

Immanuel Kant

'Genius is the ability to independently arrive at and understand concepts that would normally have to be taught by another person'

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was born in the city of Königsberg, East Prussia on April 22, 1724. He came from a family of harness-makers and was the fourth of nine children, only four of whom survived into adulthood. The young Immanuel was brought up in a devout Protestant household and although he later was to become sceptical of organised religion, he always maintained a belief in God. From an early age he loved the natural world and showed an enormous appetite for study.

In 1740, at the age of sixteen, he entered the University of Königsberg, where this serious and diminutive student - he was less than 5 feet tall - would spend the rest of his brilliant career. Indeed, legend has it that he never set foot anywhere more than 60 miles from Königsberg and lived his life so predictably, that the good folk of Königsberg would set their clocks by his daily walks. At the university he studied the philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz and the new mathematical physics of Isaac Newton. When his father died in 1746, Kant was left with no income and had to interrupt his studies to become a private tutor.

In 1747 at the age of 22, he published his first work, *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces*, a ground-breaking work looking at how and why things move. According to Descartes, everything is animated by push and pull but for Leibniz, the existence of a metaphysical animating force was proven by philosophic arguments. Kant managed to reconcile these two very different ideas. By suggesting that different types of 'body' work in different types of ways, he allowed for the Cartesian principles of cause and effect to stand alongside Leibniz' belief that there was no causal relationship between mind and body, but only a kind of natural harmony.

After seven years tutoring, Kant returned to teach at the University of Königsberg where he quickly commanded respect to such a degree that young and old alike consulted him as an oracle on the pressing questions of the day. In 1755 this obscure 31 year old Professor wrote *General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*. The book postulated that the origin of the solar system was a result of the gravitational connection of atoms. It opened up new horizons in astronomy, extending it far beyond the solar system to galactic realms and prefiguring our understanding today. He also established the newly emerging discipline of physical geography, a subject he lectured on for almost his entire career.

Kant never married but was looked after for over thirty years by a devoted servant, Martin Lampe, whose duties included waking Kant at 5.00am every morning and keeping the room where he worked extremely warm. Kant's extraordinary self-discipline enabled him to produce works on the sciences, physical geography, law, aesthetics and history, and remarkably, seminal works too, in philosophy and ethics.

Kant's daily routine after rising at 5am was to spend an hour drinking tea, smoking a pipe, and thinking over his day's work. From six he prepared his lecture, which began at seven and lasted until nine. He then devoted himself to writing until the midday meal, at which time he always had company. Afterwards he took a daily walk of an hour or so, and the evening was given to reading and reflection. He retired to bed at ten o'clock.

In 1781 he published ***Critique of Pure Reason***. This 800-page book was to become one of the most important works in the history of philosophy. By "*pure reason*", Kant was referring to knowledge obtained, not through the distorting channels of our senses, but knowledge inherent in the nature and structure of our minds. Kant argued that it is the mind that is the guardian of morality and the mind that produces moral statements. Most of the statements we make are either a priori analytic {knowable without experience with their meaning contained within the structure of the statement - like maths}, or they are a posteriori synthetic {knowable as a result of experience and having to be proved true or false in the normal way}. For Kant, moral statements are a priori synthetic – a combination of the instant, maths-like thud of intuitive understanding that *something* is moral, which then needs to be tested as to whether *this thing* is moral.

In 1785 Kant went on to write another seminal work, this time on moral philosophy. The book marked Kant out as the primary advocate of deontological ethics which understands duty as the motive for moral action. In contrast to the teleological theories dominating the moral philosophers of his day, Kant's ***Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*** posited that the rightness of an action is determined by the character of the principle that it is acted upon.

