

Right Actions, Bad Motives, and Puzzling Maxims

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1. Introduction and overview

How are we to understand the Kantian notion of acting in accordance with duty?

Whether an action is in accordance with duty [morally right] depends on the *possible* maxims [motives] out of which the action could have been performed.

This is compatible with a range of ethical theories, including consequentialist ones.

2. The problem and its context

Why the notion of acting in accordance with duty is important

- (i) “[I]n the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that it *conform* with the moral law, but it must also be done *for its sake*; if not, that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, because the immoral ground will indeed now and then produce actions that conform with the law, but in many cases actions that are contrary to it.” (IV: 390)
- (ii) “[A]ct in conformity with duty *from* duty” (VI: 391).
- (iii) Accordance to duty is moral rightness.

Conforming to the categorical imperative

“[A]ct only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law” (IV: 421). Whether an action conforms to the categorical imperative, thus, always depends on the (actual) maxim.

The shopkeeper example

- (i) Kant’s shopkeeper and other shopkeepers
 - The “shopkeeper [does] not overcharge his inexperienced customer” (IV: 397) out of self-interest. This *clever shopkeeper* is Kant’s paradigm example for somebody acting in accordance with, but not from duty.
 - The *malicious shopkeeper* does not overcharge his customers in order to annoy somebody who hates all of his customers and wishes them bad. Plausibly, his maxim does not conform to the categorical imperative.
 - The *good shopkeeper* does not overcharge his customers from duty.All three shopkeepers act in accordance with duty, but at least the malicious shopkeeper (and possibly also the clever shopkeeper) does so with a maxim that does not conform to the categorical imperative.
- (ii) Therefore, it is possible that an action is in accordance with duty but performed with a maxim that does not conform to the categorical imperative.

The problem

How can the difference between actions that are in accordance with duty and actions that are contrary to duty be explained by drawing on the resources provided by the categorical imperative?

<i>action</i>	<i>agent</i>	<i>so acting is...</i>	<i>maxim</i>
not overcharging	good shopkeeper	... in accordance with duty, from duty	conforms to the categorical imperative
	malicious shopkeeper	... in accordance with duty, not from duty	does not conform to the categorical imperative

3. Actions that are in accordance with duty

In accordance with duty vs. contrary to duty, explained

- (i) An action is *in accordance with duty* if, and only if, there is a maxim that conforms to the categorical imperative with which the action could be performed.
- (ii) An action is *contrary to duty* if, and only if, none of the maxims with which the action could be performed conforms to the categorical imperative.

Conforming to the categorical imperative vs. in accordance with duty

- (i) An action conforms to the categorical imperative if, and only if, it is possible that its maxim becomes a universal law.
- (ii) An action is in accordance with duty if, and only if, it is possible that it is performed with maxim of which it is possible that it becomes a universal law.

In accordance with duty: too wide?

- (i) The above account is in danger of classifying actions that intuitively are morally wrong as in accordance with duty (i.e. as morally right). It requires suitable constraints on what can count as a maxim with which an action can be performed.
- (ii) Coming up with such constraints can be understood as an extension of working out what can count as a maxim anyway (cf. the ‘problem of puzzle maxims’).

4. A generic view about how rightness and motives are related

- (*) An action x is right if, and only if, (and because) it is possible to perform it with a motive m_x that is F .

Consequentialism can be compatible with (*)

- (a) An action x is right if, and only if, (and because) it maximizes expected overall utility.
 - (b) An action x is right if, and only if, (and because) it is (rationally) possible to perform it with the intention to maximize expected overall utility.
- (a) and (b) are compatible; and (b) can be interpreted as a version of (*).

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