

Lecture Notes: Kant

Relativism represents a challenge to the idea of ethics, because if relativism is true, there is no objective standard for right and wrong.

We turn now to several philosophical theories that reject relativism, and claim that not only is there an objective sense of right and wrong, but that this objective can be discovered and understood by humanity.

The first we will examine is that of Immanuel Kant. Kant fits into the broader category of deontological ethics, which means ethics based on duty.

Deontological ethics has a long tradition going back to the foundation of monotheism (sometimes called ethical monotheism). In monotheism, God defines duty and humans have the responsibility to obey it.

A good example of this would be the ten commandments.

Kant was a philosopher writing during the Enlightenment, and, while he was from a religious family, he sought to establish the idea of ethical duty on a non-religious basis (and more importantly on a basis that did not rest on simple obedience to arbitrary authority).

For Kant, reason was the key to understanding duty. Recall his epitaph from earlier in the year that come from his work, a *Critique of Practical Reason*:

“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”
(Accessed on 1.29.18 at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-development/>)

Kant argued that the objective moral truths of the universe were accessible to anyone capable of reason

Here is an overview of his argument that we will examine in greater detail through our reading of his 1785 work *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

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Things simply are, they have neither the ability to comprehend nor the ability to choose.

Persons have the ability to comprehend through reason.

Reason allows us to understand what is good (duty) and allows us the choice to act on this understanding

The human ability to choose duty for the sake of duty represents a decision to act solely from recognition of the intrinsic value of an act. This distinction between intrinsic v. instrumental value is enormously important in understanding Kant's thought.

Kant argues that our ability to 1) recognize duty through reason, and 2) command ourselves to act based on solely on recognition of the intrinsic value of such an action means that our value, as agents capable of doing this, is intrinsic as well.

This intrinsic value is the source of human dignity. Dignity is the command that others recognize our intrinsic value and, like the command to follow duty for no other reason than respect of duty itself, are commanded to respect human beings for no other reason than that dignity itself.

People thus must always be treated as ends (intrinsic value) and not simply as means (instrumental value).

This is one of the main sources of our modern conception of human rights.

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Key concepts:

- The Good will
- Morally laudable actions, Morally acceptable actions, Morally wrong actions
- Motivations v. consequences of actions
- Intrinsic v. instrumental value/Inconsequentialism
- The role of reason in comprehending duty

- Duty: the two categorical imperatives
- Perfect and imperfect duties

A. The Good Will

[Ask class to list things of value]

Kant Makes a Key distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value:

Instrumental value - Something that is valuable as a means to an end. Something whose value lies in its use, or what it helps as to achieve. Instrumental value is relative to circumstance

Intrinsic value - Something that is valuable in and of itself. Its value does not depend on circumstance or use potential. Its value is relative to nothing but rather is absolute

[Ask class to explain Kant's answer to the above question from paragraph 1]

The only thing intrinsically good is the good will. The good will is the desire to do one's duty (to do good) for no other reasons than duty (or desire to do good) itself.

All other goods - power, riches, happiness - can be corrupted if there is no good will to guide their use (1)

Kant argues that the good will is essential even to being worthy of happiness (1 end).

Even qualities that seem good in and of themselves are not good without the good will - moderation, self control, calm deliberation - all are only good when coupled with the good will (2).

Kant suggests the coolness of a villain. Think of Hitler's vegetarianism and non-consumption of alcohol.

The good will is good not for its effects, but simply by virtue of its volition.

“It’s usefulness or fruitfulness can neither add nor take away anything from this value” (3)

B. Actions: Wrong Acceptable and Praiseworthy

Ask students to try to define the four categories of actions described by and in paragraphs 4-6

In understanding these categories it is important to distinguish what Kant considers to be the difference between “will” and “inclination”

An act of will is an action internally commanded and guided by reason.
(to study for a test)

An inclination is an action internally commanded but not guided by reason. (To jump out of the way of an oncoming object which takes one by surprise).

Category 1 - Actions that are inconsistent with duty - These actions are ethically wrong (Kant 4 top)

Category 2 - Category 2 - Actions consistent with duty but motivated by self interest “from a selfish view”(Kant 5 later)

These actions are not wrong, but neither are they morally praiseworthy.
Category 3 - Actions consistent with duty but motivated by inclination (Kant 5 beginning)

“It is a duty to maintain one’s life; and, . . . everyone has a direct inclination to do so”

These actions are not wrong, but neither are they morally praiseworthy

Category 4 - Actions consistent with duty and motivated by duty (Kant 6 end)

These actions are morally praiseworthy

Ask students to come up with 2 examples of each category from their own lives. Then share with their groups.