Kant wrote that his purpose of writing his book was 'the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality'. For him, human autonomy was the key, and this autonomy includes the freedom to discover the moral law for ourselves rather than having it handed to us by religion. In the *Groundwork* Kant describes moral obligation as a 'categorical imperative', an unconditional principle that is intrinsically valid {as an a priori, instantly recognisable claim}, while expressing this principle in three equivalent formulations which give structure to the notion of duty. These three formulations – or ways of expressing it – will provide the 'test' or the synthetic part of Kant's earlier hunch that moral actions are a priori synthetic.

First, always perform actions that may be made rules for everyone {universalizability}. Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. Second, always treat people as ends in themselves, not as means to an end. Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means. Third, live your life as if you were a member of the Kingdom of Ends where all people live as if these rules are totally valid. Every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.

In 1788 he published the second of his three great critiques, ***Critique of Practical Reason***; a further work on moral theory. In looking at whether or not a man is free, Kant can say that he is, by insisting that freedom follows logically from reason. Together with immortality and the existence of God these three `postulates of practical reason` all have to be true if the universe is fair. Kant knew as well as anyone that actions done from duty might not benefit us; they might be the last thing we want to do. But if the universe is fair, then these actions will be rewarded – if not now than in an after-life. If there's an after-life, there must also be a God. And if there is reward and punishment then we must also be genuinely free.

The poet Coleridge was later to describe reading Kant's work '*as if being gripped by a giant's hand*' while Goethe compared it to '*walking into a lighted room*'. Kant himself summed up his quest in life as being three urgent questions; '*What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?*'

In 1790 Kant completed his third critique, ***The Critique of Judgment***. Although he continued to write, well into his seventies, his health began to deteriorate and he became totally blind. He died, surrounded by friends, on February 12, 1804, in Königsberg. His last words were "*Es ist gut*" {"*It is good*"}, and his tomb in Königsberg cathedral was inscribed with words from his *Critique of Practical Reason*:

***"Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe
the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me"***

Just like Confucius and Aristotle, Kant's contribution to the shape of world civilization is immense and his legacy assured. Modern thought begins with Kant, the appearance of *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, marking the beginning of modern philosophy.

It is said, that to account for the influence of Kant is to write the entire history of modern philosophy. His work is read and studied on all continents and his influence is global. His Categorical Imperative informed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2004 bicentennial of his death was remembered in conferences as far afield as China, Iran and Venezuela.

Which just goes to show what can be achieved when a genius, who knew the importance of concentration, got up early and made sure his study was kept adequately warm. Perhaps one could say that the contrast between his comparatively uneventful life and the greatness of his influence has itself a dramatic quality.

CLASS ACTIVITIES

TASK ONE

Most of us live by rules, obedience to which we take as a duty. What are the most important rules you follow? What are the most important rules in your family? Are

there any rules you have rejected as you have grown older? Are there any rules that society accepts that you reject? Give examples

Discussion of Kant's notion of duty occurred in the unlikely setting of a Jerusalem courtroom in 1961, at the war-crimes trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann, who had been instrumental in organising the Holocaust. During his trial Eichmann quoted Kant and said he had just been doing his duty by following orders:

"I had known the Categorical Imperative, but it was in a nutshell, in a summarized form. I suppose it could be summarized as, 'Be loyal to the laws, be a disciplined person, live an orderly life, do not come into conflict with laws' That more or less was the whole essence of that law for the use of the little man."

{Adolf Eichmann}

Eichmann declared that he had lived his whole life according to a Kantian definition of "duty". However why do you think Eichmann's interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy was seen by many commentators as superficial, self-interested and lacking understanding?

Some people claim that Eichmann was a "conscientious Nazi" who did his duty for duty's sake. But was he obeying the categorical imperative? Or parodying it? Explain the reasons for your answer. (NB. You might want to consider Kant's three formulations to do this). Give an example of a contemporary equivalent of the "conscientious Nazi."

TASK TWO

Most people would say that lying is always wrong, except when there's a good reason for it, meaning it's not always wrong! Kant however, argued consistently that it is never right to tell a lie.

