

Immanuel Kant

Groundwork for the Metaphysics of
Morals

By Michael Diana

A decorative graphic consisting of several horizontal lines of varying lengths and colors (teal, light blue, white) extending from the right side of the slide towards the center.



Immanuel Kant
1724-1804

(Never traveled more than 10 miles from hometown of Konigsberg!)

The Basics

- **Kantian ethics is a deontological system, it judges actions based on adherence to or deviation from a set of rules.**
- **This contrasts with consequentialism, which evaluates actions based on their consequences.**

Criticisms of Utilitarianism

- **Utilitarianism bases morality on factors beyond our control.**
 - Consider saving a child from being hit by a car. This action at first seems good. However if this kid, lets call him Adolf, grows up to be a future dictator, than the action was wrong from a utilitarian point of view.
- **Kant argues that happiness is far too subjective a concept to base an objective morality on. You can't be certain of what will make people happy.**

The Good Will

- For Kant, the only thing with intrinsic moral worth is a good will.

The Good Will cont.

- The good will is divorced from all other incentives.
 - One must act from **duty** alone.
 - Ex. Returning a lost watch is not morally good if done for some expected reward. Such an act is in *accordance* with duty but not *for the sake of* duty.
 - Anyone, good or bad, can act in their own interest.

Duty

- Duty is the expression of what is morally necessary in a given situation.
- Duty constitutes a series of inviolable laws that hold for all people.
- Duty is determined by imperatives.

Imperatives

- An imperative is an “ought to” statement. It is prescriptive.
- Kant discusses two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical.
 - Hypothetical imperatives are good to achieve a particular end. Consider a recipe for making a cake. These are irrelevant in morality.
 - Categorical imperatives are **good in themselves**. This is the basis of morality.

The Categorical Imperative

- **Three formulations**
 - The formula of universal law
 - The formula of the end in itself
 - The formula of the kingdom of ends
- A “test” for determining whether or not an action is morally permissible.

The formula of universal law

- As Kant explains: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 542).
 - Consider everyone acting as you do. Would such a thing be possible?
 - The consequences of universalizing a maxim are still irrelevant.
 - Contradictions make an act immoral.
 - Contradiction in the world.
 - Contradiction in the will.

Contradictions in the World

- Describes a logical contradiction. A maxim, if universalized, is at odds with itself.
- Reneging on debts, for instance, is not wrong because a world of defaults is undesirable. It is wrong because if everyone defaulted, loans would not be made in the first place. The maxim “One ought not repay one’s debts” can’t stand.
- Maxims that pass this test are termed perfect duties.

Contradictions in the will

- Describes an action that may be possible but cannot be consistently willed by a rational being.
 - The wealthy man has a duty to help others. Kant holds that willing to neglect others is a contradiction as there are times a rational being wishes to be helped by others. “I want help but I don’t want anyone to help anyone else.”
- Maxims that pass this test are termed imperfect duties.
- Contradictions of the world are also considered contradictions of the will. It is impossible for a rational being to will a contradiction.

The formula of the end in itself

- Kant explains that things either have a price or a dignity.
 - A *price* entails the possibility of exchange. A candy bar, for instance, is worth a dollar or perhaps a soft drink.
 - Rational beings as legislators of morality have a *dignity*, an infinite value. (This is a definition of personhood).
- Therefore: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but at the same time as an end” (Kant 545).

The end in itself cont.

- Any action that might further an individual or group, at the expense of an unwilling party is immoral.
 - Stealing is wrong because it reduces the victim to a means for the perpetrators advancement.
 - In a group survival scenario, cannibalism is out of the question, even if it allows the group to be rescued.

The Kingdom of Ends

- A concept describing the community of rational beings who, obeying the previous formulations, constitute “A systematic union of different rational beings under common laws” (Kant 547).
- In the Kingdom of Ends, everyone is autonomous, that is, free to make an obey the categorical imperative.

Quick Review

- Kantian ethics is a deontological system.
- The Consequences of one's actions are of no moral significance.
- A good will is the only thing with moral value.
- The Categorical Imperative determines duty.
 - Formula of Universal Law
 - Formula of the End in Itself
 - Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

A Few Criticisms

Moral Paralysis

- **Duties are inviolable. What happens when they conflict?**
 - An unmanned trolley hurtles down the track. You are chained to the track and in thirty seconds will be crushed. The only thing in your reach is a switch that will divert the trolley down another course, where another person is tied down. Should you pull the switch or not?

Moral Paralysis cont.

- Kant states quite clearly that self preservation is a duty. It is impossible for a rational being to will its own destruction. To that end, you must pull the switch.
- However, this would violate the second version of the categorical imperative as you would be reducing the other guy to a means for your self preservation. You can't pull the switch.
- In this situation, one will necessarily violate a supposedly inviolable duty.

On Differing Descriptions

- Any action can be described in more than one way.
- In some cases, an act can both pass and fail the categorical imperative test depending on one's interpretation of it.

- One could easily see how shooting a man would fail the categorical imperative.
- However, if the man being shot was a terrorist who had just promised to execute 10 hostages, killing him could just as easily be described as saving 9 lives.
- Of course saving people is perfectly in line with the Kantian notion of duty.
- Which account of this act is the “correct” one? Is that even a worthwhile distinction?

Actions and Consequences

- Consider two chains of causality, each unfolding entirely as they are expected to.
 - “A” tells the openly homicidal “B” where “C” is.
→ B finds C → B kills C.
 - B pulls a trigger → the trigger releases a bullet from a gun → The bullet strikes C → C dies from loss of blood.

- In the first instance, Kant would easily pardon A, arguing that A only intended to tell the truth, ignoring the consequences of that truth.
- In the second instance however, Kant would surely attribute the consequence of C's death to B pulling the trigger.
- There seems to be a problem here. At what point do our actions cease and their consequences begin?

More Superficial Concerns

- We may want the freedom to defy the categorical imperative in certain situations
 - Ex. Lying to hide Jews from Nazis .
 - Ex. Killing Confederates to free slaves.