All of this leads to a central moral insight by Kant:
Right and wrong do not depend on consequences, but rather are independent of consequences.

Actions are right or wrong based on reason (Kant's maxims (8) are arrived at through reason)

This variety of ethical theory is known as non-consequentialism.

In simple terms, it means that some actions are simply wrong, regardless of what results from them

Ask students to identify quotes confirming Kant's Non Consequentialism

C-D. Imperatives, the Categorical Imperative and Duty

Kant uses the word imperative to mean a command of the will.

Kant distinguished between two types of imperatives:

1. Those that have instrumental value - something we are commanded to do if we wish to achieve a certain end - These Kant calls hypothetical imperatives. (16)

Ask students for examples of hypothetical imperatives:

If I want to watch TV, reason commands me to turn on the television.

If I want to build a house, reason commands me to chop down a tree for wood.

In each of these questions, the command is based on a particular situation and takes the form of "if . . . then"

These are hypothetical imperatives and are commanded only out of practical necessity (as a means to an end)

2. Those that have intrinsic value - something we are commanded to do by reason for no other end but because the action is “necessary of itself without reference to another end, i.e. objectively necessary.” (16)

These commands are called categorical imperatives because they command regardless of circumstance or desired ends.

The categorical imperative is how Kant Defines duty. Our duty is to follow the command of the categorical imperative.

Categorical imperatives take the form of “do or do not” there is no “if” (sorry Yoda!) because these commands exist regardless of circumstance.

The categorical imperative commands because reason makes its command inescapable, that is to say that any rationally creature **MUST** follow the command. This is what Kant means by saying that the categorical imperative is objectively necessary.

From 11,

I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. Here, now, it is the simple conformity to law in general, without assuming any particular law applicable to certain actions, that serves the will as its principle and must so serve it, if duty is not to be a vain delusion and a chimerical notion. The common reason of men in its practical judgements perfectly coincides with this and always has in view the principle here suggested.

Kant uses the example of a lying promise to illustrate why the categorical imperative must be followed by anyone commanded by reason in paragraph 11

I can will myself to make a lying promise, but if I make such an action a universal law such a law would “destroy itself” because it would mean every promise was simultaneously a lie. By destroying itself Kant means it would result in a logical contradiction. Something cannot be both a promise and a lie at the same time, yet

this is exactly what universalization would entail.

Therefore, avoiding a lying promise is an objective necessity for anyone guided by reason.

Kant summarizes nicely in paragraph 12:

I do not, therefore, need any far-reaching penetration to discern what I have to do in order that my will may be morally good. Inexperienced in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for all its contingencies, I only ask myself: Canst thou also will that thy maxim should be a universal law? If not, then it must be rejected, and that not because of a disadvantage accruing from it to myself or even to others, but because it cannot enter as a principle into a possible universal legislation, and reason extorts from me immediate respect for such legislation.

Kant maintains that this is not highly abstract or difficult and within the reach of anyone capable of basic reason (the moral law within).

In 14, Kant lays out some key ideas and a fascinating paradox:

Rational beings alone are able to comprehend the law

Reason makes people free (unlike objects which must follow natural laws)

But a person guided by reason will, in some cases be commanded to act in a certain way:

If reason infallibly determines the will, then the actions of such a being which are recognised as objectively necessary are subjectively necessary also, i.e., the will is a faculty to choose that only which reason independent of inclination recognises as practically necessary, i.e., as good

Thus reason is the source both of our freedom and our binding obligation

E. Perfect and imperfect duties

It is easier to understand this section by reading paragraph 24 first.

When we universalize an action (Kant refers to this as willing the action to be a universal law) there are three possible results:

No contradiction is found - This means the action is consistent with duty

A logical contradiction is found. A logical contradiction is a statement that cannot be conceived of - a square circle, for example. If universalization results in a logical contradiction, refraining from the action is a perfect or strict duty.

