Immanuel Kant

"The Categorical Imperative"
Kant’s Question:

- How can there be moral obligations?
  - Moral obligations are things that, morally speaking, I ought to do.
  - Kant wants to understand why I ought to do these things.

- In his own words: How can there be a categorical imperative?
An imperative is a claim about what you ought to do.

- Example: “It is imperative that you—i.e., you ought to—attend class.”

Kant distinguishes between hypothetical and categorical imperatives.

- These are different kinds of claims about what you ought to do.
Hypothetical Imperatives

- The previous example ("It is imperative that you —i.e., you ought to—attend class.”) was a hypothetical imperative.
- This imperative (this “ought”) applies to you only on the assumption (on the “hypothesis”) that you want to do well in this class.
- It is your wants/goals (and facts about the world) that explain why you ought to do this.
Categorical Imperatives

- A categorical imperative describes something you ought to do, but where this is not because of any assumption about your wants or goals.
  - They apply without qualification, i.e., “categorically.”

- Moral obligations are typically understood to be categorical.
  - If, for example, you are morally obligated to be honest, this “ought” does not depend upon any assumption about your wants or goals.
Kant’s Question:

- How can there be a “categorical imperative?”
  - That is, since “imperatives” are *obligations*, and since *moral* obligations are not hypothetical;
  - How can there be moral obligations?
    - In other words:

- How can there be something that I *ought* to do where this is not because doing so is useful in obtaining my wants and desires?
  - *Why should I be moral?*
Kant’s Answer:

- **How can there be a Categorical Imperative?**
  - That is, how can there be an "ought" that applies to *everyone* regardless of their individual wants and desires?

- **Hint:** It has something to do with what it means to act *freely*. 
For Kant, acting freely means ...

- Acting because of *reasons* rather than because of *causes*.
  - Only *persons* act for a reason; mere things are *caused* to do what they do.

- Freewill means *autonomy*:
  - i.e., being *self-legislating*, or acting on the basis of *principles* of rational action.
Autonomy vs. inclination

- Acting on the basis of rational principles is not the same thing as acting from "inclination" (i.e., as doing something because of my desires).
- My desires are caused by nature. I can be a "slave" to my desires.
- Autonomy (true freedom) means acting from general principles of rationality.
So, ....

- Morality requires free will.
- Free will means autonomy.
- Autonomy means acting for a reason.

- But, what is it to “act for a reason?”
  - What is it to “act freely?”
  - Why does acting freely *require* acting morally?
Acting for a Reason:

For Kant, it means there is a "reason" or "maxim" that explains our act.

- Acting rationally:
  - 1) Whenever anyone is in a certain situation ("S"), they ought to do a certain action ("A").
    » (This is what Kant would call the "maxim" or "volition" of one's action.)
  - 2) I am in situation "S."
  - 3) So, I ought to do action "A."
Acting for a Reason

- Whenever we act for a reason (i.e., when we act freely), there is a reason or “maxim” that explains our action.

- But reasons are always general (i.e., like “Whenever anyone is in a certain situation, they ought to do a certain action”).

- So, whenever we act freely, we are implicitly endorsing that maxim.
  - i.e., when I do something for a reason, I endorse this as a general reason for acting.
**Acting Rationally**

- Kant: A minimal condition for acting rationally (i.e., *acting for a reason*, i.e., *acting freely*) is that the “maxim of your action” (i.e., the general principle that guides your action) does not *contradict* itself.
The First Formulation of 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.”

- Remember, *whenever* we act freely, we are implicitly endorsing some principle (the “maxim of our action”) as one that *everyone* should act upon.
- So, what Kant is saying is that we should act only on those general principles that we could *explicitly* accept—without thereby contradicting our own will—as general principles for action.
Suppose I choose to lie

- **What is the general principle I am endorsing?**
  - Kant: What is the “maxim of my action?”
  - “It is permissible to lie (to say something false when people expect you to tell the truth) whenever it is convenient to do so.”

- **When I act freely (i.e., on the basis of a principle), I am endorsing that general principle.**
  - So, when I lie, I am endorsing (“willing”) the above principle (maxim).
But, what am I “willing?”

- I am willing that everyone lie when it is convenient.
  - But, if everyone did this, there would be no expectation of truth telling.
  - Yet without the expectation of truth telling, it is impossible for anyone to lie.

- So, when I lie, I am willing that everyone act in a certain way (lying) that makes it impossible for anyone to act that way.
  - i.e., the principle I am endorsing (the maxim that I am willing) is self-contradictory.
Suppose I chose to steal

- I am thereby endorsing, as a general principle for all action, that we can take for ourselves the private property of others whenever we want to.
- If everyone acted on this principle, there would be no such thing as private property.
- So, when I choose to steal, I am acting on a principle for acting that is internally inconsistent.
The problem with lying or stealing:

- *Isn’t* that it brings about “bad” consequences.
  » *This* is the kind of answer Mill will give.

- Rather, it is that I am acting on a reason that makes it impossible for me (or anyone) to act for that reason.
So what?

- The problem with acting upon a self-defeating principle:
  - *Isn’t* that it’s “nutty.”
  - Rather, it is that I am *squandering* or *abusing* the very feature that gives me *moral dignity*.

- *Persons* have moral dignity because they have a free will, i.e., because they can act *for a reason*.
  - So, if I act upon a self-defeating principle, I am acting upon a “reason” for acting that isn’t really a *reason* for acting,
    » *because* it is self-defeating.
  - I am (ab)using my freedom (my ability to act for a reason) to act *irrationally*, i.e., *un*-freely;
    » I am treating myself as a mere thing.
Acting *Immorally* means acting *Irrationally*

- Autonomy (free will) requires acting for a reason.
- Violating the Categorical Imperative involves “acting” on the basis of a reason for acting that makes it impossible to act for this reason.
- So, to act immorally is to rationally act irrationally; it is to freely act un-freely.
- This subverts our ability to act for a reason, that is, to act freely.
- So by acting immorally, we squander our own *moral dignity* and in so doing treat ourselves as *mere things* rather than as persons or rational beings.
The Kingdom of Ends Formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

- "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another always as an end and never as a means only."

- So, persons have a moral dignity that should never be violated. They must never be treated as mere things (as mere means to my ends), but always as having value in and of themselves (i.e., as "ends-in-themselves").
Kant vs. Utilitarianism:

**Utilitarianism:**

- The next reading
- Morality is fundamentally about the *results* of our actions.
- Acts are morally right if they maximize happiness, wrong otherwise.
- In the end, what matters is always/only *happiness*.

**Kant’s moral theory:**

- Morality is fundamentally about the *reasons* we have acting.
- Acts are morally right if they are done for the right reason.
- In the end, what matters is acting freely (that is, *for a reason*) rather than *because of a cause*. 