

## Kantianism

### *Speaker: David Massey*

The 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who is considered one of the most influential thinkers in the philosophical tradition, proposed the deontological ethical theory now known as Kantianism.

A *deontological* ethical theory considers actions to be morally right or wrong in and of themselves, regardless of their consequences. In other words, actions are *intrinsically* right or wrong. In contrast, a *teleological* or *consequentialist* ethical theory sees an action as morally right or wrong based only on the results or consequences of those actions. Ethical egoism and utilitarianism are examples of consequentialist ethical theories.

For example, when faced with a choice between telling the truth or telling a lie, a deontologist might say, "It is morally wrong to lie, therefore I will tell the truth to this person." In the same circumstance, a consequentialist might say, "I will tell the truth in this situation, because if I lie, this person may not trust or help me in the future."

### **Motive and the Good Will**

Kant places a strong emphasis on the will of the individual performing the moral action. In fact, for Kant, the concept of "Good Will" is at the center of all ethical action – we must *will to do good*. This concept of the Good Will, as expressed in the desire to perform our moral duty, is the proper motive for every morally acceptable action. For Kant, the consequences of the action are not to be considered at all. We must act only from the motivation to satisfy our moral duty. It is this Good Will that determines an act's moral worth.

In sharp contrast, utilitarianism gives no weight to motive at all. One may have the best of intentions, but if her actions do not result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people, then they are morally wrong.

### **The Categorical Imperative**

The **categorical imperative** is the centerpiece of Kant's ethical theory. The term *categorical imperative*, basically means "absolute command." Kant is referring to, what he sees as, an exceptionless obligation to perform the action dictated by the categorical imperative. Perhaps the best way to understand the categorical imperative is to look at how Kant used it. *It was his means for determining which action was the morally correct action in any given circumstance.*

According to Kant, there is only one categorical imperative, which he presents in three different formulations that we will explore in a moment. However, many ethicists believe that these three formulations are not the same but are really distinct from one another, and that they are all three needed to fully understand and apply Kant's ethical theory.

### Categorical Imperative – Formulation #1: The Principle of the Law of Nature

The first formulation of the categorical imperative is called the **principle of the law of nature**. It's also known as the law of universalizability, because it argues that if an action is morally right, then it must apply consistently to everyone. We should act as if our actions will become a universal law of nature. In other words, if anyone else were to be in similar circumstances to ours, they would be required to act in exactly the same manner.

For example, a Kantian borrows money from another person and promises to pay that money back. When deciding whether to keep his promise, the Kantian must consider whether his action could be universalized. His thinking might go something like this, "I could lie and break my promise. However, what would happen if *everyone* who borrows money, promising to repay it, later decides to lie and break their promise? Very quickly, promises would come to mean nothing. People wouldn't trust one another, and would not be willing to loan money to each other. This would clearly not be good for society. Therefore, it is morally wrong to lie."

A critic could argue that Kant is actually expressing some form of consequentialism, because in order to determine whether an action should be universalized, he resorts to considering what the results of that action would be in such circumstances.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the action is only being universalized for those in *similar* circumstances. The level of specificity applied to the universal law (or "maxim," as Kant calls it) is determined by the individual. For example, the universal law or maxim, based on the above scenario, might say, "Everyone who borrows money, promising to repay it, should lie and break their promise to repay." However, what if the individual and his family were homeless and starving, with no means to repay the loan. Then, the maxim might be adjusted to say, "Everyone who borrows money, promising to repay it, who later is unable to repay the money due to severe impoverishment, should lie and break their promise to repay." Whether one agrees with this statement or not, it clearly places a limitation on the first form of the maxim by making it more specific. Only under specific circumstances is it morally acceptable to act in a certain manner. This can make it easier to universalize.

Kant puts it this way:

*"Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature."*

### Categorical Imperative – Formulation #2: The Principle of Ends

The second formulation of the categorical imperative, called the **principle of ends**, states:

*"So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end and never as merely a means."*

In short, it's saying that we should always treat human beings, including ourselves, as if they are an end in and of themselves, and never only as means to an end. In other words, we should respect and value others, and not simply use or manipulate them to accomplish our own purposes.

This formulation arises from Kant's view that, due to their rational nature – or ability to reason – human beings have immense intrinsic value. People do not simply have instrumental value, but are valuable in and of themselves. As such, they are to be respected and not merely used.

The word “merely” is important in understanding what this means. For example, you are *using* your professors as a *means* to gain knowledge, skills, and perhaps a degree. You're using your professors for your own ends or purposes. Does that make what you are doing morally wrong? No, because you aren't *merely* (or only) *using* your professors. You are also valuing your professors and treating them as ends in and of themselves, by paying tuition, which enables the college to pay your professors so that they can feed themselves and their families. Both parties benefit from the arrangement. On the other hand, if you deceive someone, manipulate them into giving you something, or otherwise use them without respect, then Kant would consider that to be morally wrong, as it violates the principle of ends.

### Categorical Imperative – Formulation #3: The Principle of Autonomy

The third formulation of the categorical imperative is the **principle of autonomy**, which says we are not dependent upon others to tell us what is right and wrong, but that we are free and able to discover this for ourselves through the use of reason.

We won't spend as much time on this one, since it doesn't as clearly assist us in the process of determining what is morally right or wrong. However, it's important to note that, for Kant, the responsibility for discovering and performing the morally right action rests firmly with each individual. We are to use our ability to reason to help us apply the categorical imperative to moral questions, and make our own decisions, rather than relying on someone else to tell us what to do. For Kant, the excuse “I was only following orders,” does not excuse anyone from doing something morally wrong.

Kant puts it this way:

*“So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims.”*

### Exceptionless Rules

Kant's theory is **absolutist**, which means that it consists of *exceptionless rules*. One common criticism of Kantianism is that, although it rightly emphasizes justice and the need for consistent rules, it is too rigid and can lose sight of the purpose of ethics as a means to promote human well-being.

For example, if you hide an innocent person from violent criminals in order to protect his life, and the criminals come to your door asking if the person is with you, what should you do? Kantianism would have you tell the truth, even if it results in harm coming to the innocent person. Do you find this morally acceptable? Some would argue that another principle, perhaps that we should protect the innocent, should take priority over the principle of truth telling in life-or-death circumstances, such as this. What do *you* think?