A material contradiction is found. A material contradiction is a situation that is conceivable (it is logically possible), but one which no rational individual will will (because it would contradict their rational self interest). If universalization result in a material contradiction, then the duty is imperfect or meritorious (something that should be done, but is not an obligation

Note duties can be phrased both negatively - don't commit suicide - and affirmatively - help those in need.

Now the situations described in 20-23

20 - Destruction of life to improve life is a logical contradiction - thus avoiding suicide is a perfect or strict duty

21 - A lying promise destroys the concept of a promise when universalized - Avoiding lying promises is a strict duty.

22 - Not using you talents but living a life of sloth - a material contradiction - An imperfect or lax duty

23 - Should those who are prosperous help others? This results in a material contradiction and thus is an imperfect or lax duty

F. The Categorical Imperative and the connection to Human dignity

Kant draws an important distinction between “things” and “persons”

The categorical imperative derives from things that have intrinsic value, what Kant calls “absolute worth,” something that is an end in itself. (25)

The value of things is always instrumental (Kant uses conditional in 25).

Beings without rationality have only instrumental value - thus they are called things.

Rational beings are called persons because they have value as ends, not simply means “things whose existence is an end in itself” (25)

Reason depends on the existence of things that are intrinsically valuable. This is how Kant claims that reason is universal. It is based on the recognition of intrinsic value and the respect intrinsic value demands a priori (and by definition).

We have seen how Kant argues that reason allows us to understand duty and the ability to choose to do our duty for no other reason than duty itself (the good will). Since the good will has intrinsic value, so do we, since we can rationally choose to follow duty for its own sake. This means we have intrinsic value.

Since every rational person has this capacity, the intrinsic value I have is shared by all other rational beings.

This leads to the second, and in my opinion clearer, formulation of the categorical imperative:

Act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only.

This simple idea is the basis for our dignity, the demand that we be treated as beings with intrinsic and not simply instrumental value.

Kant then explores four situations regarding the second version of the categorical imperative:

1. Is suicide consistent with duty? No. Destroying the self to escape pain uses the existence of the self as a means to achieve the ends of avoiding pain.

“I cannot, therefore, dispose in any way of a man in my own person so as to mutilate him, to damage or kill him.” (29)

2. The lying promise treats the person promised (and lied to) as a means only to achieve my ends (30).
3. Not developing your talents ignores the end of humanity intended by nature - the greater perfection of our capacities - and turns humanity into simply a means of generating pleasure. (31)
4. Helping others. “The natural end of all men have is their own happiness” but my end must “harmonize” with the end of mankind as a whole. “for the ends of any subject which is an end in himself ought as far as possible be my ends also, if that conception is to have full effect with me” (32)

Strengths of Kant's Ideas

- It is based on a commonly accepted principle of morality - the golden rule - that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Kant himself makes this point in paragraph (12-13). Kant insists that we have a fundamental duty to view the world from other's perspectives - not simply our own. This is an argument made by many religious traditions as well, for example, the Christian New Testament contains the following passage:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’[a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Accessed on 2.13.18 at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2022:36-40>)

- It also doesn't require experience with the world. No expertise about how things are "likely to come out" is required" (12). Thus ethical knowledge is accessible to all who can reason.
- If you accept the idea that the principles of reason are universal, it establishes a basis for ethics which is applicable everywhere, in all cultures and times. Kant's system rejects relativism in favor of the universalizability of reason.
- Strict duties provide absolute moral guidance
- It accords with the intrinsic value place on human life by modern democratic societies
- It accords with the importance of freedom in modern democratic societies.
- Kant's ideas don't prioritize the interests of the self or the interests of those intimate to the self above others.
- Kant's theories are good tools for revealing hypocrisy.

Problems with Kant's Ideas

- Kant's theory ignores the consequences of our actions. It seems to force decisions that are morally counter intuitive (Anne Frank/Terrorist torture example)
- It assumes reason is universal and not bound to a single culture
- Kant's focus on intent seems odd. Kant would say that the good Samaritan that helps the wounded stranger out of sympathy is not morally praiseworthy, But the Samaritan who hates the stranger and is indifferent to his plight but helps him out of duty is. This seems to devalue qualities of empathy that are traditionally considered praiseworthy and positive. (Calling Mom on her birthday example)
- It ignores human psychology - the way form habits and act not from reason but from inclination (the Aristotle objection)

