Barbara MacKinnon – Utilitarianism and Kant’s Moral Theory

Ethical Theory

- An *ethical theory* is a general theory about which actions are right or wrong, and *why* those actions are right or wrong. An ethical theory will provide criteria for determining whether an action is right or wrong, and it will claim that the action’s meeting those criteria explains *why* the action is right or wrong.

  - An ethical theory will entail various particular *ethical judgments*: for instance, that you have a duty to donate money to charity, that affirmative action is unjust, or that it is impermissible to go to a prostitute.

    * A particular ethical judgment is just a judgment about what is right or wrong in a *particular* case. It doesn’t tell us anything about how to behave in other cases.

    Only an ethical theory will do that.

  - There are many particular ethical questions that we’re unsure about. We can use our general ethical theory to guide us through these difficult questions. That is, we can use our ethical theory to form particular ethical judgments:

    ![Ethical Theory](Ethical Theory) ![Ethical Judgment](Ethical Judgment)

  - However, there are many particular ethical questions that we’re much more confident about. We’re confident, for instance, that torturing babies for fun is pretty much always immoral, that using the elderly for target practice is impermissible, and that enslaving human beings for profit is unjust. We can therefore use judgments like these to *test* our ethical theories.

    ![Ethical Theory](Ethical Theory) ![Ethical Judgment](Ethical Judgment)

  - So there’s a two-way street between our ethical judgments and our ethical theory – we can use the theory to form our judgments, and use our judgments to form the theory.
Utilitarianism

- **Utilitarianism** is a consequentialist ethical theory: only the consequences of an action are relevant to its goodness/badness. An act is good iff it has good consequences.

- For utilitarians, what makes a consequence good is that it promotes net aggregate expected happiness (or utility).
  
  - **net**: Utilitarians care about net happiness brought about by the action: the total amount of happiness brought about, minus the total amount of unhappiness brought about. If smoking a cigarette makes me moderately happy when I’m smoking it – suppose that it brings me 10 utiles of happiness – but, later on, causes me a great amount of unhappiness – say, it brings me −100 utiles of unhappiness – then the net happiness smoking brings me is −90 utiles.

  - **aggregate**: Utilitarians say that you should maximize aggregate happiness. That means that we take the happiness experienced by each person equally into consideration. If an action brings about 10 utiles of happiness in me and 4 utiles of unhappiness in you, then the action has a net, aggregate utility of 6 utiles.

  - **expected**: Utilitarians think you have to weight the happiness potentially caused by your action by the probability that your action actually bring about that outcome. Suppose that there’s a button which has a 10% chance of causing ten people to suffer 100 utiles of pain each, and a 90% chance of causing ten people to each experience 50 utiles of happiness. In that case, my action has a net, aggregate, expected utility of

    \[
    10\% \times -1000 \text{ utiles} + 90\% \times 500 \text{ utiles} = 350 \text{ utiles}
    \]

    Since the net aggregate expected utility of pushing the button is greater than the net aggregate expected utility of not pushing the button, the utilitarian says you should push.

  - **happiness**: the happiness is a psychological state, which can include simple physical pleasure, or intellectual pleasure. It is the kind of thing that can come in degrees, be more or less intense, and be measured by a scale of *utiles*.

- **Act and Rule Utilitarianism**:
  
  - The *Act Utilitarian* says that an action is good only to the degree that it promotes net, aggregate, expected utility.

  - The *Rule Utilitarian* says that an action is good only to the degree that it accords with a rule which *would* promote net, aggregate, expected utility, *were* it to be universally obeyed.

- **Objections to Utilitarianism**:
  
  - It is impersonal.

    * It does not permit us to give special preference to our loved ones. If action A will produce 10 utiles of happiness, all of which will go to the people we love,
and action B will produce 11 utiles of happiness, all of which will go to people we’ve never met, then utilitarianism requires us to perform action B. Some philosophers think this is the wrong result.

- It does not distinguish between self-sacrifice and other-sacrifice. But there seems to be a moral difference between sacrificing yourself and sacrificing somebody else.

- It does not distinguish good pleasure from bad pleasure
  * Utilitarianism asks us to weigh the rapist’s happiness against the rape victim’s unhappiness. But it seems like the rapist’s pleasure shouldn’t get to count in the equation.

- It does not respect rights
  * If torturing one innocent person can bring about a great amount of happiness for all, then (at least act, and possibly rule) utilitarianism says that we should torture that person. But we might think that a person has a right to not be tortured.

- It can fail to treat everybody equally
  * Suppose that there is a utility monster who experiences a much, much, much more intense pleasure than everybody else. Utilitarianism says that you should work to please the utility monster rather than yourself, since this is the way to maximize net aggregate expected utility.

**Kant’s Moral Theory**

- On Kant’s view, consequences are unimportant. What makes an action good is 1) the reason you have for acting that way; and 2) the nature of the action itself.

  1) Your reason for acting

  - Kant says that your action flows from a good will iff you act because your action is good.

  - Kant ranks three kinds of action from best to worst in the following order:
    3. You do the right thing because it is in your own interest to do the right thing.
    2. You do the right thing because you want to help others.
    1. You do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, irrespective of how it helps you or others.

  - The action is best when it it performed out of moral duty alone, and not because the actor in any sense wants to act that way.

  2) the nature of the action itself

  - According to Kant, an action is good iff it conforms to the categorical imperative.

  - There are two formulations of the categorical imperative, which Kant believes to be equivalent (this claim has confused philosophers ever since – almost everybody else thinks that these two formulations are nonequivalent).
* The First Formulation: **Act only on the basis of those maxims that you could consistently will to be universally followed.**

- A *maxim* is a general rule, such as “Break your promises”, “Keep your promises”, “Lie when it is to your advantage”, or “Always tell the truth.”
- An application: you shouldn’t lie, since you can’t consistently will that everyone follow the maxim “lie when it is to your advantage.” Lying requires the existence of a practice of truth-telling; otherwise, people would not believe you when you utter false propositions. But if everybody lied, then there could be no practice of truth telling. So there could be no lies. Contradiction. So you can’t act according to the maxim “lie when it is to your advantage.”

* The Second Formulation: **Never treat people as mere means to your own ends. Rather, treat them as ends in-and-of-themselves.**

- This means respecting other people’s *autonomy.* Every person has their own projects, and should be granted the autonomy to pursue those projects without interference.
- You can involve other people in your projects. However, you must have their voluntary and informed consent for this involvement.
- To use somebody as a *mere* means is to coerce, manipulate, deceive, or force them to help you in some way.
- An application: you shouldn’t lie, because lying is deceiving somebody into acting in the way you want them to act. But this is just using them as a mere means to your own end. It is not respecting their own autonomy to decide for themselves what to do.

* Objections to Kant’s Moral Theory:

  – It is unclear what maxim an action is based upon
    * I can’t consistently will that everybody lie when it is in their interest. But can’t I will that everybody lie when they are talking to their mother-in-law about her new dress in the state of Arizona on December 23rd, 2011? That wouldn’t break down any practice of truth-telling. If this can be the maxim on which I act, then it is permissible for me to lie in this circumstance, according to Kant.

  – It is unclear how to distinguish coercion and manipulation from persuasion; and how to distinguish deception from privacy.
    * If I tempt somebody into doing something, is that manipulation, or mere persuasion?
    * If somebody wants to know something personal about me before helping me out, do I have the right to keep that information private, or does keeping that information private mean that the person’s help isn’t made under conditions of full information?

  – It can lead to **terrible consequences**
    * Lying is always impermissible, according to Kant. So what happens if the Nazis knock on the door and ask me whether there are any Jews in the house?