Bearing in mind Kant's Categorical Imperative, why do you think he believed lying was always wrong?

Is it always right to tell the truth, even if it hurts or destroys someone else?

What matters more, the life of an individual or the majesty of the moral law?

Can you think of examples where it could be argued that lying is moral?

Although we can understand that if lying became a universal law relationships would collapse – what might possibly be the consequences be of *not lying* becoming an universal law? Might relationships similarly be threatened?

TASK THREE

Cheating involves not playing by the rules. Is it possible for a cheater to will his/her maxim as a universal law? Use Kant's notion of a maxim to show what, if anything, is wrong with cheating in an A Level examination. How would Kant's approach to this

kind of example differ from the approaches of the utilitarian? Which comes closest to your own position on the issue?

Imagine the following scenario: Rosie borrows money from a friend and promises to repay her, even though she knows she won't be able to. What is the maxim of this action? Could it become a universal law?

TASK FOUR

Categorical Imperatives are unconditional commands e.g. "Don't cheat on your taxes", even if cheating serves your interests. According to Kant, our actions must be based on the categorical imperative because morality commands it. You cannot opt out of it or claim that it does not apply to you – it is a "categorical imperative". Kant contrasts this with it being a "hypothetical imperative". Write a sentence explaining the connection between morality and categorical imperatives? Which of the following imperatives are categorical and which ones are hypothetical:

"Be honest, so that people will think well of you"

"Thou shall not steal"

"Do not steal if you want to be popular."

"Do not lie"

"If you want to be well-liked, do not lie."

"Thou shall be honest"

"Don't cheat on your partner"

TASK FIVE

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explores the issue of suicide. Read this short extract:

"A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes feels sick of life, but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether taking his own life would not be contrary to his duty to himself. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is this: from self-love I make as my principle to shorten my life when its continued duration threatens more evil than it promises satisfaction. There only remains the question as to whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature?"

Metaphysics of Morals

How do you think Kant answered his own question, and explain why?

TASK SIX

Drawing on your own experience, give a clear-cut example of a case you know in which one person is using another person merely as a means to an end.

Give a clear-cut example of a case in which a person is respecting another person as an end-in-him/herself.

Is it possible to live a life whereby you do not use other people merely as a means? Why or why not?

TASK SEVEN

Kant thought that humans were different to animals because humans alone have reason and humans *give value* to everything around them.

In contrast to the prevailing mood of his day however, Kant did argue that it was wrong to treat animals badly. He derived this prohibition against cruelty to animals as a violation of a duty in relation to oneself. According to Kant, humans as rational agents have the duty to strengthen feelings of compassion, since this feeling promotes morality in relation to other human beings. But, cruelty to animals deadens and numbs feelings of compassion in humans. Therefore, humans are obliged not to treat animals brutally. What do you think?

Are animals deserving of respect?

Are there certain types of animal worthy of more respect than others?

Should we respect animals as much as we respect human beings?

When, if ever, are we justified in using animals as a means to human ends?

TASK EIGHT

Many political systems around the world are prepared to cede the needs of the minority in favour of the majority – a utilitarian bias. This is especially true in times of war when states sacrifice a `few` in defence of the `many` – any loss of life seen as being instrumental in achieving a greater end result such as peace or justice. Kant however argued that people must be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. Can you think of examples where you could argue that it is sometimes necessary to treat people as means to an end?

TASK NINE

Kant was opposed to taking the consequences of an action into account. The end does not in any way justify the means according to his deontological {duty-based} theory. Any good consequences from a moral act, for Kant, had to be purely

incidental to the moral action and ought to have no place in the decision regarding what action to take.

{a} Do you agree, or do you think that consequences are an important part of ethical decision-making? If so why?

{b} Have you a personal experience of doing something you thought was right only for it to turn out badly?

{c} Have you a personal experience of acting in a way you knew was wrong, and good consequences resulting?

