Kant’s Ethics

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a German professor who is thought by many to have been the greatest philosopher since Plato, perhaps greater. He contributed original ideas in almost all areas of philosophy. In politics, one of his ideas was what we know today as the United Nations. In astronomy, he developed the “nebular hypothesis” for explaining the origin of solar systems. He was also influential in developing the field of geography as an academic study, despite never having traveled beyond his home town.

Deontology

Moral theories like utilitarianism focus on the good or bad consequences of actions. An alternative approach to ethics concentrates on actions themselves, regardless of their effects. It has been named “deontology,” from the ancient Greek word for “duty.” Rightness and wrongness are thought to belong to action-types, like promise-keeping, or lying. In deontology, moral duties are typically expressed by rules.

*The Golden Rule* is a deontological principle of ethics. It is often stated as an imperative, or as a command: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It is found in the New Testament, and elsewhere.

Most people believe the Golden Rule is a correct moral principle because it expresses a basic fairness. Since you wouldn’t want others to lie to you, or cheat you, you shouldn’t lie or cheat.

Kant’s Critique of Utilitarianism

We understand why it makes no sense to base moral principles on something we also want to evaluate, like our society, or ourselves, or God. Kant pointed out that it is possible for people to enjoy happiness they do not deserve. If an evil person is very happy, it seems correct to judge that he does not deserve it, especially if his happiness is due to others’ suffering or unhappiness. This means that evaluating happiness makes sense, and so utilitarians seem mistaken in basing the correctness of moral principles on happiness.

Practical Reason

The source for correct moral principles suggested by Kant is called “practical reason.” It is our human ability to act for what we recognize as good reasons. Animals do not appear to act for recognized reasons. We use practical reason to evaluate actions when we say that someone’s action was “perfectly reasonable,” or that someone is being “unreasonable,” or “irrational.” To judge an action reasonable is to recommend it; to say it would be unreasonable is to discourage it. Practical reason does not appear to be something anyone cares to evaluate.

Self-Defeating Actions

It might seem to be just a matter of opinion whether an action is rational or not. But some actions, known as “self-defeating actions,” are easily recognized by everyone as irrational, without any doubt.

If your goal is $G$, and if what you do in order to achieve $G$ makes it impossible to achieve $G$, your action is *irrational*. You’re defeating your own purpose.

Kant’s idea was that at an action that is not self-defeating at the individual level could be self-defeating at the “universal level,” when everyone acts that way. If so, then that action would be *wrong*. 
**The Categorical Imperative**

Kant named the basic moral principle of his deontological theory “the categorical imperative.” Stated in the form of a moral command, as an expression of duty, it goes:

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Kant’s Categorical Imperative</strong></th>
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<td>“Act only on maxims you can will to become a universal law.”</td>
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Three ideas need to be explained in order to understand this principle of moral duty:

1. **Maxims.** A maxim is a rule-like formula for your action that expresses three things: its circumstances, the action itself, and its goal or purpose. For example:
   - *Circumstance:* When someone asks you a question…
   - *Action:* you would give an answer you believe incorrect (you would lie)…
   - *Goal:* because you want the questioner to believe something untrue.

2. **Universal Law.** A universal law is a rule (maxim) everyone can be expected to follow. If your maxim became a universal law, then everyone would be expected to act that way.

3. **Willing.** The human will is rational. Human beings cannot willfully act in ways that are irrational. They can do things that are self-defeating only if they are mistaken about what they are doing.

The basic idea behind the categorical imperative:

*An action is wrong if everyone’s being expected to act that way, in those circumstances, to achieve that goal, would be irrational.*

<table>
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<th><strong>Why lying is wrong</strong></th>
<th><strong>Why cheating on exams is wrong</strong></th>
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<td>The goal of lying is to get people to believe something false. If everyone were expected to lie (“a universal law to lie”), then no one would believe anything said, and no one’s lies could be expected to achieve their goal.</td>
<td>The goal of cheating is to get the benefit of a better grade. If everyone were expected to cheat, teachers would not give exams, or exam grades would be worthless. Either way, no one could achieve the goal of cheating.</td>
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Typically, in Kant’s ethics, we are doing something wrong when, in order to achieve our goal, we rely on everyone’s being expected *not* to act as we do. For example, we rely on everyone’s being expected to tell the truth, or to take exams fairly, because that’s the only way our lies will work, or the only way we’ll benefit by cheating. But that is like treating others in ways we wouldn’t want to be treated, which is a violation of *the golden rule.*