Backward Looking Theories, Kant and Deontology

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Study Guide

• The study guide is now available on our course website
• The midterm will be composed of a selection of questions from this study guide
• The midterm is scheduled to happen in this room during lecture. Do not be late (you will probably need the entire class time)
• Make sure to bring a blank bluebook to the exam. The exam itself is closed notes
Short Answer Questions

- Short answer questions have two parts:
- 1) A **definition**: make sure to (succinctly) define the term you have chosen
- 2) A **significance sentence**: why did we introduce this term? What was its role in an argument? Whose position does it support or undermine? Etc etc etc…
- Example: **Psychological Egoism**: the claim that human beings, as a matter of fact, always act to further their interests. Rachels criticizes the reinterpretation argument used to support psychological egoism.
Medium Answer and Essay Questions

- With Medium Answer questions you do not need to include a thesis, intro or conclusion
- Make sure to address each component of the medium answer question
- With the Essay Question you must make sure to structure your response as an essay (there should be an intro, a thesis, body paragraphs, etc)
- Don’t just tell us what each author thinks, remember to explain how each claim is supported
Recap

• We have been discussing criticisms of consequentialist moral theories. Several criticisms clustered along a few lines:

  1. Impartiality: Consequentialism is (typically) construed as an impartial moral theory. Some have argued that consequentialists cannot account for the partiality that results from human relationships (special ties)

• Insofar as consequentialists cannot do this consequentialism is a revisionist moral theory
2) **Rights/Integrity**: we normally suppose that individuals cannot have their rights intruded upon. To ignore the integrity of individuals is to ignore the separateness of persons.

- Rawls and Williams expressed similar worries.
- If Consequentialism ignores the separateness of persons then it can be seen as *alienating* us from the integrity of our own lives.
Recap (3)

- Conceptions of the good: we have seen problems aimed at different Utilitarian conceptions of the good.
- Nozick’s experience machine, Haydn and the Oyster, Rawls’ “Content” problem, and the Pushpin v. Poetry problem critique Utilitarian understandings of the good as a subjective mental state (Bentham) or as an exercise and development of deliberative competence (Mill).

- It may be worth considering other options…
Forward v. Backward Looking

- Forward looking moral theories can be contrasted with *backward* looking theories.

- Backward Looking moral theories focus on the quality of an agent’s *will* and not on the consequences of their actions.
The proponent of the backward looking moral theory argues that we should do what we can to mitigate the effects of moral luck.

While we do not have much control over the world, we can exercise control over our will.

When we morally evaluate an agent’s actions, we should therefore ignore the consequences and focus on the content of an agent’s will.

i.e. What were they intending to do? How did they intend to do it?
Immanuel Kant

- Argues that consequences are not relevant when assessing the moral worth of an agent.
- The goodwill is the only intrinsic good.
- Duty’s are the result of categorical imperatives that represent things we must will insofar as we are rational beings.
Agency and Maxims

- Kant wants us to focus our moral analysis on agents and not on the consequences of actions.
- Agents are special because we have the freedom to reflectively choose our reasons for acting.
- Kant refers to our subjective principles of volition (will) as Maxims.
- An agent’s maxim /will is composed of her intended end along with the means that she wills.
- Maxims are the subject of Kantian moral analysis.
The Goodwill

- Kant argues that a goodwill is the only thing with *intrinsic* value
- A goodwill “shines forth like a jewel” no matter where it is found
- This is because a goodwill *always* leads to right action
- A goodwill is a will that conforms to duty *for the sake of duty*
The Goodwill (2)

- A goodwill is a will that belongs to someone: a rational agent
- Maxim: I *will* to [means] tell the truth *in order to* [end] obey the moral law
- Notice that Maxims have a *rational structure* built into them (Means > End) this means they are open to rational analysis
- An agent who *acts* in accordance with duty but not *for the sake of duty* does not demonstrate a goodwill and her action would not have moral worth
Cases

- Kant gives us four cases to help demonstrate the nature of the goodwill
  - 1. Honest Shopkeeper
  - 2. Prudent Shopkeeper
  - 3. Sympathetic Helper
  - 4. The Curmudgeon
- All these agents act in accordance with duty, only some display a goodwill
From Goodwill to Duty

- A goodwill is a will that conforms to duty for the sake of duty.
- Willing is a *rational activity* and Kant reasons that human wills are constrained by principles of reason.
- If principles of reason require every agent to will in a certain way then we have a *duty* (insofar as we are rational) to act in accordance with the constraints of reason.
- What might this tell us about the nature of duty?
The Categorical Imperative

• If willing is a rational activity and it is bound by rational principles then moral duties are *categorical imperatives* (commands)

• Moral commands are inescapable in the same way logical truths are inescapable

• Insofar as you are logical you must accept that either A is true or A is false

• Insofar as you are rational you must obey the categorical imperatives of morality
The Categorical Imperative (2)

• According to Kant we must…

• "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."

• We have a duty to avoid acting on Maxims that cannot be willed to be universal laws
An Example

• Assume I want to act on this maxim:
• “I wish to lie in order to secure my own advantage”
• Can a maxim like this be universalized as a (rational) law?
• Kant thinks not. When we lie to someone we are assuming that we live in a world where truth telling is the general policy
• If Everyone were able to lie whenever it would suit them then the conditions that make lies possible would be eradicated
• We have a duty not to lie as a result
The Golden Rule

- Kant believes that many of us will confuse the Categorical Imperative with the Golden Rule
- GR: treat others the way you would like to be treated
- The Categorical Imperative is not identical to the Golden Rule
- The GR universalizes moral conduct to my own preferences
- The Categorical Imperative universalizes maxims based on principles of reason
For Next Time

• Read Rawls, Selections from *A Theory of Justice*