{d} Kant once wrote of the “*serpent-windings of utilitarianism*”. Why do you think he was opposed to an utilitarian ethic?

TASK TEN

Kant suggests that the only action that is truly good is the one that is in accordance with the Good Will, *the Summum Bonum*, meaning that the action is done because it is good in and of itself - not because of any consequences that might result. He illustrates by telling a story about a grocer:

‘...it certainly accords with duty that a grocer should not overcharge his inexperienced customer; and where there is much competition a sensible shopkeeper refrains from so doing and sticks to a fixed and general price for everybody so that a child can buy from him just as well as anyone else. Thus people are served honestly; but this is not nearly enough for us to believe that a shopkeeper has acted in this way from duty or from principles of fair dealing; his interest required him to do so. We cannot assume him to have in addition an immediate inclination towards his customers, leading him as it were, out of love, to give no man preference over another in the matter of price. Thus the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but solely from purposes of self-interest.’
Groundwork of Metaphysics and Morals

Kant gives two other illustrations. In your opinion did the two men in Kant’s two illustrations below, act in accordance with his concept of the Good Will?

1. The king threatens a peasant with death unless the peasant publicly lies and declares that a person the king dislikes, plots to kill the king. The peasant lies.
2. A man lusts after a woman and make plans to rape her. However he changes his mind on seeing the city gallows on which he would be hanged if he executed his plan.

TASK ELEVEN

Kant on Capital Punishment

"If he has committed murder he must die. Here there is no substitute that will satisfy justice. There is no similarity between life, however wretched it may be, and death, hence no likeness between the crime and the retribution unless death is judicially carried out upon the wrongdoer"

{Kant, *The Philosophy of Law*}

Using some of the principles of Kant's ethics, explain why he thought capital punishment was a just punishment for murder?

TASK TWELVE

Complete the sentences below by adding the following missing words where you think they should go: **universal, end, means, Kingdom, deontological, Good Will, consequences, reason, duty...**

Kant's approach to ethics is.....

This means that for Kant, the right or wrongness of the action is to be found in the action itself, and not in it's.....Kant is a rationalist.

He believes thatis the means by which we can analyse the world.

Kant argues that the only thing which is good in and of itself is what he calls theHe argued that "all rational beings" have theto behave morally.

There are three ways that Kant formulates the categorical imperative.

Firstly, one should act in such a way that one could will it that one's action should become alaw.

Secondly, one should always act in such a way as to treat fellow beings as anin themselves and not as ato achieving an end.

Thirdly, one should act as though you were a legislator in the ".....of ends".

TASK THIRTEEN

No ethical theory is without its critics. Using what you consider to be the FOUR strongest criticisms in the list below, write an imaginary conversation between Immanuel Kant and an opponent. You must **decide for yourself** how Kant would respond to defend himself.

KANT & CRITIC

Opponent:

Kant:

Opponent:

Kant:

Opponent:

Kant:

Opponent:

Kant:

CRITICISMS

When we watch *Comic Relief* or *Sports Relief* on TV we don't always give money out of a sense of duty, but often give because our feelings are aroused and our emotions touched. Sometimes we act not out of a sense of 'duty for duty's sake', but through our feelings and emotions. Kantian ethics can appear cold and impersonal, while following what one perceives to be ones "duty", without guidance from compassion, can lead to rigid moral fanaticism {think Eichmann!}

Kant's system does not take into account situations in which duties may conflict. The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre gave an example of conflicting duties when he wrote of a pupil during World War Two who is absolutely torn between looking after his ailing mother in France or travelling to Britain to help fight the Nazis. He found himself "*drawn into a vicious circle.*" Which of the duties does he follow?

Kant's theory does not help with the Principle of Double Effect. For example, should a terminally ill patient be given painkilling drugs to ease their suffering if the administration of these drugs will cause them to die sooner?

As a deontologist Kant is not interested in the consequences of actions. However many people would say that consequences *do* matter. There are some occasions when consequences can be so severe that it would better to break a rule than allow terrible things to happen.

