Lecture 5: Deontology

Problems with Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism claims that the most important thing to consider when making ethical decisions is how much pain or pleasure will be produced. (Do you think that this is really the most important thing to think about for ethical decision? Before you decide whether to tell a lie or the truth, is this what you consider?) Recall Aristotle's treatment of pleasure? He says that some pleasure is good for leisure, but a life that only seeks pleasure is vulgar. Thus, the first problem with utilitarianism is the fact that it thinks that pleasure has intrinsic value.

Secondly, utilitarianism can justify ANY action, as long as it produces more pleasure than pain. (Do you think this is a problem? Why or why not?) If one person's life could save or improve the lives of many others, then utilitarianism says we should sacrifice that one life for the pleasure of many lives. One living body can give us a heart, two kidneys, two lungs, a liver and a handful of other useful body parts. Each of these can either save another person's life, or improve their quality of life drastically. So killing ONE person for these organs will save the lives of at least SIX other people. This same argument could be made for lying or stealing.

Deontology

Immanuel Kant, the founder of deontology, states: “The basis of morality does not lie in happiness or in the consequences of our action, or even in human nature; it lies in reason.”

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the most important figure in the history of philosophy since Aristotle. He transformed all areas of philosophy, from metaphysics to ethics. The basis of his ethical theory lies in human reason. Let's look more closely at Kant's quote:

“The basis of morality does not lie in happiness...
[Contrary to virtue theory.]
"or in the consequences of our action...
[Contrary to utilitarianism.]
"or even in human nature...
[Contrary to ubuntu.]
“it lies in reason.”

Kant's theory of ethics is called “deontology”. Deontology is a theory about what rules we have a duty to follow, regardless of their consequences (the word “deontology” comes from the latin word “deon”, which means duty).
What can be Good?

Remember Aristotle’s question about what the highest good is? Kant asks an even more fundamental question: What, if anything, can be good? The point is to find something that is good in itself, that doesn’t depend on anything else for its goodness.

Can the consequences of an action be good in themselves? No! Consequences of actions just follow scientific laws. If you throw a knife at you, the consequence will follow the laws of physics. The consequence itself is neither good nor bad; you have no control over them.

So, the consequences of actions can’t be good in themselves. But what about our actions? Can our actions be good in themselves? If we keep a promise, is that good in itself? If we help someone in need, is that good in itself? No: We can do good things, but for the wrong reasons. When we keep a promise because it’s to our benefit, then we are not doing good. Or when we help someone in need for our own purposes, then that is also not good in itself. This gives us a clue to what might be good: the reasons for our actions...

So the consequences of our actions are not good in themselves. (We have no control over them, they just follow the laws of nature.) And our actions are not good in themselves. (We can do a seemingly good thing for the wrong reason.) So what is good in itself?

For deontology, only our rational will can be good. Our rational will is our ability to desire some end goal. This can also be called our intentions.

Let’s expand on this idea of the rational will and goodness.

Remember the distinction between descriptive statements and prescriptive statements? What do we base our descriptions of the world on? How do we know what is the case? Experience! – We look at the world using our five senses. What do we base our prescriptions about right/wrong on? How do we know what should be the case? Reason! – We think using our ability to reason. Using our rational wills, we think about how we ought to/should act And it is only from here, from using our rational wills, can we know what is good.

Categorical Imperative
Subjective Maxim

What exactly is a WILL or an INTENTION? The will is the ability to create maxims. A maxim is a subjective principle to:

(i) act in a certain way
(ii) under a certain condition
(iii) in order to realise a certain goal or end.

For example, I could will to (i) eat an ice cream (ii) when it is hot (iii) in order to cool myself down. Or, (i) to study (ii) when it is nearly time for a test (iii) in order to gain enough knowledge to pass the test. (Make sure that you can give your own examples of subjective maxims.)

Objective Maxim

An objective maxim is a duty, a rule, a moral law. A maxim that applies to humans [beings with rational wills] at all times and under all circumstances. How do we know whether we can make a subjective maxim into a moral law, one that applies to everyone always? We just need to ask: “Can I make this maxim into a universal moral law, one that’s applicable to every rational person?”

For example, if I have a subjective maxim like this:

“I will make a promise that I don’t intend to keep whenever I think it will benefit me.”

Then it will look like this when I turn it into an objective maxim:

“Everyone ought to make a promise they don’t intend to keep whenever they think it will benefit them.”

Why can this not be a moral law? There is a contradiction: You must will that there are promises and that there are not promises.

This brings us to the rule for testing our maxims, the CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

When a maxim passes the test of the categorical imperative, then it becomes a moral law, and thus a duty.

For example, consider this maxim:

“I will ask to borrow money from my friend when I know that I won't be able to pay it back.”

Can this be a universal moral law? Think what it would be like if everyone in the world acted like this.
Absolute value of humanity

Deontology bases our moral decisions on a rational principle, called the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative applies to all rational beings. But there is an important constraint (restriction/limitation) on how we can act. We can never act in a way that harms or hinders another rational will.

Earlier we established that only a rational will can be good. This doesn’t mean that it always is good, but that it has the capacity or ability to be good. Why is it good? The rational will is good because it doesn’t depend on anything else for its value or worth; it is good in itself. This means that the rational (human) will is absolutely good, and therefore it has absolute value.

For deontology, anything with absolute value has a dignity that must always be respected, no matter what. This means that you can’t compare the life of one rational person with another, or even with a greater number of others. Absolute value of Humanity

Immanuel Kant states, “To respect persons is to regard them as absolutely, unconditionally, and incomparably valuable, to value them in themselves and not in comparison to others or insofar as they are valuable to somebody else or could be useful as a means for furthering some purpose, and to acknowledge in a practical way that their dignity imposes absolute constraints on our treatment of them.”

He thus comes up with the following formula called the “Humanity Formula" for restricting how we act:

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\text{Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means.}
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1. Does having respect for persons mean that we can’t use them as a means ever? No: we are instructed to use humans “...never merely [only] as means.”

2. What is the difference between respecting a human and respecting the “humanity” of a person? Must we always obey the wishes of every person just because they are a person? No: we must respect them as autonomous, responsible moral agents.

3. What is exactly meant by “respect”? I can respect a great artist, or an historical figure, or an athlete. Is this the same kind of thing? No: This kind of respect is given only when someone has done something impressive. Deontology tells us to respect other people no matter what.