to the Vogons, aliens who are going to destroy the Earth, that what they are doing is immoral. Morality doesn't apply to beings that can't make rational choices, such as dogs and cats (pets misbehave, they don't act morally wrongly).

OBJECTIONS TO THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

In additions to the objections posed to deontology generally, Kant's theory faces the objection that the Categorical Imperative is a flawed test. First, couldn't any action be justified, as long as we phrase the maxim cleverly? In stealing the gift, I could claim that my maxim is 'To steal gifts from large shops and when there are seven letters in my name (Michael)'. Universalizing this maxim, only people with seven letters in their name would steal only gifts and only from large shops. The case would apply so rarely that there would be no general breakdown in the concept of private property. So it would be perfectly possible for this law to apply to everyone.

Kant's response is that his theory is concerned with my actual maxim, not some made-up one. It is not actually part of my choice that my name has seven letters, or perhaps even that it is a gift I steal. If I am honest with myself, I have to admit that it is a question of my taking what I want when I can't afford it. For Kant's test to work, we must be honest with ourselves about what our maxims are.

However, Kant's test delivers some strange results. Say I am a hard-working shop-assistant, who hates the work. One happy Saturday I win the lottery, and I vow 'never to sell anything to anyone again, but only ever to buy'. This is perhaps eccentric, but it doesn't seem morally wrong. But it cannot be universalized. If no one ever sold things, how could anyone buy them? It is logically impossible, which makes it wrong according to Kant's test. So perhaps it is not always wrong to do things which requires other people do something different.

Kant argues that it is not rational to act in a way that not everyone could act in. This is not means-end reasoning, but picks up on other formal features of reason (universal, categorical, independent of desires). However, some philosophers argue that Kant has wrongly taken the features of theoretical reason – reasoning about facts, science, logic and so on – as features of practical reason. Practical reason does not require us to follow a rule that everyone can follow. Instead, being irrational involves taking the wrong means to one's ends.

RESPECTING HUMANITY

Kant gave an alternative formulation of the Categorical Imperative, known as the Formula of Humanity: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'.

Kant does not say we cannot use people as a means, but that we can't use them simply as a means. We rely on other people in many ways as means to achieve our own ends, e.g. people serving me in a shop are a means to getting what I want to buy. What is important, says Kant, is that I also respect their humanity as an end in itself. By 'humanity', Kant means our practical rationality, our ability to rationally determine which ends to adopt and pursue. To treat someone's humanity simply as a means, and not also as an end, is to treat the person in a way that undermines their power of making a rational choice themselves. Coercing someone, lying to them, stealing from them, all involve not allowing them to make an informed choice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION IN MAKING MORAL DECISIONS

At the heart of deontology is the idea of the 'good will', a will that intends and chooses what is right because it is right – one's duty – to do so. To do what is morally right because it is morally right is to act from the motive of duty. Much of the time we do things just because we want to. However, if we do not care whether what we do is right or wrong, we are motivated only by what we want. But if we wouldn't do what we want to do if it were wrong, then we are, at least in part, motivated by duty. The clearest case of being motivated by duty is when we do something we don't want to do, because we feel we ought to.

Kant compares two shopkeepers, who both give the correct change to their customers. The first is honest because he is scared of being caught if he tries to cheat his customers. The second is honest because he believes it is morally right to be honest. The first shopkeeper doesn't act from duty; the second shopkeeper does. Suppose the first shopkeeper gives correct change because he wants people to like him, or even because he likes his customers. He still isn't acting from duty, because the fact that it is his duty to be honest is not his reason for being honest.

Objection

Many philosophers object to the idea that we should be so concerned with 'doing the right thing'. Surely, if I do something nice for you, like visit you in hospital, because I like you, that is also a morally good action. Much of the time we do good things because we feel warmly towards the people we benefit. Kant seems to say we have to want to benefit people because it is our duty to so, not because we like them. Some philosophers have thought putting duty above feelings in our motives is somehow inhuman.

Kant can respond that he is not trying to stop us from being motivated by our feelings. His point is that, when we are choosing what to do, how we feel should not be as important as what it is morally right to do. But when you do something for a friend, should you think 'I'll do this because he is my friend; and it is morally right to do so'? Perhaps Kant can reply that you only need to be willing to refuse to help your friend if that involved doing something morally wrong.

The objection does not apply to other deontological theories. Aquinas, for instance, argues that practical reasoning starts with what is good, and that the right response to what is good is to choose in accordance with it. To intend to do something bad, such as lie or kill, (even in order to bring about some good consequence) is not to order one's will in accordance with what is good. A good will aligns itself with what is good, and that includes friendship. If we do something out of friendship, this is morally good. We do not need an additional motive of duty to make the action morally good.