

Introduction to Ethics – Kantian Ethics

HPPH4092

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Deontology

The morality of an action is to be judged on the basis of its adherence to rules. It has nothing to do with the action's consequences.

The most famous deontological ethical theory is undoubtedly that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant stresses the universal and necessary character of moral principles (i.e. the moral law).



Hume

Kant's view of morality was a response to British empiricism, in particular the ideas of David Hume (1711-1776) and forms of utilitarianism.

In Hume's view, morality can be fully explained in terms of passions, desires, sentiments (feelings), and experience.

For Hume, moral judgments depend in particular on the sentiment of sympathy, which allows one person's feelings to be shared by others.

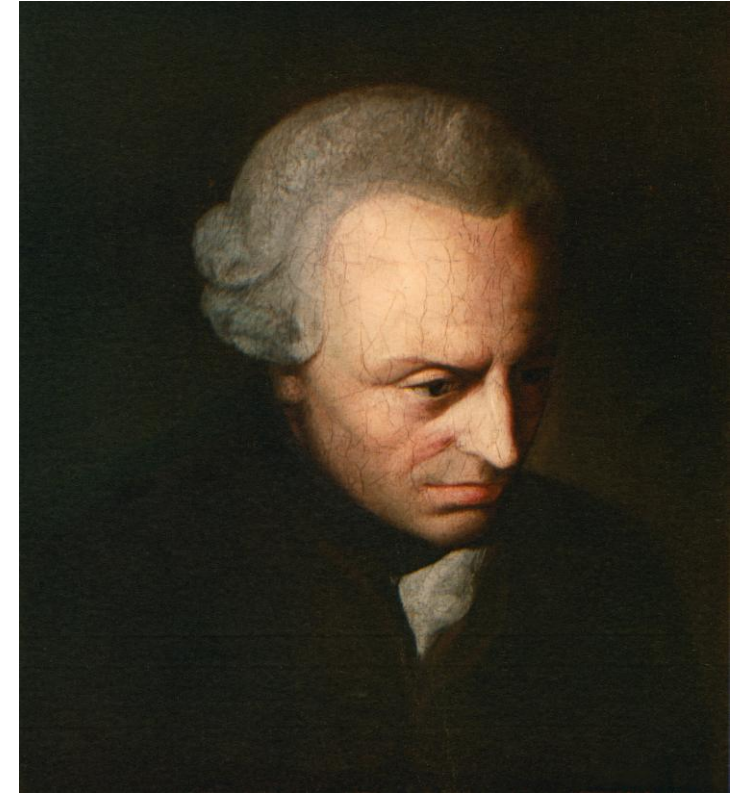


Kantian Ethics

For Kant, moral philosophy addresses the question 'What ought I to do?' He thinks that Hume's account of morality does not offer a satisfactory answer to that question.

In Kant's view, the foundation of morality is not desires or feelings but our reason or rational will.

Reason is sufficient for establishing the moral law as something universally binding on all rational beings (i.e. duty).



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Kantian Ethics

Kant believes that reason is the source of moral concepts and moral principles.

Moral duties, in his view, are commands of reason; it is reason that tells us what we ought to do.

For Kant, moral principles are absolute (without exceptions), unconditional (always valid in any kind of situation) and universal (applicable to all rational beings).



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Duty and Autonomy



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Duty



What gives an act moral worth?

For Kant, the answer is 'duty.'

For an action to have moral worth, it must be motivated by duty. If an action is not done with the motive of duty, it is without moral value.

It is not enough that we do what is right. We must do the right thing for the right reason, i.e. we do what is right simply because it is our duty to do so



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Duty



For Kant, Duty is self-imposed through reason.

Right actions are actions done out of a sense of duty. An action that has moral worth is one that is done for the sake of duty.

Thus, the moral worth of an action is determined by our 'good will' (our intention to do what is right because it is right).



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Duty



In Kant's terms, we must act from duty, not merely in accordance with duty.

For example, if you help another person simply because helping people makes you feel happy, your action does not have moral worth.



Freedom of the Will



Kant believes in the freedom of the will.

Humans are rational beings with free will (the power or ability to make decisions).

As rational beings with free will, we impose moral duties on ourselves – we act under the laws that we give to ourselves through reason.



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Autonomy



Autonomy, in the Kantian sense, means having one's moral decisions made by reason rather than desire, self-interest or anything capable of being influenced by experience.

The will of a moral agent (moral person) is rational and autonomous – it both gives itself the moral law and can constrain or motivate itself to follow the law.



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Ethical Imperative



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Ethical Imperative

An 'imperative' is any proposition that declares a certain action (or inaction) to be ethically necessary.

According to Kant, there are 2 kinds of imperatives:

hypothetical imperatives,
the categorical imperative.



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Hypothetical Imperatives

A 'hypothetical imperative' tells us what we ought to do given our wants and desires;

e.g. if I want to pass the exam, I must study hard.

Kant argues that hypothetical imperatives cannot be the basis for moral judgments because they only specify which means best achieve our ends, they do not specify what we ought to do as rational moral agents – ***they do not tell us which ends we should choose***



Categorical Imperative

The 'categorical imperative,' on the other hand, can be understood as the demands of the moral law, that is moral principles that hold without exception, in all circumstances.

It is the fundamental moral principle of moral reason.



