

# Lecture Notes

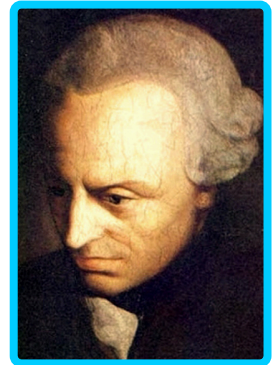


## Kantian Ethics



Notes on Kant's Deontological ethical framework

Designed to accompany the lecture from Cogito Education



### Who was Kant?

- Immanuel Kant was a Prussian Philosopher who lived in the 18th Century
- He believed that morality had its foundation in:
  - > Rationality
  - > Human Freedom
- But he also believed that the morality generated by these two elements was universal

Definition: It applies to everyone

### The Good Will

- "Good Will" is an inclination to only obey your moral duty
- Kant believed that it was the only characteristic that is good in and of itself

**Why:** Because all other characteristics might lead to bad actions

- For example, "Bravery" is great if you are standing up for your friend, but bad if you use it to rob a bank, so cannot be good in itself
- Here, Kant argues that the character controls the two other parts of the mind:
  - > Talents
    - These are intellectual abilities
  - > Temperament



"Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except good will. Intelligence, wit, judgement, and the other talents of the mind ... or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good."

(The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant, Translated by Thomas K. Abbott, Lara Denis ed., 2005, p.55)

- These are abilities of action
- So, if the character is bad, then the implementation of the talents and temperament will be bad.
  - > This means that those qualities of the talents and temperament cannot be good without qualification (they could also be used for bad)
- Therefore, the only thing that is good in itself is a good character – a Good Will (the desire to perform your duty).

## Acting according to duty vs Acting out of duty

- Kant believed that it was only if you acted out of Good Will that you were performing a good action

### Why: The Shopkeeper analogy

- Shopkeeper A doesn't overcharge a child because he doesn't want to get caught and lose custom.
- Shopkeeper B doesn't overcharge a child because he believes it his duty not to (he is motivated by the Good Will).
  - > Only Shopkeeper B has done the right thing. Shopkeeper A is not doing the right thing on purpose (and so it isn't the right thing), but instead because of selfish motivations

### Why: Charitable person analogy

- Person A volunteers for charity because they're inclined to be kind
- Person B volunteers for charity, even though they don't like people, because it is their duty (motivated by the Good Will)
  - > Only Person B is acting morally, because they are choosing to do the right thing due to the fact that it's his duty, rather than because it was something they wanted to do

- Kant puts it like this:



“Now an action done from duty must wholly exclude the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will, so that nothing remains which can determine the will except objectively the law, and subjectively pure respect for this practical law...”

(The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant, Translated by Thomas K. Abbott, Lara Denis ed., 2005, p.62)

- Kant is making a distinction between:
  - > Acting in accordance with your duty
    - Where your inclinations (what you want) happen to coincide with the moral law
  - > Acting out of duty
    - Ignoring your inclinations and doing something because it is the right thing (that is, implementing your Good Will)
- It is only when we act out of duty that we perform moral actions
  - > In the above examples, both shopkeepers and charity volunteers performed the same action, but:
    - Shopkeeper A and volunteer A act according to duty, so it is not a good action
    - Shopkeeper B and volunteer B act out of duty, so it is a good action

## Hypothetical vs Categorical Imperatives

- An imperative is a command to action:
- Hypothetical imperatives
  - Definition: A command that requires a motive
- Categorical imperatives
  - Definition: A command that's an absolute demand
- For instance, "If you want to get fit, you should go for a run"
- For instance, "You have to tell the truth"



"If now the action is good only as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; if it is conceived as good in itself and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is categorical."

(The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant, Translated by Thomas K. Abbott, Lara Denis ed., 2005, p.74)

- Kant believes that only Categorical Imperatives can be moral because they are the only ones where the motivation is solely the Good Will
  - > It is important to note, of course, that you can have non-moral Categorical Imperatives, but all moral Imperatives are Categorical in nature
- Hypothetical Imperatives require inclinations, and so might result in acting according to duty but will not be acting out of duty

## The First Categorical Imperative



"Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become universal law."

(The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant, Translated by Thomas K. Abbott, Lara Denis ed., 2005, p.81)

- Kant says that before you act, you need to formulate the **maxim** (rule) by which you are about to act
  - > To do this, you need to apply the First Categorical Imperative:
    - Ask yourself, if it were **universalised**, would it lead to contradiction?
- If it is **contradictory**, then you should not perform that action

Definition: Imagine it were a universal moral law that everyone followed

Definition: When an idea makes itself false

- There are two types of contradiction:
- Contradiction in conception
  - > Strong form.
  - > The maxim contradicts itself – it makes itself wrong.
  - > This would mean that the maxim you were about to act on was extremely wrong.
- Contradiction in will
  - > Weak form.
  - > The maxim would mean that the kind of hypothetical world you'd create would be one that you wouldn't want to live in.
  - > This would mean that the maxim you're about to act on is still probably wrong.

