

expects to be lied to. To really benefit by committing a wrong act, I thus need to remain in the minority, with most people not acting in the same way.¹² Whichever way you look at it, then, one cannot *rationaly* will that stealing or lying be made universal. Al's act of lying fails Kant's categorical imperative, and this shows lying to be immoral.

Again, it is important to see that Kant's categorical imperative is *not* functioning like the golden rule, which tells us that lying is wrong because we ourselves wouldn't want to be lied to. Nor does any of this have to do with the disutility that widespread lying might bring into the world. Instead, Kant's point is that lying is fundamentally irrational: if we willed to universalize the practice of lying, that would be inconsistent with the primary purpose of lying, which is to deceive. The dictates of reason—not how we feel or what might result as consequences—are what determine moral right and wrong.

Kant offers other illustrations of how the principle of universal law works. In one illustration, Kant asks whether I can consistently choose to commit suicide as an act of self-love, out of an intent to ensure my own welfare. Kant concludes that this is not possible and that suicide is morally wrong. For one thing, suicide amounts to treating oneself only as a means to attaining relief from suffering; it thus violates the principle of ends. Since they are supposed to be saying the same thing, it should likewise violate the principle of universal law. In particular, Kant argues that I cannot consistently will to improve my life via suicide, because suicide destroys life. As Kant puts it, "Now we see at once that a system of nature of which it should be a law to destroy life by means of the very feeling whose special nature it is to impel to the improvement of life would contradict itself...; hence that maxim cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature and, consequently, would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty."¹³

Summary

Universalizability is the central notion in Kant's principle of universal law, which states that only a maxim that can be consistently universalized can qualify as a moral law. Although the golden rule also employs a requirement of universalizability, Kant's approach is unique in that his formula requires rational consistency. Kant does not appeal to what people want or to an act's consequences. To determine whether a given act is morally right, we must (1) formulate the maxim which that act falls under, (2) universalize that maxim, and (3) determine whether the universalized maxim generates inconsistency. If there is no inconsistency, then the universalized maxim violates no moral law; if there is inconsistency, then the act is morally wrong. For instance,

¹²Note how this relates back to Kant's principle of ends: to benefit from acting in ways that cannot be universalized, I must take advantage of the honesty and integrity of others, thereby treating them as means but not ends.

¹³Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. T. K. Abbott (public domain, 1797), <http://www.grtbooks.com/exitfram.asp?idx=0&yr=1724&aa=AA&at=AA&ref=kant&URL=http://www.constitution.org/kant/metamora.txt> (accessed August 5, 2009).

because a universalized practice of lying undermines the intent of lying, it generates an inconsistency, so lying is morally wrong.

Key Terms

- **Maxim:** a rule of conduct or behavior that one can act in accordance with.
- **Principle of universal law:** act only in accordance with a maxim that you can at the same time (rationally) will to be a universal law or principle (a version of Kant's categorical imperative).

VI. KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: PRINCIPLE OF AUTONOMY**

For Kant, the notion of autonomy is particularly important. However, Kant uses *autonomy* in a somewhat narrower sense than we have up to now. For Kant, autonomy requires that the moral agent be capable of acting both freely and within the dictates of reason. This much is in keeping with our usual concept of autonomy. Yet Kant, as a rationalist, also wants to show that morality is essentially rational. In particular, he wants to show that the entire moral law derives from the categorical imperative, which itself is dictated by reason. Since autonomy enables us to act within the dictates of reason and since reason dictates or "makes" the moral law, we should expect a genuinely autonomous individual to act in accordance with the requirements of the moral law. On Kant's view, failing to act morally is not merely irrational; it is also inconsistent with genuine autonomy.¹⁴

Thus, genuinely autonomous individuals are capable not only of making free choices and of employing reason (i.e., they must be *persons*, capable of exercising the Good Will), but should also act morally. Because each person (by definition) has reason and because the moral law is "made" by reason, it also follows that the entire moral law is available to all persons. Each person, in short, is fully capable of discovering the moral law for herself.

Although reason exists in persons, however, it has no existence in and of itself; it exists *only* in persons. Only persons, furthermore, can employ reason to "make" the moral law. The moral law is thus created or "made" by each individual by means of the reason that resides in that person. This gives us yet another piece of Kant's notion of autonomy. In particular, persons don't merely *discover* the moral law for themselves—rather, each person actually "*makes*" the moral law for herself. For Kant, this result is so fundamental that he considers it just another version of the categorical imperative:

Principle of Autonomy: *Every person is equally a creator of the universal moral law, that is, each person makes the moral law for herself.*

¹⁴Kant's notion of autonomy is strongly value guided, in the sense discussed in Section IV of Chapter Three.