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Hypothetical Imperative

- We ought to do it to get what we want - as a means to an end.

Categorical Imperative

- We ought to do it because it is right and we have the duty to do what is right.



Universal Law



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Universal Law

“Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.”

“Always act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be willed as a universal law of humanity.”

Universal Law

A maxim is a subjective rule that guides action.

A moral maxim, according to Kant, must have universality (must be applicable to everyone).

When you are considering whether an action is morally right or wrong, you should ask yourself whether you would want everyone to act in that way.



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Universal Law

To universalize a maxim is to conceive or imagine a world where all people necessarily acted in this way in the relevant circumstances and then see if the maxim and its associated action would still be conceivable in such a world.

If a maxim can be universalized, then we accept it, and the action is moral; if it cannot be universalized, then we reject it, and the action is immoral.



Universal Law

Kant asserted, for example, that lying cannot be conceived as a universal maxim. If everybody lies, then words lose their function to express truth.

Similarly, holding the maxim 'kill anyone who annoys you' and applying it universally would result in a world which would soon be devoid of people and without anyone left to kill. Thus holding this maxim is irrational as it ends up being impossible to hold it.



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Universal Law

For Kant, the rules derived from the categorical imperative – such as ‘never lie’ and ‘always keep your promise’ – are universal and without exception.

It is our duty to obey the commands of the categorical imperative, regardless of consequences. Our feelings and desires should also be taken out of the picture, too.



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Universal Law

Suppose some Nazi executioners are pursuing a Jew that escaped from a concentration camp.

You know where the Jew is hiding.

You also know that the executioners would kill him if they found him.

When the executioners come to ask you the whereabouts of the Jew, what should you do?

What is more important: telling the truth or saving the lives of innocent people?

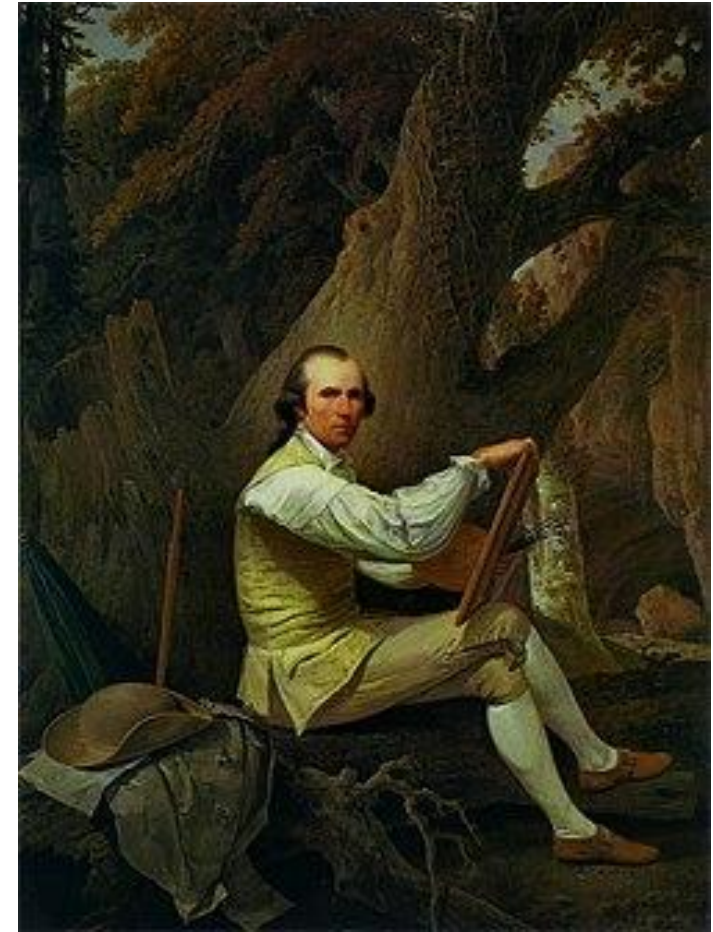
Are we responsible for the bad consequences of telling the truth?



Universal Law

One way out of this dilemma is to add qualifications to the universal principle: instead of the principle 'never lie', we have another principle: 'never lie, except to save an innocent person's life.'

But the trouble with this way of solving the problem is that there seem to be no limits on the qualifications: How about this one: 'never lie, except to please my girlfriend'?



Universal Law

Another solution is to weigh two conflicting principles to determine what is the right thing to do in a specific situation.

The first principle 'never lie' is incompatible with the second principle 'always protect the innocent'.

So we choose the second principle instead of the first – lying to the Nazi executioners becomes our actual duty.



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Universal Law

Kant asserts that if a maxim cannot be universalized, we must reject it as immoral.

A problem with his formula of the universal law is that maxims that cannot be universalized are not necessarily immoral.



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Universal Law

Consider these maxims: 'never speak unless you are spoken to', 'don't start eating until someone else does', or 'leave early in order to avoid the traffic'.

None of these maxims can be universalized because it would be self-defeating for everyone to follow the same maxim. But are they all 'immoral'?



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Reading

The reading for this section is the following chapters:

Stern, R, “Does ‘Ought’ Imply ‘Can’? And Did Kant Think It Does?” in Stern, R, ‘Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation’, OUP, 2015.

O'Neill, Onara, 'Kant', *A Companion to Ethics* edited by Peter Singer, (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000)



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