#### Application: A lying promise

- **Maxim:** "It is right to lie about a promise"
- **Universalization:** Everyone would lie all of the time
- **Contradiction in conception:**
  - > Lying relies upon an assumption of truth (in the person being lied to), if everyone lies all of the time, there would be no presumption of truth.
  - > Lying would never be believed.
  - > Universalizing the maxim makes its aim (lying) ineffectual – it contradicts itself in concept.
- **Duty:** Do not lie

## The Second Categorical Imperative



"... the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end."

(The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Immanuel Kant, Translated by Thomas K. Abbott, Lara Denis ed., 2005, p.87)

- Kant believes that one of the pre-conditions of morality is autonomy
- So if you undermine autonomy, you are undermining morality itself
- A few definitions:

Definition: Free action

- Means

Definition: Using something for your own purposes

- End

Definition: Respecting something as having freedom of choice

- The Second Categorical Imperative states that you must not undermine the moral autonomy of another rational agent
  - > Morality is founded in our ability to choose rationally from options
    - This is because, as Kant puts it; "Ought implies can"

- You can only be responsible for something if you were able to do/not do a certain thing
- > Morality requires freedom
- So, by taking away someone's freedom, you are taking away the thing that makes them special, as independent moral agents
- This doesn't mean that you can't use people as a means, but that you must also respect them as an end
- > So, you cannot have a slave (that would be not giving them a choice about their actions)
- > But, you could employ someone (that would give them a choice because they could choose to no longer work for you)

#### Application: Lying

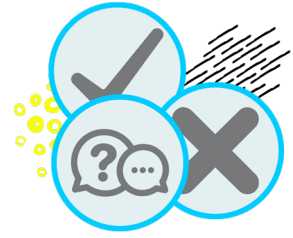
- Lying to someone gives them a false impression of the world, and so they cannot make a free decision because they do not have the correct data to make that decision
- You are undermining their autonomy, and therefore breaking the second formulation
- It is therefore, again, your duty not to lie
- **Duty: Do not lie**

# Criticisms of Kantian Ethics



Here, we'll examine some of the debate surrounding Kantian ethics

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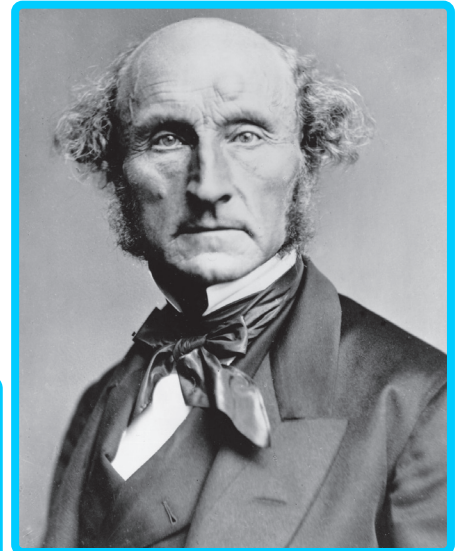


## The Categorical Imperative leads to bad outcomes

- This criticism came most prominently from the supporter of Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill.
- He argued that the Categorical Imperative would condone negative actions
- Here is how he put it:



“But when he [Kant] begins to deduce from this precept [the First Categorical Imperative] any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the consequences of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.”



(Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, p. 10)

- Mill is arguing here that Kant has in fact failed to show that there are any contradictions in concept that can be produced by the First Categorical Imperative
  - > That there are only contradictions in will, which are not as strong as an actual identification of wrongness
- Mill argues, therefore, that there are plenty of possible maxims (e.g. “Kill when you can get away with it”) that do not lead to contradiction
  - > The conclusion, then, is that Kant accidentally condones a whole range of actions that are morally wrong
- A possible response, for Kant here would be that whilst it is clear that the First Categorical Imperative does allow for maxims to be universalised without a contradiction in conception, the Second Categorical Imperative less obviously does so
  - > For instance, any form of murder or stealing quite clearly undermines a person's autonomy

## Conflicting duties

- Another issue that Kant fails to address, according to the critic Benjamin Constant is the problem of conflicting duties
- In the famous “Murderer at the door” argument, he suggests that we can have no way of choosing between two clear duties in Kant’s ethical system:

### Murderer at the door

- **Setting:** A friend comes to the door and asks to hide in your house. You let him in. Next, a murderer comes to the door and asks where your friend is. What should you do?
  - > **Conflicting duties:**
    - Duty to your friend to save them from death
    - Duty to the murderer not to lie to them