# Kantian Ethics Summary Sheet

**Note**: references to the *Groundwork* (Paton (ed.))are to the paragraphs, not the page numbers

## 1. Aims

**Broome** says we should treat Kant's work as a response to Hume. From this POV, Kant has three tasks:

1. To demonstrate that a morality founded on sentiment ('inclination' in Kant's terms) cannot be true morality. To act morally, you must act from duty, not inclination
2. To show that morality can indeed be founded on reason, and to show what specific moral principles can be derived from reason
3. To deal with Hume anti-rationalist argument from motivation

Roughly, these three tasks correspond to the three chapters of the *Groundwork*

## 2. The structure of the Groundwork

**Kant's project**: 'the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality' (*Groundwork*, 4:392)

**First section (4:393-405)**

- Carries out the search by appealing to moral common sense ('common rational moral cognition') to motivate a more rigorous account of the commitments of common sense ('philosophic moral cognition') [*Groundwork*, 4:392-3]
- 'Moral common sense' refers to an everyday unreflective awareness of the rational standards Kant thinks anyone must use in moral deliberation and judgement. Common rational moral cognition is prephilosophical in its origin and therefore subject not only to philosophical explication, but also to rigorous philosophical criticism, correction, rejection, or vindication [does Kant use an error theory?]
- The aim of the first section is to develop the practical knowledge held by moral common sense into a kind of theoretical knowledge; necessary, as moral common sense a species of innocence
- An example of the development of moral common sense opinions into something more is Kant's treatment of the 'good will'—showing that normal opinions, i.e. that natural sympathy is good, are not warranted etc.
- The supreme principle of morality is formulated only provisionally in the first section as the

First formula

Formula of Universal Law (FUL):

'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law' (*Groundwork*, 4:421; cf. 4:402)

With its variant

FLN The Formula of the Law of Nature: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature' (*Groundwork*, 4:421; cf. 4:436)

**Second section (4:406-445)**

- Makes a new start, bypassing 'popular moral philosophy' and employing a philosophical theory of the will to lay the ground for a 'metaphysics of morals' (*Groundwork*, 4:392, 406)
- The parallel search in the second section has more definitive results than the FUL: a system of three formulas (two of which are provided with a variant form)

Second formula

FH The Formula of Humanity as End in Itself: 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (*Groundwork*, 4:429; cf. 4:436)

Third formula

FA The Formula of Autonomy: '…the idea of the will of every rational being as giving universal law' (*Groundwork*, 4:431; cf. 4:432) or 'Choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition' (*Groundwork*, 4:440; cf. 4:432, 434, 438)

With its variant,

FRE The Formula of the Realm of Ends: 'Act according to the maxims of a universally legislative member of a merely potential realm of ends' (*Groundwork*, 4:439; cf. 4:433, 437, 438)

*Hume: morality is not capable of demonstration*

- Hume says demonstration consists of relations of four sorts: resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number. Clearly moral conclusions cannot be drawn from these alone
- The obvious objection is that there may be some other kind of relation which allows demonstration, but to this Hume replies forcefully with a challenge: it is up to those who say that morality is demonstrable to point out this other kind of relation
- Hume: what could such a relation be? What is, say, morally wrong is a certain intended action. Nothing that involves either only mental processes or only external objects and events can be immoral. Hume claims to have shown, in Book 1 of the *Treatise*, that there is no genuinely necessary connection between causes [actions?] and effects [sentiments?], that is, no possibility of *a priori* knowledge that one thing will produce another. The connection between the supposed moral relation and choice by any rational agent would need to be necessary and intelligible *a priori*; it'd need to have just those features which Hume has shown causal relations not to have
- 'This seventh argument has a good deal of force against the suggestion that there are demonstrable categorical imperatives' (**Mackie**, *Hume's Moral Theory*)
- See Hume summary sheet for more detail on this issue of morality and reason

*No link between rationality and universalisability*

- The moral law is not analytic (**Schneewind**). The concepts 'completely good will' or 'perfectly rational agent' don't include 'acts only through universalisable maxims'. And we cannot base the moral law on experience. It is a necessary proposition, and experience alone never grounds such proposition. What basis then is there for the moral law?
- The problem for Kant is to discover something through which we can join the subject of the moral law—'perfectly rational agent'—and its predicate—'acts only through universalisable maxims'
- Idea of freedom of the will. Freedom has a negative aspect: if we are free, we aren't determined solely by our desires and needs. But a will wholly undetermined would be random and chaotic
- The only viable way to think of a free will, Kant holds, it to think of it as a will whose choices are determined by a law that is internal to its nature, only by itself, and is therefore free. The only self-determined actions are actions done because of the universalisability of the agent's maxim. So if we could show that a rational will must be free, we would have shown that a rational will acts only on universalisable maxims
- Morality, unlike desires, requires the possibility of action from a wholly non-empirical motive
- When we as rational beings act, we must take ourselves to be free. Because freedom entails the moral law, we must think ourselves as bound to it (*Groundwork*, 4:447-8/115-16); **A law is needed to save the will from being undetermined and chaotic**
- If we think of ourselves belonging to the noumenal world as well as the phenomenal world, then we can see how in one respect we may be beings bound in a web of mechanistic determination. While in another respect we are the free rational agents morality supposes us to be
- Problem: this argument seems to be saying that we are only free when we are acting rationally. If we're immoral, then we're irrational. However, on this view, we're only ever responsible when we're being moral
- 'In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant treats freedom as the ground of our ***having*** moral obligations, and our awareness of CIs as the ground of our ***knowledge*** that we're free' (**Schneewind**). Kant held that if we think of ourselves solely in empirical and deterministic terms we will necessarily think of ourselves as heteronomous, as moved by our desires for this and that, and never solely by respect of the law