Kant's ethical system is inflexible, and there might be occasions when you should be able to break an unhelpful rule if the individual circumstances warrant it.

Kantian ethics are unrealistic: Kant asks us to follow maxims as if they were universal rules, but just because we act this way, it doesn't mean others will. For example, pacifism makes sense as a law of nature, but someone chose to be a pacifist, they might end up being a sitting duck for violent aggressors.

Every situation is unique – universal rules aren't helpful in the real world where every situation is different. If no two situations are the same, morality should be relativist not absolutist.

Some modern philosophers such as preference utilitarian Peter Singer have criticised Kantian ethics for being too human-centred {anthropocentric} designating non-human animals as having no intrinsic value. This according to Singer and other environmentalists and animal rights activists is “*Speciesism*”.

Not everyone agrees on what universal maxims should be. Ideas about right and wrong can be totally conditioned by cultural or religious factors and what might be considered moral in one culture might be considered immoral in another.

Is there an Objective Reality? Are our perceptions of reality always subjective?

TASK FOURTEEN

Discuss the following statements:

“Everyone’s idea of happiness is different and therefore subjective. Reason, however, forces us to be objective and therefore make more considered, rational judgements”

“Kant’s morality is straightforward and based on reason, and so is accessible to everyone”.

“Kant aims to treat everyone fairly and justly and so corrects the utilitarian idea that the minority can suffer so long as the majority are happy”.

“It’s impossible to do your duty without also having some expectation of reward, of what you might get in return. People rarely act purely out of duty.”

“With climate change, people are now taking action because they feel fearful of what might happen. But as long as the actions are good, why should it matter if it is an emotional rather than a purely rational response that inspires good actions?”

“Kant’s theory can be compatible with religious beliefs but does not need religious beliefs for it to make sense”.

“Today’s uncertain world makes Kant’s principle of universalizability more potent than ever because it reminds us that unless we meet our common interests and just not our individual desires, the future looks gloomy”

‘If I steal from you, I give permission to everyone to steal from me’

“Always act in such a way that you would not be embarrassed to have your actions splashed all over the front page of The Sun”

TASK FIFTEEN

The Hot Seat!

Put Immanuel Kant in the **HOT SEAT!** One student will be in character and play Immanuel Kant {practice your German accent!} while the rest of the group question

and challenge his ethical theory. In preparation for this drama, write down questions to ask Kant with the answers you think he might give.

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

Question:

Answer:

THE SCRIPT

Why don't we condemn a lion for killing? Because it is only humans who are capable of acting morally. A rock or a flower isn't good or bad, and neither is an animal. Only beings who can freely choose how to act have the capacity to be good. And this assumption - the assumption that we are free to choose – really matters to the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant.

Immanuel Kant lived in Königsberg in East Prussia during the 18th century. Although Kant's contribution to philosophy was immense, he lived an ordered and quiet life – going for the same walk every day, so predictably, that the citizens of the town adjusted their clocks.

Kant looked for morality outside of religion. For him any Divine Command missed the point because if men or women obeyed out of fear of God, they were not really acting morally. Instead he was interested in discovering a root for moral decision-making that was beyond the Church– and to find it he turned to logic and to reason

a posteriori: knowledge dependent on experience

a priori: knowledge independent of experience

Everyone claims to know things. We know that Henry 8th had six wives, or that the cake is made of chocolate and that fire is hot. But how do we know these things?

Philosophers say that knowledge comes from two different sources. There is knowledge we get through experience –tasting the cake gives us knowledge that it's made of chocolate, touching the fire gives us knowledge that it is hot- posterior to – or after – the experience.

On the other hand however we don't need to touch or taste anything to know that mathematically $1 + 1 = 2$ – it just 'is' and we know it intuitively. We know it prior to or before any experience – and this is called a priori knowledge.

There's also a further subdivision. Statements can also be either analytic or synthetic.

