

Ethics and society: Kantian ethics

Philosophy 150: Handout 4

IMMANUEL KANT'S MORAL THEORY

1. A good will: To have a good will is consistently to have the right motive (to do the right thing *because* it's the right thing).
 - (A) A good will is good unconditionally. The possession of a good will is good under any circumstances.
 - (B) A good will is intrinsically good, or good in itself. It does not derive its goodness from its ability to achieve some proposed end, for example, happiness.

2. Kant's argument for the claim that happiness is not the true end
 - (1) If happiness were the true end of nature in beings with reason, then nature would not have provided us with reason as a tool for guiding us toward our ends. (This is true because instinct is better at guiding us toward happiness than reason is.)
 - (2) But nature *did* provide us with reason as a tool for guiding us toward our ends.
 - (3) Therefore, happiness is *not* the true end of nature in beings with reason.

3. The proper function of reason

Nature has endowed us with reason, and reason's proper function is not to guide us toward happiness but to "produce a good will." So, according to Kant, we are creatures who should aim, above all else, toward having a good will. (The aim of happiness is a subordinate aim.)

4. Actions that have moral worth

Kant now provides an example – the example of *duty* – that is supposed to show that a good will "always takes first place and is the condition of everything else."

| | | It is my duty to ϕ | It is <i>not</i> my duty to ϕ |
|------------------------------------|--|--|------------------------------------|
| I am inclined to ϕ | | These actions are done <i>according to</i> duty. | X |
| I am <i>not</i> inclined to ϕ | Not inclined <i>at all</i> | Compelled, coerced, etc. | X |
| | These actions are done <i>from</i> duty. | ... <i>according to</i> duty. | |

According to Kant, only actions done from duty have moral worth or moral value.

5. The priority of a good will

Kant now wonders about the relation between a good will and laws (or moral rules). Given that a good will “always takes first place,” it can’t be the case that a good will should be guided by a particular law or set of laws. This means that a good will should be guided by the notion of “law as such.” This notion includes the idea that particular laws should apply to everyone. So if it is to be good, a will must want to act according to principles, or maxims, that can be universalized. Thus, Kant says that “I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim [the subjective principle in accordance with which I act] should be a universal law.”

6. Kant’s argument for the categorical imperative

(1) Rational beings – for example, human beings – should pursue the aims of reason.

(2) The aim of reason is the production of a good will.

(3) Therefore, rational beings should pursue the production of a good will.

(4) A good will, in accordance with reason, is motivated to act only according to those maxims that it can will to be universal laws. That is, a good will, in accordance with reason, is motivated to act according to the categorical imperative.

(5) Therefore, rational beings should act according to the categorical imperative.

7. Three versions of the categorical imperative

The categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

The universal imperative of duty: “Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.”

The practical 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.”