

# Moral Philosophy :

## Immanuel Kant



## **Kant's Ethics**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* argued that morality involved following absolute rules. His approach is a deontological approach.

### **Imperatives**

An imperative statement is an “ought to” statement such as “you ought to go swimming” or “you ought not to lie”.

Kant stated that there are two types of imperatives, hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives.

Hypothetical imperative: A hypothetical imperative is statement that takes the form:

*If you want x, then you ought to do y.*

I ought to do y if I want x. Note that if I do not want x then I do not need to do y. The imperative (the “ought”) is entirely dependent on my desire. Remove the desire, and the imperative disappears.

*If you want to stay out of trouble at school, you ought to attend every lesson*

If I don't want to stay out of trouble at school, then there's no need for me to attend every lesson.

Hypothetical imperatives are very common and Kant believed that they *had nothing to do with morality*.

Categorical imperative: A categorical imperative is an “ought to” statement that is *not dependent* on our desires or wishes. We ought to perform the particular action simply because we are rational beings. Morality is concerned with categorical imperatives.

Kant formulated the categorical imperative (below) as the basis for determining whether an action is morally acceptable or not.

*Act only according to that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

**Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)**

The categorical imperative states that we should only ever act on a maxim (follow a rule) if we can, at the same time, wish for this rule to be applied to everybody. We must check to see whether the rules we follow can be universalized (made applicable to everybody). If the rule cannot be universalized, then it is not one we should follow. If it can be universalized then we are justified in following it.

Some examples will make this clearer.

### **A rule that cannot be universalized**

Suppose I decide to lie to somebody. Kant believes that I would be acting on the maxim (rule) "*it is ok to lie*". I must ask myself if this rule can be universalized. Can it be applied to everybody?

Well, if everybody followed the rule "it is ok to lie" we would have no way of knowing whether or not somebody was telling the truth. We would cease to expect that others would tell us the truth.

If we did not expect others to tell us the truth, then the very concept of lying would be undermined.

Lying only works (i.e. people believe the lies of others) because there is a general expectation that people will speak the truth. Remove this expectation and lying is no longer possible.

The rule "*it is ok to lie*" cannot be universalized and is therefore a rule that we cannot follow.

### **A rule that can be universalized**

Suppose I see a homeless man lying in the street in need of help. I decide to help him. I am acting on the rule "*It's ok to help people*".

What would happen if everybody followed this rule? If everybody followed this rule then people would help one another.

The rule does not undermine itself in the way that "*it's ok to lie*" does.

"It's ok to help people" is a rule that can be universalized and is therefore a rule that we can follow

## Kant and Respect for Persons

Kant also formulated the categorical imperative in a different way:

*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 always at the same time as an end.*

### **Kant, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)**

Kant believed that humans are rational beings, with the freedom to make decisions for themselves. To treat somebody as a means is to treat them as though they did not have this freedom. Here are some examples of how somebody may be treated as a means to an end:

- 1) **Lying to somebody.** To lie to somebody is to mislead them. The person who lies does not respect the rationality or the freedom of the person they lie to. They give them misinformation in the hope that the other person will think differently than they would have if they had been told the truth.
- 2) **Keeping somebody as a slave.** To keep somebody as a slave is to assert a property right over them. It is to treat them as though they were an object. It is to deny that person's rationality and ability to make free choices.
- 3) **Punishing somebody as an example to others.** If a person is punished in order to deter others from committing the same crime, that person is being treated as a means to an end. They are being treated as a means by which crime is reduced. They become an object or a tool that is used for some other purpose. Once again, their rationality and freedom is not respected.
- 4) **Punishing somebody in order to reform them.** If a person is punished in order that they are reformed, then once again we are not respecting that person's freedom or rationality. We are using them as a means to pursue some greater good such as transforming them into a "model citizen", or creating a society with less crime.

As we have seen, this formulation of the categorical imperative leads to interesting views on punishment. Kant's moral philosophy encourages the view that punishment should be administered on a *retributive* basis (sometime referred to as "an eye for an eye").

If somebody murders another person, they are acting on the maxim "it is acceptable to murder people". As a rational being, the murderer must expect her maxim to be universalized i.e. applied everywhere. According to Kant, we should respect the rationality of the murderer by universalizing her actions. In short, she too must be killed!

## **Problems with Kant's Approach**

Kant's categorical imperative is not without its problems. Some of the main problems are summarized below:

- 1) **Conflicting rules.** What do we do when rules clash with one another? What do we do when, for example, I can only help somebody by lying to them?
- 2) **Kant's rules are too general.** Kant thinks in terms of absolute general rules such as "one should not lie". Perhaps this is too rigid. Whilst "one should not lie" cannot be universalized, perhaps a modified rule, such as "one should lie to protect friends from axe murderers" can be universalized.
- 3) **The consequences of action are ignored.** Perhaps the consequences of our actions are important in determining whether they are good or bad. Utilitarian philosophers certainly think they are.
- 4) **Too much emphasis on reason.** Kant believes that as rational beings we ought to follow the categorical imperative. What's so special about rationality? Why are we compelled to act in a particular way simply because we are rational? (Some feminist writers argue that our moral behaviour should be based on the special relationships we have with others, and not on some abstract principle or rule)
- 5) **Respect for rational beings encourages disrespect for non-rational beings such as animals.** By treating rational beings as beings with absolute value, Kant is accused of encouraging the mistreatment of any being that is not rational. A dog, for example, (assuming it is not rational) has no moral worth in Kant's scheme. Its welfare is important only to the extent that it impacts on the wellbeing of a rational being.

## Things to think about

*Does Kant's theory have any advantages when compared to other theories such as utilitarianism?*

*Think of some moral dilemmas and see how Kantian ethics might help to solve them. Compare these to a utilitarian solution. How do the solutions differ?*

*Is it correct to treat all rational beings as ends and not means?*

*Do some non-rational beings deserve the same treatment as rational beings? What might Kant's ethics have to say about the mistreatment of animals, or the mistreatment of non-rational humans (e.g. the very young)?*

*Is it really so bad to reform criminals, or to punish them in order to set an example to others?*