Analytic statements are true by virtue of their meaning

Synthetic statements are true by how their meaning relates to the world

An analytic statement is one that is true if it contains its own meaning within itself- or if it says the same thing twice! A good example is: 'Bachelors are unmarried males' - you cannot find a bachelor who is not an unmarried male. It would be a contradiction in terms if you did.

However there is nothing analytic in saying 'Henry is not a bachelor' he might be – or he might not be. If you say 'Henry is not a bachelor', but he was, you might be lying or just misinformed – but you would not be contradicting yourself. This kind of statement is known as 'synthetic'.

Up until the time of Kant, it was popular to view moral statements as a posteriori synthetic – that is they were only knowable having experienced the world, and they might or might not be true. Kant asserted that morality itself was a priori but a priori synthetic. In other words the root of morality is as instantly knowable and independent of experience, as is maths. But the things that 'seem' to be moral may or may not be true and according to Kant they have to be tested – just like any other synthetic statement.

*Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration: the starry
Heavens above me and the moral law within me
Critique of Practical Reason*

To establish that the urge to morality is a priori and within us, Kant turns to the essential nature of man. And what he discovers is something almost mathematical in its simplicity and found solely within rational humans; the good will. Unlike every other virtue, the good will is so pure that it can never be reduced; it can never become anything less than itself. Courage looks like a virtue – but it can be turned to evil in the wrong hands; a brave thief is more ruthless and more extreme. His courage remains courage, but it's courage put to evil. Not so good will. The instant a good will is used in a bad way it is no longer good will. It is morality's starting point.

There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence and wit are doubtless good. But they can also become bad if the will, which is to make use of these gifts is not good
Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

The good will is a priori – and so recognisable without experience. Statements, however, are not so simple. Whether they look like moral statements or not, they may not always be correct. And for Immanuel Kant, only a certain type of statement has any chance of being moral.

Some statements – or maxims - are hypothetical: ‘I mustn’t eat so many chocolates’ is a hypothetical statement. I should only stop eating chocolates if I want to lose weight. I should only obey the command if I want something as a result. Whereas categorical statements are not done for result – in fact they are done regardless of the result. For Kant there were four possible reasons why someone might do something that looks moral. He eliminated three one by one. And he does so because they are all hypothetical.

You might do something good because you will benefit from it. If the shop-keeper who reduces all his goods in a sale is motivated by the buzz of being kind, or in the hope of making a long term profit, he is not really acting morally. He’s doing it for the reward - in true hypothetical style.

Some people, on the other hand, act out of curiosity and interest. The counsellor who helps people because she’s fascinated by problems is not a particularly good woman. Her career choice looks moral but, on Kant’s criteria, may not turn out to be that of a good woman. It too is driven by results.

Neither are religious people necessarily moral. The young woman, who doesn’t take contraceptives only because the Pope tells her not to, is not good. She is merely afraid of the consequences of disobeying authority. To succumb to authority merely to avoid consequences is not to behave morally.

There is, however, a fourth reason why you might behave in a certain way. You might do something because you perceive it’s your duty to do so. You may not want to do it, but you do it anyway. This is the categorical imperative - done not for any result, nor because you’re afraid. It is the only moral course.

So, if morality gives us a categorical imperative to follow our duty and do the right thing, how do we know what actions are actually good? How do we test if a maxim or moral statement - is actually right or wrong?

According to Kantian ethics a statement, to be right, must be capable of being true everywhere. It must be universal. If it’s good for me to behave in a certain way – it must also be good for everyone to do so.

First Principle of the Categorical Imperative

"For an action to be morally valid, the agent - or person performing the act - must not carry out the action unless he or she believes that in the same situation, all people should act in the same way"

Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

Kant is not talking about symmetry or order but is more concerned with logic when he makes this important point. If I say 'Promises are made to be broken' and everyone accepted that statement, it would destroy the very notion of promise keeping. There would be no such thing as a promise if, when universalised, the thing itself was destroyed. There would be no such thing as a lie if everyone thought that lying was permissible. Any maxim that is not universal, cannot at the same time be moral. It has failed the first test.