There is a danger of misinterpreting Kant here. Despite how this may appear, Kant is *not* saying that each person can make up any morality for herself or that my morality could differ from yours. He is not offering us a subjective morality! In fact, he intends exactly the opposite. Kant insists that there is just *one* set of moral laws and, being both universal and absolute, these laws hold for all persons in exactly the same way, without exception. Further, these laws are necessarily created or made by reason, which exists in every person. The one moral law is thus made in the same way by every person.

According to Kant, then, the moral law is fully available to all persons and is autonomously made by each person. It thus cannot be imposed upon us by any outside authority: it is imposed solely by the authority of reason, which resides in each person. Although reason doesn't *force* us to act in accordance with the moral law, it does teach us that we must act morally if we wish to exercise moral agency as genuinely autonomous beings.

Summary

For Kant, the notion of autonomy takes on a very special meaning. The autonomous person is not only able to exercise free will and to employ reason, but is also able to "make" or legislate the moral law for herself. The autonomous person is thus not under the authority of any external moral authority, but is under the authority of her own reason alone. Such a person then ought to act in accordance with the duties of the moral law, which is what she does when she exercises the Good Will.

Key Terms

- **Principle of Autonomy:** Every person is equally a creator of the universal moral law, that is, that each person makes the moral law for herself (a version of Kant's categorical imperative).

VII. CRITICISMS OF KANTIAN ETHICS

The Consequentialist's Objection: The objection that any consequentialist would immediately bring forward, of course, is that Kant refuses to take consequences into account. Suppose that some terrorists are setting a bomb to go off in a subway station, and one of them asks you if the station is likely to be filled with people at, say, 6 p.m. According to Kant, you should tell the truth even if your doing so enables the terrorists to cause the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. But can this be right? Don't such consequences have *some* relevance, at least, to determining the morality of your action? Kant's reply is "not at all." His argument for this rather surprising response is as follows: No matter what the situation, one cannot control or even anticipate the future course of events. Your telling the truth could lead to hundreds of deaths, but then again, circumstances might work out so that it saves hundreds instead (e.g., the electricity goes out at 5 p.m., an evacuation is ordered,

and the subway is completely empty at 6 p.m. just when the bomb goes off). Further, we normally have little control over what others choose to do. The terrorists might follow through on their plans to cause the deaths of hundreds—or they might undergo a change of heart and turn themselves in. Because we have no real control over future circumstances or the choices of others, we cannot be morally responsible for what ultimately takes place. On the other hand, what you *can* control—and what you are morally responsible for—is how *you* choose to act. Whatever else may happen, one's moral duty is to tell the truth. Morality thus requires that *each person* do the right thing regardless of what else may take place.

Although Kant no doubt has a point, he has surely overstated it. As the consequentialist would be quick to point out, we usually have *some* influence on the choices of others. We can try to persuade them to choose differently, or, if all else fails, we can attempt to block some of their options. Further, we often exercise significant control over events that are about to take place. We thus do not seem as generally powerless as Kant suggests. Even when we have only a little influence over the future, we still have responsibility to the degree we can exercise that influence. Since Kant seems to deny all of this, it appears that his theory has problems with moral confirmation.

The Absolutism Objection: As briefly mentioned previously, Kant takes an absolutist approach to ethics; specifically, Kant maintains that any moral law supported by the categorical imperative must hold *without exception*. Why does Kant take such a position? For one thing, Kant thinks morality is based solely upon reason. Since reason gives rise to principles like “do not lie,” there can be no exceptions to such principles, on pain of irrationality. Similarly, it would be irrational to think that there could be exceptions to the principles of mathematics or logic. Further, we have seen that Kant takes a strong stand on the intrinsic worth of persons. But given that persons have such worth, it can never be morally acceptable to treat any persons—even terrorists—with anything less than the full respect due to them as autonomous beings.

For these reasons, there doesn't seem to be any room for Kant to budge on his absolutism. Yet many consider this—a problem with practicability—one of the most objectionable aspects to his theory. Imagine, for instance, that although Al's employee, Fred, has agreed to always obey his boss's orders, Al now tells him to lie to Mrs. Satzoner. Then, although Fred has an absolute duty to keep his agreement with Al, he also has an absolute duty not to lie to Mrs. Satzoner. Fred thus *cannot* avoid committing a moral wrong, because his fulfilling either duty forces him into violating the other, and neither duty (being absolute) can allow any exceptions. Consequently, dilemmas between Kantian duties apparently cannot be resolved.¹⁵

¹⁵Kant actually distinguishes between *perfect* duties (e.g., do not lie), which we can completely or perfectly fulfill in any given situation, and *imperfect* duties (e.g., I ought to help others), which we can only fulfill in part or imperfectly (for I can always lend *more* help). Kant may have intended perfect duties to take precedence over imperfect duties. If so, then Kant can resolve some dilemmas (e.g., between a perfect and an imperfect duty), but not all.