*Problems concerning the idea of a maxim being a contradiction in the law of nature*

- **David Wiggins** mentions that when Kant universalised the maxim 'To release my debtor from his debt, as an act of simple generosity', this is surely an example of what Kant calls a 'contradiction in conception/nature'. If the maxim is followed, then most of the expectations presupposed to lending and borrowing would lapse and thus practices too would lapse. Nobody is normally required to release his debtor, but it is strange to be required not to
- **MacIntyre** (*After Virtue*): on Kant's reasoning, the maxim 'Always to keep my hair cut short' is inconsistent because such willing 'contradicts' an impulse to the growth of hair implanted in us all
- But surely, against MacIntyre, Kant was referring to nature at the conceptual, not causal, level?

- These critics, like **MacIntyre** (his essay on Hume on Is and Ought), make snide comments concerning Hume's Protestant, pietist upbringing
- **Wood** says these critics overlook the fact that Kant's interpretation of the a priori moral principle itself, as well as his conception of its application to the human will, depends on some quite distinctive views about human nature and history
- Kant takes into account that we are rational beings—this is taking account of human nature and is quite positive about it
- Kant's distinction between the perfect and imperfect virtues allows for the fact that some people have inclination to do more than the *recht*. Nevertheless, Kant's theory allows those who are not naturally inclined to perfect themselves or even do what is right to have respect for the law, something which can arise for any rational being in their awareness of the law; Kant, far from overlooking human nature or not taking it into account, recognises our failings and creates a moral theory that recognises, and prescribes a remedy for, the problems of the human condition

## 5. Kant's theory of motivation

### a) His theory

- In chapters 1 and 2 the question of motivation doesn't matter as much as it does for Hume. It may be that no one has ever actually been motivated by reason, so no one has actually acted morally. Still, this is what morality consists in [see Smith: Hume's morality deals with motivation, but not normative reasons?!]:
- 'Reason by itself and independently of all appearances commands what ought to happen; that consequently actions of which the world has perhaps given no example—actions whose practicability might well be doubted by those who rest everything on experience—are nevertheless commanded unrelentingly by reason' (*Groundwork*, 4:408)
- Nevertheless, in chapter 3 Kant takes up the question of motivation in his own terms. Kant is a determinist about the natural world, and the natural world includes human beings. How people behave is determined by natural facts about the world. He believes that people's actions are actually determined by their desires and inclinations
- 'if I were solely a part of the sensible, they [my actions] would have to be taken as in complete conformity with the law of nature governing desires and inclinations—that is, with there heteronomy of nature' (*Groundwork*, 4:453)
- But our reason is entirely distinct from our desires and inclinations. So if our actions are determined by our inclinations, they are not determined by our reason. This seems to rule out the possibility that reason might motivate the will
- However, there's more depth to Kant than that. Kant also believes in free will, and he identifies the question of motivation with the idea of free will. Your will is the core of your self, to which all desires and inclinations are external forces. When you act simply because you feel like it, or because you are inclined to, your will is not engaged; you are acting heteronomously. You are simply being pushed by your desires. But when reason comes into play, and determines your will, you are standing up to your desires and acting autonomously, under your own control. This is acting from free will, and it's also when your action is determined by reason
- Kant believes that we can act freely, and here is his argument:
- He points out, first, that we cannot act except under the idea of freedom. If you are to see yourself as acting, you must see yourself as making decisions, and this means you must see yourself as free to make on choice or, alternatively, a different one. You must choose under the idea of freedom:
- 'We cannot possibly conceive of a reason as being consciously directed from outside in regard to its judgements, for in that case the subject would attribute the determination of his power of judgement, not to his reason, but to an impulsion. Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of alien influences. Therefore as practical reason, or as the will of a rational being, it must be regarded by itself as free; that is, the will of a rational being can be a will of his own only under the Idea of freedom, and such a will must therefore—from a practical point of view—be attributed to all rational beings' (*Groundwork*, 4:448)
- Broome says this seems pretty clear to him: you cannot decide how to act and at the same time see your decision as determined by some outside. If it was, it wouldn't seem like a decision to you. Indeed, when you act deliberately, you act under the idea of freedom. Then Kant says that, for practical purposes, it follows that you are actually free:
- 'I assert that every being who cannot act except under the idea of freedom is by that alone—from a practical point of view—really free' (*Groundwork*, 4:448)