Kant's second principle builds on this:

Second Principal of the Categorical Imperative

So act that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other human being, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end

Immanuel Kant

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

For Kant human beings are special. Each and every person is an individual, worthy of respect and as equal as anyone else. As a result you can never treat anyone as a means to an end. A suspected terrorist can't be tortured even if it means saving innocent lives because that one life is as important as many other single lives. Sheer weight of numbers doesn't make many more important than one.

In the third principle Kant asks that our rules and statements stand up in real life. He asks us to act as if we had the power to make these rules and imagine them into fruition:

Third Principle of the Categorical Imperative

So act as if you were through your maxim a law-making member of a kingdom of ends

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

In other words we have to imagine that our smallest moral action could become law and then ask– would it stand up? If, given the same circumstances, it would, then it was actually the right thing to do. Kant's system of deontological – or duty bound ethics – is interested in the action itself, not the consequences, and gives a method for arriving at ethical actions without appealing to any religious vision of God.

**Kant's Postulates of Practical Reason:
Freedom
God
Immortality**

But, God does not disappear altogether. Kant maintains that the universe is fair and operates in such a way that when moral laws are followed it leads us to a world where people are both good and happy. If the universe is fair it must reward the good – if not in this life, then the next. And for Kant, this is enough for us to assume that there is an afterlife, just as we can also assume there is a God.

He calls these 'postulates of practical reason', they, along with freedom, can all be assumed to exist. They are safe bets if we are using reason correctly and following the moral law.

Kant's system is widely regarded as fair, logical and coherent. It takes both rights and duties seriously and gives real power to people as they make their everyday decisions.

Avoiding the pit falls of utilitarianism where minority interests invariably suffer, Kant is bold in his championing of individual human worth. There is also room within Kant's theory – especially as put forward by the philosopher WD Ross - to allow some duties to count more than others. When the father is faced with two drowning people and one is a scientist on the brink of curing cancer, and the other is his daughter – within Kant, via Ross, there is justification for saving the daughter. It is not that the person has intrinsically more worth, but that they have more worth to you. Utilitarianism would demand otherwise.

Although, Kant's ethics are appropriate for a pluralistic, multicultural society and have been upheld as the bedrock of ideas such as inalienable human rights, there are challenges to Kant.

For a start most people do want to take the consequences of their actions into account and to ignore them is just not practicable. Situations are invariably complex and there are instances when our duties conflict – a challenge only partially addressed by Ross.

What of circumstances when it may be right to tell a lie, not because we are arguing that everyone should be free to tell this particular lie, but because by lying we might achieve more than by conforming to a principle of truth telling?

Kant would argue that, in the long run, protecting the principle would prove itself right but that might be a long way off. Further, there may be occasions when it is necessary to use people as a means to an end. In war sacrifice of the few may lead to the survival of the many.

On top of this, Kant's theory does lead to some strange conclusions. A man who is tempted to steal but does his duty and doesn't give in to temptation is, for Kant, a

better man than the one who is not even tempted to steal. This feels wrong. Also an overarching deontological approach may not be particularly useful in the everyday world. In an over stretched hospital Kant's theory becomes empty, with little to say about how resources should be distributed among those that need them, other than that they should be distributed fairly. The utilitarian would ask 'What is fair?'

Despite these criticisms, Kant's thinking has been hugely influential in its insistence that morality is more than just personal preference and happiness can't be promoted if it undermines the rights of others. His ethical system is diametrically opposed to the utilitarian view that the punishment of the innocent can be justified if the majority benefit. For Kant, human beings are always individuals, with ends in themselves, never as means to an end. As such they should never be exploited for some apparent greater good, and always treated with respect. It is an understanding that many people still live by.

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