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The Many-Formulations Problem: An important difficulty arises whenever we attempt to apply the principle of universal law to determine the moral acceptability of a given kind of action. Imagine that Al is once again contemplating an act of lying. To evaluate the morality of this act, we must first formulate a maxim that characterizes the act Al is contemplating. This is a critical step, because this maxim characterizes the *kind* of act that is to then be universalized. If this maxim cannot be rationally universalized, then that kind of act will count as morally wrong. The entire application of this version of the categorical imperative thus depends upon what maxim is chosen in our formulation. But here is the problem: *the very same act* can often be characterized by *different* maxims; even worse, some of these maxims may be rationally universalizable, while others may not. Everything thus hinges on how we formulate the maxim. How can we be sure we formulate the maxim correctly?

For instance, Al's contemplated lie might be characterized as an instance of (a) *telling a lie with the intent of promoting one's own advantage*. But suppose that Al is also intending to lie to Fred only when Fred suspects nothing. Is this a case, then, of (b) *lying to Fred when he suspects nothing and with the intent of promoting one's own advantage*? Or what if Al tells a lie that, for once, is not for his own advantage, but is instead (c) *lying with the intent of sparing someone from some painful news*? Although each of these characterizations is clearly different, each *could* conceivably characterize the same single act. Which characterization, then, should be used to formulate the maxim?

We have already seen that lying (a) with the intent of promoting one's own advantage is *not* universalizable. As for universalizing the practice of (c) lying to spare someone's feelings, this is difficult to decide upon. It would be self-defeating if people could typically recognize those sorts of bad news situations in which they should expect to be lied to. But when people can't always recognize such situations, the practice may in fact be consistently universalizable. What about (b) lying to Fred when he doesn't suspect anything? The universalization of *this* practice certainly does not seem self-defeating, for it limits lying to Fred and, more specifically, to just those times when Fred suspects nothing. When Fred is unsuspecting, the attempt to deceive him is guaranteed to succeed, and no inconsistency appears to arise.

Although the many-formulations problem poses a genuine challenge to Kantian ethics, a Kantian could make some attempt to clarify how appropriate maxims are to be obtained. For instance, the Kantian could argue that the maxim about lying just to Fred does not qualify as a genuine maxim, because it is not sufficiently general. A maxim should not include specific references to individual persons, times, locations, etc. There is also something "fishy" about the ploy to avoid inconsistency by adding the qualification that Fred must suspect nothing.

It may also be argued that if the categorical imperative judges lying in general to be immoral (as Kant held), then no qualified versions of lying (e.g., for the sake of sparing someone's feelings or only to unsuspecting persons) could

ever be allowed. Unlike with rule utilitarianism, Kantian duties and prohibitions cannot be fine-tuned. Appealing to responses like these, contemporary Kantians have maintained that the many-formulations problem can be satisfactorily addressed.

The Rational Agent Objection: We have seen how Kantian ethics places great emphasis upon the personal worth and the rights of individual persons. This emphasis impressively contrasts with utilitarianism's tendency to neglect justice and rights. But some related worries still arise within the Kantian approach. For one thing, Kantian ethics only requires the just and respectful treatment of *persons*—of autonomous moral agents. This appears to rule out all other animals. Specifically, Kantian ethics imposes no **direct duties** or responsibilities toward animals like those we owe directly to other persons. Nor does it bestow animals with any moral *rights*. Still, Kant *does* argue that we have **indirect duties** regarding animals—duties arising from our moral duties toward persons. Kant thinks that if I act cruelly toward animals, then I might well act similarly towards humans, since people's feelings towards animals and humans often resemble each other. I thus should not harm animals because of my duty not to demean myself or harm the rest of humanity. Nevertheless, Kant's approach will not satisfy proponents of animal rights.

Even more seriously, and for similar reasons, Kant's theory does not seem to support any *direct* moral duties toward human infants, young children, or others, such as those with advanced Alzheimer's, who appear to lack autonomy (see footnote 7 of this chapter). Once again, it might be replied that we still have important *indirect* duties toward these individuals, but this doesn't seem to provide for a sufficient degree of moral respect for such people. Another possible reply might be to point out that infants and children, at least, have a unique *capability* for developing autonomy and that this reflects an important difference between them and other animals. Perhaps creatures that have the capability of future autonomy (or that have had autonomy in the past) should be granted certain rights, at least, and be viewed as deserving greater moral respect than those that could never have this capability.

Summary

Kant's theory inevitably runs into some problems: (a) Kant's deontological basis for morality neglects consequences. Although we can't control the consequences of our actions with certainty, however, it seems that, morally speaking, they have some relevance to determining how we should act. (b) Kant's theory, as absolutist, allows no exceptions, and so does not appear able to resolve moral dilemmas. (c) It seems possible to characterize the same act by different maxims. Since some of these maxims may be rationally universalizable while others may not, we are left with uncertainty as to whether the act itself should be judged right or wrong. (d) Finally, because of Kant's emphasis upon persons—rational free agents—his